

The background of the cover is a photograph of a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing glasses and a light blue button-down shirt that is open at the collar. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile, and his right hand is raised to his forehead. The setting is a forest with trees showing vibrant autumn foliage in shades of orange, red, and yellow. The overall tone is romantic and scenic.

ASPEN GOLD SERIES

Second
Chances

Donna Kaye

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Chapter 1

Heath Lawe didn't know what his wily granddad was up to, but he meant to find out. He pulled his blue rented Jeep Wrangler into a parking spot at Aspen Gold Lodge, killed the engine and leaned back in his seat. Slipping off his glasses, he closed his sandpaper-dry eyes, and he let the quiet seep into his weary muscles. A wave of the deep exhaustion which had become his constant companion during the last six months swept over him, leaving him drained. Sleep had become his enemy, and he was now paying the price for the constant battle. Maybe he should have taken a break from his job sooner, but as usual he'd refused to give up or ask for help.

Opening his eyes, he let his gaze roam over the panorama before him. Majestic snow-capped peaks provided a picture-postcard setting for the magnificent lodge nestled below them.

Nothing about the lodge had changed since he'd been here five years ago. The white sprawling five-story building was topped with a red tile roof and surrounded by a low stone fence. Long covered porches stretched the length of the building, a reminder of a slower, simpler time.

Heath rolled his shoulders trying to relieve some of his tension, but the movements did nothing to relax him. Leaning over the back seat he grabbed an envelope out of a side pocket on his laptop bag and carefully unfolded the heavy vellum paper embossed with the lodge's gold letterhead. He put his glasses back on and read the message written in his granddad's spidery strokes.

Heath still wasn't sure what to make of the whole thing. He'd never received a handwritten note of any kind from Jakob, especially not one signed 'Love, Grandpa.'

Love? Since when? Jakob had never once told Heath he loved him. Grandpa? No one called Jakob that and Heath had never been invited to call him anything other than Jakob. Who knew? Maybe his granddad had gone soft. According to his sister Miranda,

Jakob was a kinder and gentler man now. Perhaps this new interest in family was the result or someone else had signed the letter.

Jakob's letter couldn't have come at a better time. Heath needed a break from his job at the FBI-possibly a permanent one. This trip would give him time to decide what he wanted. The only thing Heath was sure of was that he couldn't go back to being a hostage negotiator.

He pulled his thoughts back to the present and wondered what Jakob wanted. His granddad could be cunning and manipulative when he wanted something. Heath needed to figure out exactly what the old man was up to.

Stepping out of the Jeep, he pulled out his gear. After slinging the strap of his computer case over his shoulder, he relinquished his other two bags to the approaching bellhop.

Entering the lodge, he paused to get his bearings. Little had changed inside either. The spacious lobby had an old-world charm. Small groups of furniture further enhanced the overall impression of quiet understated elegance. On the other side of the room, a grand staircase invited guests up to the second level.

Heath strode to the reservation desk and gave them his name. Turning slightly, he leaned his elbow on the marble reception counter and continued scanning the room while he waited. Realizing he'd instinctively covered his back, Heath scowled. Habits ingrained by years of training, first in the military and then by the Bureau, were hard to break. But he wasn't working on a case right now. Hell, he hadn't even been in the field in over six months.

Just the thought of going on a case, even a routine one where no one's life was in danger, made him break out in a cold sweat.

"Mr. Lawe?" A soft voice came from directly behind him. Turning toward the source, Heath faced the receptionist.

"Mr. Spencer is in a meeting. His secretary said he should be free shortly. The office is on the second floor. You can take the stairs or the elevator around the corner." She made a nervous gesture toward the hallway on his right.

"Thanks. Please have my bags taken to my suite." Heath strolled toward the curved staircase leading to the second level and the resort offices. Halfway across the lobby, he

stopped and stared. A woman with shoulder-length sandy-blond hair had entered the room. As Heath watched, she raised her hand and threaded her fingers through her bangs, pulling them away from her face. The familiar gesture sucked the air out of his chest.

Cassie. The one woman he'd never forgotten. Heath watched closely, trying to get a better look as she crossed the sitting area and disappeared down a hall.

Heath hadn't seen the young woman's face, but there was no way she could have been Cassie. The person's actions had simply reminded him of her. He hadn't allowed himself to think about their brief interlude almost ten years ago. And he had enough going on to worry about it now.

* * *

"Let me get this straight, you want my company to provide individual security for twenty executives," Cassandra Andrews clarified. She kept her gaze focused on the distinguished older man sitting across from her.

"Yes. Since your company has provided security for us in the past, our staff is familiar with your procedures. We'd also like you to supply additional security to work with our own staff on overall coverage for everyone who attends." Jakob Spencer slid a file across his mahogany desktop.

His brilliant green eyes, a startling contrast to his pure white hair, never left hers. His intense scrutiny should have made her uncomfortable. She wasn't sure why it didn't.

"This is a list of everyone who registered for our CEO summit. Those with a star in front of their names will require individual security during their stay."

Cassie quickly scanned the list, recognizing many of the names. Her company had provided personal security for at least a half dozen of those listed at various times during the past year. There were at least another dozen for whom they had handled services in the last three years. A definite plus; they would already have background information on these clients.

"There should be at least one person assigned for each shift, but I would prefer two." Opening another file, he pulled out a stack of bound papers and handed them to her.

"Do you know if anyone on this list made private arrangements for protection during their stay?" Cassie asked.

“There were two who mentioned getting their own, but I told them it wouldn’t be necessary since the lodge would be providing extensive security.” Jakob relaxed into his wing-backed leather chair.

“Good.” She flashed him a grateful smile. “That makes our job easier.” Glancing down at her notes, she perused her list before continuing. “I will need a full set of blueprints for each building and a list of all areas authorized for the general public.”

“My head of security, Deke Ward, was temporarily called away. However, he has compiled a complete report for you, including a list of personnel, their backgrounds and all other information you should need. Is there anything else?”

“I’d like a tour of the property and a meeting with Mr. Ward when he’s available.” She softened her requests with another smile. Rising to her feet, she continued, “Could we meet tomorrow for my assessment and suggestions for any changes?”

“Have my secretary check my schedule. Deke should be back shortly, and he’ll arrange a meeting with you. He can handle your questions. It’s been a pleasure seeing you again, Cassandra.” Standing, he followed her to the door.

“The pleasure has been mine, and please call me Cassie. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Jakob opened the door for her. His old-world courtesy reminded her of her dad.

“I understand you accepted my offer and brought your son with you. I hope you both enjoy our resort.” With that, he gently dismissed her and closed the door.

Cassie couldn’t believe the change in Jakob. She remembered him from her childhood as a cold unsmiling business associate of her dad’s—one who had always scared her because of his stern uncompromising demeanor. Either he was more relaxed because he was on his home turf, or he’d mellowed. Whatever the reason, she was glad. The change made dealing with him less stressful.

An hour later, she met Deke in the main lobby. The next three hours were spent touring the main lodge, outlying cabins, and buildings. Reassured by the security procedures already in place and by Deke’s grasp of the additional problems the summit might create, she returned to her suite.

* * *

Heath stepped into Jakob’s office and quietly shut the door behind him. His gaze swept over the room, taking in the familiar setting. Raising his gaze, he met his

granddad's clear green eyes. Jakob stood and walked around his desk. Heath realized how much Jakob had changed physically since the last time Heath had seen him five years ago.

Although the older man was still as lean and elegant as Heath remembered, the lines on his face had deepened and he appeared...less invincible. Reaching out, Heath shook the hand Jakob offered, pleasantly surprised by the strength of his grip.

"Heath, I'm glad you could come this quickly." Jakob gestured toward the sitting area which provided a view of Twin Owl Lake.

Heath dropped into an upholstered chair facing his granddad. "Jakob."

After a slight pause, Jakob continued. "As I mentioned in my letter, I would like to use your new security program for a summit the lodge is holding."

The reason he'd come to the lodge was to find out how Jakob had even heard about his program. "My system is still developmental."

"I understand, but I've done some research and from what I've found out, your program would be a good fit with the lodge's current system." Jakob leaned forward and fixed Heath with his sharp gaze. "I'd like to use your system and give you a chance to work out any potential problems."

He knew his granddad. The old man wouldn't do this unless there was something in it for him. "Why?"

"I'm a businessman. I know a good deal when I see one." Jakob sat back and smiled. "If your system performs as well as I believe it will, I'd like to set up a partnership with you to market your design."

Heath stared at him in stunned silence. During the few summers when he, his twin brother, Hunter and their older sister, Miranda, had visited the lodge, his granddad had seldom had much to do with them. As they'd grown older, nothing about their relationship with Jakob had changed...until now. "You want to go into business with me?"

"Yes. I can arrange the financial backing needed to mass-produce and market your system. Through the years I've acquired many influential friends, a large number of whom are always looking for new and better security systems for their various businesses."

“And, if I said yes, who would run the company? You?” The thought of working for his granddad held no appeal. Heath remembered the possessively tight rein Jakob had tried to keep on his family and employees.

“You would. I have enough to handle with the resort and my other investments.” His granddad’s gaze never wavered. “Besides I’m not getting any younger. I just want to help. No strings attached.”

“What’s in it for you?” he asked.

“The satisfaction of seeing my grandson succeed.”

Heath studied Jakob, but couldn’t read the expression on his granddad’s face. There was more to this than just his system, but for the life of him, Heath couldn’t figure out what. “Why?”

“I believe in your work and I have the resources available to help.” Jakob took a sip of water before continuing. “I remember how tough it was to get a new business off the ground. If I can help smooth over the obstacles, then I’d like to.”

Right now, Heath wasn’t sure what his future held. “I’m not sure I want to go into business for myself.”

“Before you make any hasty decisions, take a look at my proposal. We can talk about this again tomorrow.” Jakob rose from his chair and held out a folder.

“I’ll look the information over. But I’m not promising anything.” Heath grabbed the paperwork to review.

“If you have no objections, I’d like to order the equipment needed to conduct the test. If you’ll give me the specs, I can have Deke work on locating everything you’d need.”

“If I agree to this test, where do we go from here?” Heath wasn’t ready to give out information about his suppliers or technology yet.

“We can handle this however you want. Why don’t you sleep on it? We’ll meet tomorrow to discuss your decision.”

“I’ll contact my suppliers and make any arrangements needed after I review your proposal.” Heath tucked the folder under his arm and left the office. He’d look at the papers, but he was wary of going into business with his granddad. But if Jakob’s deal was everything he’d said it was, this could be the opportunity of a lifetime.

An opportunity he'd be a fool to pass up. But could he trust Jakob to keep his word and let Heath run the company? At this point, all he could do was read the proposal carefully. If the deal was good, he'd have an attorney review the paperwork before signing anything. Heath suspected his life would never be his own once he did.

* * *

Entering her suite, Cassie smiled. As usual, the television was going full blast with her nine-year-old son's latest video game. A loud explosion on-screen nearly sent her reeling. "Less volume, sport. I'd like to keep my hearing a little longer."

"Aw, Mom. It isn't as much fun without the awesome sound effects," Alex said over his shoulder. A huge grin spread across his tanned face, and he used his expressive green eyes to give her his best pleading look.

"Somehow I don't think the special effects will be any less awesome with a little less sound." Cassie ruffled his silky black hair as she passed behind the couch. She nodded to the staff member who had been watching Alex for her. Another perk provided by Jakob, childcare when she was working. The young woman smiled, picked up her book and let herself out of the suite.

Cassie dropped her purse and notes onto the coffee table and sagged onto the cushion beside him. Reluctantly, he turned down the volume.

"Wanna play? I'm up to level ten." He returned his attention to the game and rapidly pushed buttons to maneuver through the obstacles on the screen.

"No, thanks. We both know how hopeless I am at that stuff. I've got a couple of free hours. Do you want to do something?"

Alex whipped his head around and gave her an eager look. "Can we go riding?"

The only thing her son loved more than video games and computers was horses. Anything and everything about them, regardless of what kind. Alex's love for horses matched her own. Something they had in common since she couldn't play a video game to save her life.

"Sure. Let me call and make arrangements." Rising to her feet, she grabbed the lodge directory and made the call. "We've got about twenty minutes, so you'd better shake a leg and get changed."

“Who-ee, you’re the best, Mom.” Jumping up, he raced over and gave her a quick hug before running into his room.

“You’re welcome,” Cassie called after him. She shook her head in amazement. What she wouldn’t give to have half of his energy. Most days she dropped into bed so beat she was asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Hurrying into her room, she grabbed her favorite pair of jeans and her boots and changed quickly. A warm sweatshirt completed her outfit, and she pulled her hair into a ponytail to keep it out of her eyes. A surge of excitement swept through her. Before their arrival yesterday, she hadn’t been on a horse for almost two years. Not since before she’d left her husband Trevor, and later taken over the reins of the company after his death. She’d forgotten how much she enjoyed the simple pleasure.

A knock sounded at her bedroom door seconds before her son pushed it open. Turning, she fixed him with a stern look. “I don’t remember giving you permission to come in yet.”

“But I didn’t come in.” Alex pointed to where his feet were planted just outside the doorframe. “See.”

Cassie shook her head at his antics. “You’re supposed to wait until the person on the other side of the door tells you to come in, and you know it.”

“Yeah, but you take too long. Come on, Mom, let’s go.” Alex stepped into her room, grabbed her hand and practically dragged her out of the suite.

“Slow down, sport, the horses won’t leave without us.” She smiled at his boundless enthusiasm. He’d had so little to enjoy this past year. There had been so many things to sort out and take care of after her husband’s death. With all those problems at the company to fix, Alex got the short end of the deal most days. Unfortunately, she hadn’t had any other choice until now.

Entering the stables five minutes later, Cassie let the familiar smells and sounds wrap around her like a long lost friend. She’d missed this. She draped her arm over Alex’s shoulders and gave him a hug. He returned her hug before pulling away and racing toward the nearest stall.

A long-missed sense of peace settled over her, and Cassie allowed the rigid control she kept wrapped around herself to loosen. A wonderful sense of freedom allowed her to

relax. She couldn't remember the last time she'd let down her guard enough to truly take it easy and simply live in the moment.

Maybe this trip could be the start of better times for her and Alex. She hoped so, for both their sakes. Something had to change.

[END OF EXCERPT]

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