

ASPEN GOLD SERIES

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Chapter 1

Once again, her impulsiveness had landed her in a jam. Francie Karr rifled through a stack of papers on her gigantic wooden desk and picked up the letter for the tenth time that morning. The official confirmation of her obligation to attend the class reunion. She'd placed the irksome reminder on the edge just so, in case her cat took a notion to jump up on the desk and bat the paper into the wastebasket. He hadn't. The traitor.

She'd used the envelope postmarked Spencer, Colorado as a coaster for the better part of a week before piling invoices on top of it, but the return address still remained legible.

No, the letter was still here and she hadn't forgotten about the impulsive promise she'd made, so she guessed she was going to have to send the reunion committee an email about her arrival plans. She'd first ignored the group Facebook message from the planning committee requesting she be the photographer for Spencer High's fifteenth class reunion. She'd asked if they didn't have a local photographer, but the relentless social media members had been adamant it be someone from their class, so she'd grudgingly agreed.

What had she been drinking? She'd known then, just as she knew now, that she wasn't going to be able to attend the class reunion. She was going to have surgery that week. Or something else was going to come up. A debilitating sickness maybe. Perhaps even a death—her own would be convenient.

The intercom buzzed her that someone was downstairs, and she walked distractedly to the panel, the wrinkled letter in her hand. "Yeah?"

"Miss Karr, it's Ryan MacNair. I'd like to speak with you for a few minutes, please."

"Who?"

He repeated his name and added, "We spoke last month. About the brooch you had appraised? You told me to call back at a more convenient time."

“Oh.” She glanced around the cluttered loft where she lived and worked. Photographs hung on every wall—some were even framed. Stacks of books teetered on end tables, and every pair of shoes she’d worn recently were beside the sofa. The place wasn’t going to suddenly become neat and organized, and the time never got more convenient, so she might as well let him in.

“Come on up.” She jabbed the button that unlocked the security door and sauntered back to her desk.

How hard could it be to fake her own death? She’d seen it done on TV plenty of times. She could assume a new identity and move her studio to Peoria under a different name.

Francie flopped onto her office chair and grimaced at her own thoughts. No. YaYa needed someone to check up on her often and make sure the care center was doing a good job. Deserting her dear fragile grandmother was out of the question. It distressed the old woman enough to think Francie wasn’t married yet. Disappearing was a purely selfish thought. Self-preserving and really clever—but selfish.

How on earth then was she going to get out of this dreadful class reunion? What was she going to tell her grandmother? YaYa was the only person in the world she was close to. The only person whose opinion mattered. But YaYa didn’t agree with Francie’s decision to choose a career over a marriage and children.

A few months ago, to alleviate the old woman’s worry over her being alone, Francie had told her she’d gotten married.

To a rich man.

To a rich man with kids.

To a rich *handsome* man with kids.

How in blazes was she going to get out of this one?

A knock sounded on the door.

Francie crossed to open it.

“Hi, Miss Karr—”

“Francie.”

“Francie. Thank you for seeing me.”

She swung the door open wide and ushered a tall dark-haired man in a tailored navy-blue suit into her studio. “Would you like a soft drink? The coffee’s been sitting since morning.”

“No, thank you.”

“Well...” She wandered back to her desk chair and sank onto the comfortable cushion, her gaze immediately landing on the letter that still lay on her desk. Darn cat anyhow. Darn YaYa for thinking a woman couldn’t be fulfilled with her career.

“I have an offer for you,” MacNair said. He glanced around, then moved a stack of manila envelopes from the seat of the chair opposite her desk to the only available spot on the floor and plucked the crease at the knee of his trousers as he sat. “Are you moving out?”

“No, why?”

“Um, no reason. Do you recall why I’m here?”

Absorbed in her predicament, Francie tapped a fingernail against the edge of the desk. The reunion was less than two weeks away now, and she still hadn’t figured out what she was going to do.

“Francie?”

“What? Oh. No, I guess I’ve forgotten what it was you wanted to see me about.”

“The brooch you had appraised at Grambs & Sons last month.”

“Right. That pin was in a box of old junk that I bought at an auction. I buy things like that for my still life photography. The piece will make amazing shot in black and white, with maybe a pair of gloves. Kind of draping out of an old jewelry chest with a piece of lace beneath it.”

“Several months ago, I put the word out to all the jewelers that I was looking for that particular item,” he said. “Grambs called me after you’d been in. That brooch rightfully belongs to my daughter. It’s her inheritance.”

She’d found the perfect pair of old lace gloves. What had she done with them?
“Uh-huh.”

“It belonged to my paternal grandmother. Unfortunately, my grandfather’s will was contested, and the jewelry went to one of my aunts who only wanted what she could get out of everything. Just to be spiteful, she wouldn’t even let my father buy the pieces he

wanted. I can't even remember why she started the feud with my father in the first place. I'm not even sure she remembers."

"She sounds lovely." Francie picked up a pen and doodled a sketch of her idea on the letter.

He blinked at her. "She sold it all, and we've been trying to find the pieces to buy them back. My father had intended for that brooch to remain in the family."

Francie's attention drifted to Peyton Armbruster's scrawled signature on the page, and Francie knew she couldn't stall any longer. She either had to come clean...or come up with a husband.

"The brooch was appraised at five thousand dollars," MacNair said. "Miss Karr, I'll double that offer."

At his concerned tone, Francie glanced up into his grave features, and finally his words sank into her dilemma-drugged brain. He was as intense about the silly old brooch as she was about taking a husband to the reunion.

For the first time she took a long assessing look at Ryan MacNair. His dark hair, bearing a distinguishing widow's peak, was neatly styled and brushed back from a square-jawed face. Dark brows were divided by a V of anxiety that didn't diminish his well-bred features. The dude was impressively handsome.

He had a nice straight nose and an interesting mouth that could probably slide into a knockout smile if he'd loosen that tie and give himself a little air. His navy suit and cranberry silk tie were of the best quality and taste, and he wore them with ease and panache. He was rich. Not her type—if she had a type—but wouldn't he impress the Spanx right off her classmates back in Spencer? And YaYa wouldn't be able to stop smiling. She imagined her grandmother looking him up and down with approval.

"You planned to use the brooch in some photographs," he said. "Have you done that?"

"Are you married?"

He blinked, his warm brown eyes showing confusion over the abrupt change of subject. "I'm divorced," he said finally. "Is that relevant to the discussion?"

Actually, a discussion took two people, but she spared him that reminder, and let the ever-turning gears in her mind whirl with possibilities. “I’m just beginning to sympathize with your situation, Mr...”

“MacNair.”

“Mr. MacNair. I’d certainly feel bad if something of my grandmother’s was sold off against my wishes.”

He nodded, his brow still furrowed. “Then you’ll sell it to me?”

“You really want this brooch, don’t you? It means a lot to you. And to your father.”

Still his carefully guarded expression didn’t change. “Yes.”

“So, I guess my decision carries a lot of weight.”

“It does,” he admitted, though his aggravated expression showed his reluctance to do so.

Francie smoothed the letter, refolded it and placed it inside the stained and warped envelope. “Perhaps we can negotiate after all.”

He gave a shake of his head. “Money isn’t the issue here. The brooch has sentimental value. Ten thousand. Fifteen.”

“No. Not more money,” she said with a flick of her hand. “In fact, if you agree to this idea, you can keep your money.”

His frown deepened. “What idea?”

“I’m in a predicament myself. I’m afraid I’ve done something—said something—impulsive, and now I don’t have any way out of it. Except maybe through you.”

He raised one dark brow. “I don’t understand. What does your predicament have to do with me?”

“I told my grandmother that I’d gotten married.”

“And that’s a problem?”

“Yes, it’s a problem. It wasn’t true. It isn’t true.”

“You told her you were married?”

She nodded.

“But you’re not married. And you weren’t married.”

“Right.”

“Then why did you tell her that?”

The question was so simple. The answer was so complicated. “Because I’m not.”
He stared at her.

“It’s a long, boring story,” she supplied. “Maybe sometime we’ll go over the details, but for now I’ll just say I had my reasons.”

“So, you lied. And now this lie is causing you a problem.”

“Oh, yeah. A super-sized problem.” She stood and walked restlessly to the row of tall windows and gazed, unseeing, down on the street

“What does your lie have to do with me?”

She turned back. “I’ve been cornered into participating in my class’s fifteen-year reunion in my hometown. YaYa is expecting me. And she’s expecting me to bring a husband.”

With a wary expression, he waited for her to speak.

“You can have the brooch...”

He leaned forward in the chair like his Spidey-senses were on alert.

“...if you come to Spencer, Colorado with me as my husband for a week.”

He stood. “I suspected you were going to say that, but I didn’t believe you would have the audacity. That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard.”

She gave a halfhearted wave. “Well, hey, it was worth a try.” Shoulders slumped, she hugged her upper arms and turned back to the window. “I saw something about escort services on Dateline the other night.” She reached for her phone. “Do we have any of those around here? There’s probably an app.”

Ryan studied her small frame in profile against the window, her words sinking in and shocking him once again. “You can’t use one of those apps.”

“Why not?”

“You don’t know anything about the person you’d meet. There are devious people out there. Perverts trolling pretty girls. Serial squatters. You could place yourself in serious danger.”

“I am in some serious danger, here, Mac.”

He straightened his shoulders at the flip nickname. “You’re in an embarrassing situation because you lied. You have only yourself to blame.”

“I’m not blaming anyone. I’m trying to come up with a solution.”

“Why don’t you tell your grandmother the truth?”

She turned back, more than a hint of irritation in her blue eyes. “Because she’d only make my life miserable until I really found someone to marry, and I’m not willing to do that.” She set down her phone. “I guess we don’t have anything more to talk about.”

“What about the brooch? An arrangement? I’m sure we can come up with something—”

“Those were the terms, Mac. If you want the pin, you need to pose as my husband. It’s only one week out of your whole neatly-pressed and really nice-smelling life. If that’s too much of a sacrifice, well...” She shrugged.

“Lady, I’ve never heard anything so unprofessional or unethical in my life. Real people just don’t go around doing these kinds of things. That only happens in the movies.”

“Sure, they do. Negotiations take place on Capitol Hill every day.”

“Honest negotiations.”

“Oh, please.”

He didn’t know if it was her irreverent attitude or the fact that she was holding the brooch as ransom that irked him. Ryan reflected back on the only heirloom he had to hand down to his daughter and held himself in check. His grandfather had had that piece of jewelry made for his grandmother as a wedding present.

The old man intended for Alanna to have that brooch, and had been disturbed over its loss for the past year. When Ryan had received the call from the appraiser and learned that the piece of jewelry had fallen into the hands of a young woman, he’d decided to appeal to her sense of fairness.

How could he ever have imagined that the woman would be an obtuse, outrageous photographer with more nerve than sense? She didn’t operate on his wavelength. She didn’t seem to operate on anyone’s wavelength but her own.

“Bartering was the first type of selling around,” she added. “Our country was founded with trades.”

Artists. He’d dealt with his share in his position at the museum. He could deal with this one. But numerous days in Colorado pretending to be her husband? The proposition was preposterous.

It was also his only option. “When exactly is this...event?”

She gave him the dates.

He glanced at his phone calendar. Then glanced up to have his attention snagged by a black and white photograph on the wall. A child stood in a shaft of sunlight, her shadow on the brick wall behind her. “Who did that photo?”

She glanced up. “They’re all mine.”

She took these intriguing photographs? He couldn’t align the art with the person behind the camera, but shook off the thought. “I don’t have anyone to take care of my children for an entire week.” It was as good of an excuse as any, and it was the truth.

She turned from the window and inched toward him like a dog sniffing a steak. “Children?”

“Yes. I’ve never left them for that long. I keep my business trips to only a day or two. My housekeeper fills in during that time, but—”

“How old are they?” she asked, circling him. “Girls? Boys?”

“Twelve and nine. A girl and a boy.”

She stepped closer, her blue eyes lit with a determined fire he didn’t trust. “That’s perfect. They can come along!”

“What do you mean?”

“I need kids, too! Oh, this is awesome. Now I won’t have to do something drastic.”

“What? What could be more drastic than this scheme you’re concocting?”

“I’ll make the plane reservations and get the tickets, don’t worry about that.”

“Hold it. I can’t just pull up and take off for a week. I have a job. My children have school.”

“A week out of class won’t hurt them. They’re probably little geniuses.” She perched on the edge of her desk, sending a stack of papers sliding across the top and onto the floor, and grinned a naughty grin. “Oh, man. This is perfect.”

“Now wait a minute.” He stopped her gush of pleasure with an upraised palm, then leaned down to collect the papers she’d knocked off and shuffle them into a semi-neat pile. Letting her near his kids was out of the equation. “I never said I’d do this. I can’t just take off a week to play your game of house. And I can’t subject my children to it either.” He tried to find a place to lay the papers, and finally shoved them into her hands.

“What kind of father would drag his children along and ask them to participate in something this dishonest?”

Carelessly she dropped the stack of papers on the already laden desktop behind her. “A father who wants my brooch?”

Her irritating confidence got under his skin. “I can’t ask my kids to lie. I’ve always taught them honesty.”

She shrugged. “I guess we could say they’re at boarding school.”

Ryan’s mind had remained three steps behind hers since this meeting had begun. He gave himself a mental shake. “What about the logic of all this? What did you tell your grandmother that your husband’s name was? Who would I be expected to be?”

“I don’t think I actually gave you a name. I told her I still go by Karr because that’s the name I’ve established in my career. Plenty of women don’t take their husbands’ names. Don’t tell me you’re a sexist.”

Ryan blinked. “No! I’m not—what would being a sexist have to do with it, anyway? This hair-brained idea would never work.”

The woman was enough to drive a sober man to drink.

Hopping off the desk, she sat on her chair, rifled through the papers and books and produced a disorganized box of business cards. “Fine. You know the way out.”

She flipped over cards, reading her scrawled writing on the back and setting a few aside.

“What are you doing?”

“Finding someone else to do it. I don’t know why I didn’t think of this before. I meet a lot of adventurous men at photography conventions. Of course, they may not have kids. We’ll use the boarding school story.”

Ryan stood watching her peruse the cards with a pencil between her teeth. His logical mind grappled with what was happening. She had no intention of selling him the brooch unless he went along with her bizarre plan.

He had an ultimatum. He could walk out and disappoint his father and his daughter. Or he could grit his teeth and go along with her outrageous mandate for one week. One week. How difficult would that be?

He could leave the museum for that long. He'd gone over his planner just that morning and knew what lay ahead. The next few weeks were going to involve intensive cleaning and painting in preparation for the summer and fall exhibits, and he could afford to take the time. There was only a week of school left before summer vacation, and then what?

He had no one to care for his daughter and son for a week. He'd been promising to take them on a vacation and teach Cameron to swim. He never got enough time with them. What would he tell them?

The truth, of course. He'd never done anything less.

They would see how important this was—he'd have to stress that he didn't condone the masquerade, but that he'd had no choice—and they'd understand. His daughter had lost so much already. She wasn't going to lose her heirloom if he could help it.

Francie had picked up her smartphone and pulled up the keypad with her index finger. She looked at a card and tapped a couple of numbers.

He took a step forward. "Is there a pool at the hotel?"

"I think so."

"All right," he said.

Finger hovering over the phone, she glanced up. "All right?"

"All right," he repeated. "I'll do it."

A delighted grin spread across her features, and she set down her phone. "The kids, too?"

He nodded grimly.

"All right! It'll be fun, Mac. You'll see. We'll wow 'em."

"My name is Ryan."

"Right. I'll get the plane tickets and call you with the itinerary. What are the kids' names?"

"Alanna and Cameron."

"Good choices. We won't have to change them."

"I'm so glad you approve."

“We’ll leave a couple days before the actual activities start,” she went on, apparently oblivious to his sarcasm. “We need clothes for the themed dance, and there are some great consignment and thrift stores in Spencer.”

“Themed dance?”

“Yeah, pop culture of graduation year. You’d make a great Simon Cowell.

“Who?”

“American Idol?”

He frowned.

“Who do you think I could be? Carrie Underwood maybe. There’s Harry Potter to choose from though. That would be fun, and we could all choose a character.”

A disturbing knot of indigestion settled in Ryan’s stomach. A week with this woman. One solid week. But it was one week versus his daughter’s legacy.

He hoped he had the stamina to live through it.

[END OF EXCERPT]

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Cheryl