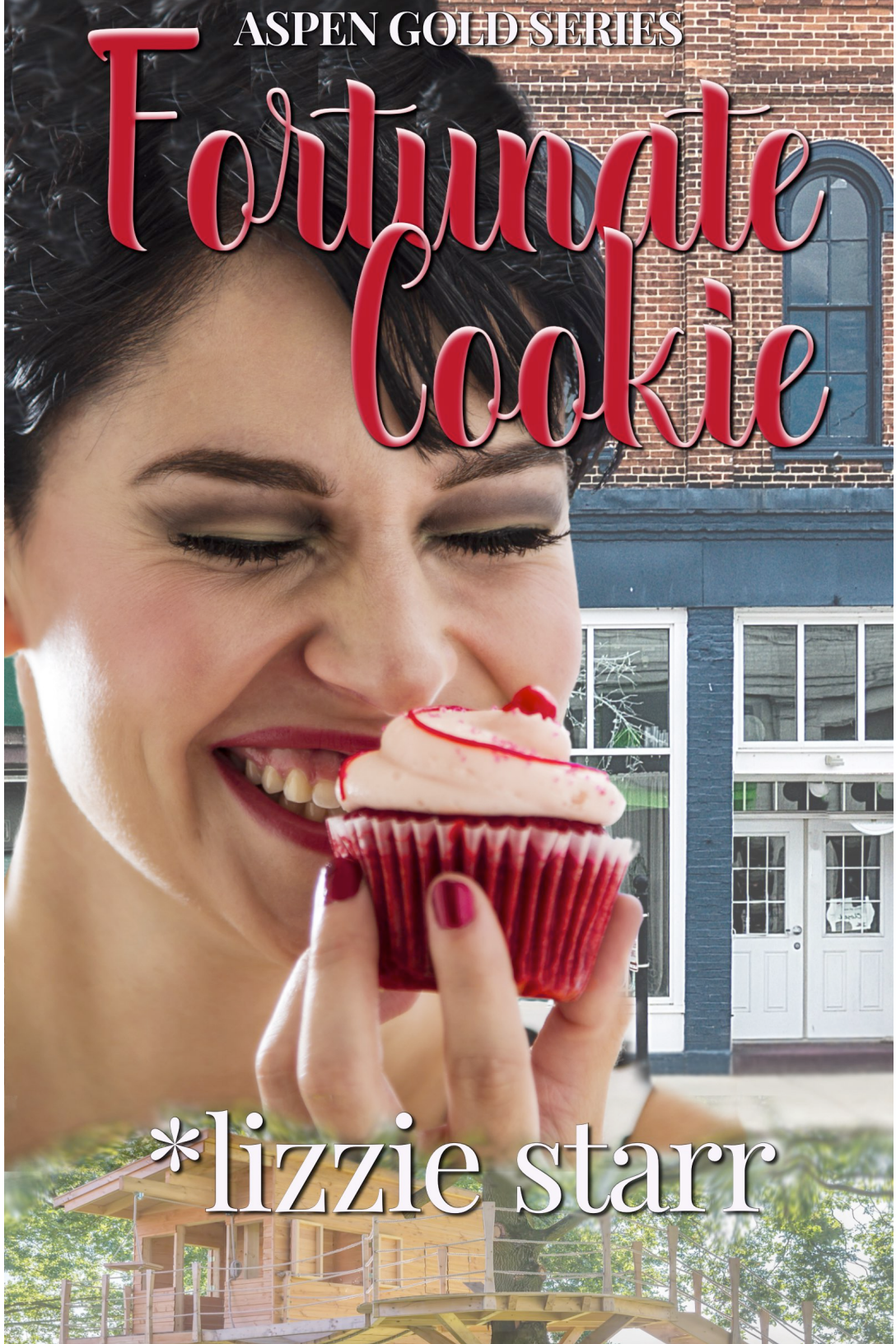


ASPEN GOLD SERIES

Fortunate Cookie



*lizzie starr

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Cookie Lamont stood in the center of her immaculate store front and smiled with satisfaction. The bakery case sparkled, ready to show off the day's cupcake specials and local favorites. Behind the counter, the copper espresso machine gleamed under a strategically placed spotlight. She turned toward the front of the store and the tall, narrow paper mâché tree she decorated for the seasons. It was nearly Easter, so she really needed to add the colored eggs and fluffy bunny ornaments to honor the coming spring. Especially after last weekend's major blizzard. Tilting her head from one side to the other, she gave a final adjustment to the placement of a white twinkle light. Maybe she'd give up control and ask one of her baristas to decorate.

Cookie's Coffee & Cakes was ready to open for the day.

She raised the shade on the huge front window. A single body waiting on the sidewalk, hunched against the early morning chill, lifted a gloved hand in greeting. Cookie returned the wave and hurried to open the door. Winter business hadn't been the best in this tourist town, but with the warmer weather, things were looking up. She'd been in Spencer for nearly nine months and the locals had proved to be steady customers. Having the only fancy coffee service in this part of town hadn't hurt. Thank goodness she'd kept that expensive option in her business plan.

"Come on in, Mr. Kinsey. I'll get your coffee started."

Mr. Kinsey removed his coat dropped the jacket over the back of a chair. "Vernon," he said with a chuckle. "I'm here often enough to be on a first name basis with you."

"Vernon. I have some of those breakfast cupcakes you like. They're fresh from the oven. Can I get you one?"

"Sounds perfect, Cookie. You should branch out into pastries if you insist on opening so early. Not everyone can be convinced to try a cupcake first thing in the morning."

the The Cooling Rack for your donut fix.”

“No coffee at the bakery. And just plain stuff or tea...” He made a face. “Tea, at the bookstore. Although, Katie does have cinnamon rolls on Tuesday. Gotta be there early to get one of those.”

Carefully delivering the steaming cup, Cookie sighed dramatically. “So that’s why you’re never here on Tuesday. I should have guessed.” She and Kate Spencer, owner of the bookstore, had made a friendly agreement not that long ago. Cookie provided cupcakes for afternoon sales at the Rocky Mountain Bookstore twice a week and Kate directed serious coffee drinkers to Olde Town and Cookie’s.

So business was good—even with the winter lull. Luckily her online business took up any slack. In fact, she’d been surprised by a sudden influx of orders over the past two months. Word of mouth she suspected, since she hated doing any online marketing. She never would have imagined how popular erotic, anatomically correct, carved cakes would be. Especially her portrait cakes. She’d gotten over being embarrassed by the explicit cakes but thank God she never had to meet any of those customers face to, uh, face.

“My cupcake?” Vernon interrupted her thoughts with a smile.

“Of course. Sorry, just lost in thought. Be right back.”

Anthony Burnham maneuvered his truck into a too small space in the parking area behind the Old Stone Church. Scaffolding and tarps covered the back façade of the old church, indicating there was some exterior work being done along with the interior redesign his mom had described in detail in one of her letters. It was about time someone rescued the beautiful old building. Who better than Willa Samuels, Spencer’s renowned artist.

No, he’d forgotten. She was Willa Spencer now, married to Jakob Spencer, owner of the Aspen Gold Lodge. He stared into the dark, pre-dawn morning. Things, and people, certainly had changed since he’d last been home. He gave a soft snort. At least now he had plenty of time to hear all the stories.

were dark, and he figured his moms wouldn't be up yet. In any case, right now he needed coffee. He no longer had an easy familiarity with the roads leading into town and driving those narrow mountain roads at night probably hadn't been the wisest choice. Especially with the high piles of snow left from clearing the pavement after the recent blizzard. But he was anxious to be home. He needed family.

He could head back to the edge of town and the 24-hour gas station, but no one would ever convince him that, despite the claims in commercials, the coffee was freshly brewed. At this time of the morning, there was a good chance it was yesterday's brew. He shuddered.

He'd wait until the first light came on in the apartment over his family's store, then call from right outside the door. His moms had no idea he was coming. He looked forward to surprising the two women he loved more than anything in the world. Except maybe his sister, but she hadn't been home in longer than he'd stayed away. He should call her, convince her to come for a visit while he was here.

A wide yawn nearly cracked his jaw. With no hope of coffee, he needed to walk and let the cold wake him. So, he slipped from the warm truck cab, pocketed his keys and, with his collar turned up against the frigid wind off the mountains, he crossed the street.

He headed along the back sides of the buildings just across from the city park. His long strides brought him quickly to the far end of the block and the point where two sides of Olde Town made a triangle's point. Slightly more awake and shivering, he turned toward the center courtyard.

Bright light shining from a single store caught his attention. He knew most businesses opened later to serve the tourist trade. He shrugged. Maybe the lights were nothing more than a cleaning crew getting ready for the day.

Drawn like a moth to that bright light, he walked in a wide arch, studying the simple storefront. A cupcake store? Open at six? With a customer? Then he saw it. There, at the back of the store. A beacon of hope, warmth and comfort all wrapped in copper. An espresso machine. A good quality one, if he knew his machines.

And a blessing on this cold Colorado morning.

hours listed on a small card near the door. Yep. Open. He tugged on the door and the aroma of dark, almost bitter roast coffee froze him in the doorway. He lifted his nose, inhaled and sighed.

“Hey, man, in or out. Just close the door.” The customer sitting at a small, round wooden table gestured for Anthony to enter. “Mornin’. It’s a pleasant change to see someone else out this early.”

“Coffee,” was all Anthony managed.

“I hear ya. Cookie had to go check her baking. She should be right back. She makes a mean latte. You a tourist?”

Dragging his focus from the coffee service, Tony shook his head. “No, used to live here. I’m just back to visit family.”

“Have a seat.” The man shoved out a chair with one foot. “I’m Vernon Kinsey.”

“Anthony Burnham.” He swung a leg over the chair and, shrugging out of his coat, sat.

“Burnham? Like in Muffy Burnham?”

Anthony nodded. “My mother.”

The older man screwed up his expression. “Anthony. Hmm. Your sister is Isabeau?”

Considering the older man, Tony paused before answering. “Yes.”

“Don’t look so concerned, young man. A long time ago I taught ballroom dancing here in town. Izzy was one of the most talented girls in class. Tell me, did she keep dancing?”

Yeah, she had. But not exactly the way the man meant. Last Tony had heard, she was an exotic dancer in Nebraska. “Off and on, I think. I really haven’t talked to her for a while.” At the man’s disapproving frown, Tony continued, “But I’m hoping to talk her into coming home while I’m here. It’d be great to have the whole family together. It’s been a few years. Too long.”

Vernon lifted his cup. “There’s truth in that, my boy. Ah, here’s Cookie.”

young woman had bent behind the clear display case, placing cupcakes in precise rows on a colorful tray. “Uh, excuse me?”

“Yikes.” She jerked and stuck her thumb into the thick, creamy white icing on a dark cupcake. “Well, shi— shoot.”

“I’m sorry, didn’t mean to startle you. I, uh...” Words failed him when she straightened and looked at him with wide, chocolate-brown eyes. Dark hair, tucked up in a messy bun, highlighted her fair complexion. The contrast was a study in perfection. She lifted her hand as if to brush back a stray hair but stared instead at her frosting covered finger.

He had the insane desire to pull that finger into his mouth and lick off every bit of sweetness.

Seeming to pull herself together, she pasted on a perfect customer service smile and reached for a towel. “Hi, welcome to Cookie’s Coffee & Cakes. What can I get for you?”

He couldn’t look away. Her soft gaze held him in thrall. He wanted nothing, nothing but... “Coffee.”

Her pasted-on smile softened to a true grin. “Plain or fancy?”

Regaining some semblance of composure, Tony gave his order in a well-practiced manner.

She turned without comment and started his drink. He hadn’t specified a size, so was filled with relief when she grabbed the largest cup. Rooted in place, he watched her economical movements. When she placed the coffee on the counter, he pointed to the ruined cupcake. “Since I caused that, I’ll take the cupcake, too.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. One of the tribulations of baking. It’s not the first time I’ve worn frosting. It won’t be the last.”

The suddenness of the vision filling his brain made him draw a sharp breath. This woman, wearing frosting. And nothing else. He gave his head a quick shake but couldn’t dislodge the thought from his brain—or his uncomfortably interested body. He cleared his throat. “Still, in this case, I’d love that cupcake for breakfast.”

breath trying to calm the fierce beating of her heart. Who was that man, that gorgeous man who left her befuddled, confused, and unwilling to resist the unusual attraction? She didn't need a man. Want a man. She had no time for a relationship, and definitely not for the needs of a man. Her father had distracted her mother from her dreams and Cookie was determined to stay far from that unhappy fate.

But, that one. She'd consider—maybe—a date or three. Or an evening in. She fanned her face with her hand. Even when her evenings started early and ended by eight there was plenty of time for possibilities.

She glanced down at the special order that had just come in from Kinky Kakes, her online baking business. Maybe she needed to stop making these erotic cakes. Especially if he was in town long. Hmm. Long.

No. She shook herself and sat back in her desk chair. Don't even go there. Shit, how could just one man with sandy blond hair and gray-blue eyes having coffee and a damn cupcake mess with her hard-won calm? Nope, she didn't need this in her life right now. Or ever.

Confident her barista was busy and had everything under control in the shop, she opened her secret business email and replied to a special order, confirming price, date and delivery.

In her mind she scheduled the baking for the next day the shop was closed. For now she needed to get back to that day's cupcakes.

And just in time. The rear door opened and her assistant baker entered. "Cookie, I need to talk to you."

"Sure. There's nothing going on right now. Come on into my office." Calling the corner where she had an old wooden desk with a computer her office was silly but made her feel good. Successful. Like she knew what she was doing.

The intrusion of her father's voice echoed through her thoughts. *You don't have the smarts to own a business, girl. Find yourself a good man. You'll be successful like your mother then.*

slim figure. The man lived in the 1950's and her mother went along on that time travel quest with him.

Cookie had seen the hurt in her mother's eyes when she hadn't performed up to the man's standards. Or the dead expression when he berated her mother's once successful career. When the man had thrown out the fabric samples and her mother's sewing machine, her mother had shut down and since then, been the happy Stepford wife he wanted.

Waiting until she was old enough to leave home meant hiding under her father's radar as much as possible. At least when she'd asked to take baking classes at the community college, she'd convinced him it was to improve her skills for her future husband.

The road to Spencer and her little cupcake shop had been long, hard and filled with unexpected curves. She didn't regret a moment of the hard work. Or the secret, online bakery that covered the mortgage payments for the building and supply deliveries the first few months. Once she'd added the coffee service, business had exploded.

Take that, Dad.

Maybe she should close the online bakery. She glanced at the old-fashioned ledger she kept along with her computerized spreadsheets. No. Not quite yet. Even with her concerns the town people might boycott her shop if they discovered her hidden business, emotionally she still needed that cushion to fall back on. But soon. At least by the end of the year.

"So, what's up," she asked the woman who perched on the edge of a chair facing her. Cookie smiled an encouragement.

The woman remained silent a few moments then blurted, "We just found out I'm pregnant."

"Congratulations."

"But my husband, well, he..."

Cookie knew the words the woman hesitated to say and took her hand. Her eyes held the same defeated dullness as her mother's had, despite her apparent joy at having a baby. "And your husband doesn't think you should be working outside the home."

he also doesn't expect me just to quit and leave you with no help. He says I can have a month."

"Don't worry about me. But you'll be difficult to replace, you know."

"I will?"

The poor thing needed some encouragement. "Of course. You're one of the best bakers I've worked with. Oh, I know you didn't think you knew anything when you started. Remember how afraid you were of the big mixer?"

Finally relaxing, the woman chuckled. "It is a beast compared to the little one I have at home."

"You follow my recipes exactly so everything turns out perfectly every time."

"Except that time I forgot to turn on the timer after I set it. Whew, the smoke was horrible."

Cookie shrugged. "I think every baker's done that a time or two. Before long you'll be baking for your little one. Imagine the treats you'll be able to create now. I'm sure your husband will enjoy the sweet baked goods as well."

Relief filled the woman's eyes and washed over Cookie as well. She might not be able to change the world, or even the mind of this one man, but easing someone's concerns went a long way. "You've given me plenty of notice. Thanks for that. Hopefully I can get someone hired before you leave so you can help me train them."

"Help train?"

"Of course. You know the job, how I like things done. You'd be a great help to me. Like you always are. Now, those cupcakes aren't going to frost themselves. There's a tray of carrot cake that need cream cheese cinnamon icing. Go ahead and pipe a carrot on top for the decoration. Would you start with those, please?"

"Yes, yes of course, Cookie. And thanks."

"No, thank you. And congratulations on your future cupcake lover."

"If my sister throws a shower, I'm telling her she has to get cupcakes from here, not the grocery store."

"And I'll make them special just for you. Now get busy. I've got a little paperwork to finish."

and made a note about the resignation. Despite the husband's obvious control over what his wife could or couldn't do, Cookie hoped they had a better relationship than Cookie's parents. Beyond hope there was little else Cookie could do. She fiddled with items on her desk to pass a couple minutes, then rose to do what she did best.

Lose herself in developing a new cupcake flavor.

[END OF EXCERPT}

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Thank you for being excited about this story.
I can't wait for you to read the rest of it!

** lizzie.*