

ASPEN GOLD SERIES  
**LONELY EYES**



**Bernadette Jones**

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## Chapter 1

“What the hell?” Owen swore into the empty truck cab, struggling to see through the blinding downpour. Was that a kid hiking on the road? He leaned forward, squinting through the rain-dappled windshield, catching quick glimpses of the asphalt between the rapidly beating wipers. Luckily, he caught a second glimpse of the huddled form, slogging ahead on the empty traffic lane.

Easing completely off the gas, he fought the urge to slam on the brakes. He quickly shifted into the opposite lane and gradually guided the heavy tow truck around and past the hitchhiker walking along the highway. Why would someone be out in this mess?

Once past, he eased to a stop, steering as close to the edge of the mountain road as sensible.

He glanced at the clock on his dashboard, already knowing the time was well after midnight. Throwing the vehicle into park, he put on the emergency brake and switched on every flashing and blinking light the truck sported. Opening his door, he stepped onto the road. “What the hell are you doing walking in this storm? Don’t you know how dangerous it is? I almost didn’t see you. I could have hit you.”

The kid took two steps backward and stopped, hiding in the shadows of the overhanging evergreens. Slightly-built, maybe five-five. From what he could see, Owen guessed him to be twelve or thirteen.

“Look, it’s dangerous out here. Visibility is shit and there’s all this lightning. How long have you been walking? Get in the truck and I’ll give you a lift.”

Still no response. Owen studied the teen’s body language. He sensed that if he made a move the kid would bolt into the forest. With the cold rain and the lower night temperatures, he didn’t want the kid freezing to death.

“You’ve got to be cold. It’s another six miles to town. I don’t think you’re going to make it walking. You’re already moving stiffly.”

The kid tried to straighten, but under the bulging backpack and rain soaking every inch of his body, he could barely stand.

“Let’s make a deal. Use your phone to take a picture of my truck and send it to a friend. Then I’ll give you a ride to town. No questions. No charge. Hell, I won’t even talk.”

Still no sound, but the boy at least shuffled his feet.

“I’m not one to let people die. What’s it going to be?” Through the torrent of rain, Owen kept his gaze locked on the kid. Worst case, he could drive off and wait on the opposite side of the upcoming bend. He doubted the kid could walk much farther before he collapsed. Once he had fallen, Owen could pick him up and put him in the truck.

How had he gotten up here on the mountain in the first place? Owen hadn’t passed any abandoned cars on his return from the accident. He thought of the collision site. Could the teen have been involved in the crash?

He studied him. No way he’d walked from the crash site. Who would dump a kid off in the middle of a storm?

The kid shifted again, this time awkwardly pulling a phone from his left pocket.

“Good choice. Take photos of the truck, license plate, and one of me.” He pushed off the hood from his rain slicker. Tell your friend my name is Owen Strong and I’m from Spencer.”

Motionless, the kid stared at his phone.

“Your battery dead? Look, you need to get into the truck. You need the heat.”

The hiker took one step and collapsed.

“Damn.” Owen sprinted to the fallen kid, instinctively weighing options and the best recourse. Most Spencer emergency response teams were still transporting accident victims from the crash. He could help quicker than calling. He had enough experience to deal with early stages of hypothermia.

Lifting him upright, he gently tossed the kid over his shoulder, scooped up the cell and headed to the truck. Pulling open the passenger door, he sat the kid on the seat edge and tugged the backpack from his shoulders, dropping the bag onto the ground by his feet.

Turning the kid to face the dash, he hooked him in place with the seatbelt. Confident the boy was secure; he slammed the door shut and grabbed the pack. Hell, the bag weighed more than the kid. Rounding the front of the truck, he tossed the backpack into the rear seat and stripped off his slicker, throwing it on the floor. He grabbed the blanket he kept in the truck, climbed behind the wheel, and cranked up the heat, making sure the vents pointed toward his passenger.

“Kid. Kid, can you hear me?” he asked as he wrapped the blanket over the teen’s crumpled body. Gently, he tapped the boy’s hooded cheek. No response. As the boy lay collapsed against the passenger door, Owen loosened the cinch on the hood, slid his hand under the fabric and checked for a pulse. The flesh was cold, but with slight pressure Owen found a steady beat. A good sign.

He needed to move off the shoulder of the road. It wasn’t safe to have the tow truck parked on this stretch of the highway. Releasing the brake and shifting the vehicle into gear, he checked his mirrors and eased onto the highway.

Once he got them to town, if he couldn’t wake the kid, he’d take him straight to the hospital. At least he was out of the rain. The trip to Spencer would take about fifteen minutes in this downpour.

He glanced to the side. The hood had fallen forward again. Now, in closer proximity, his passenger seemed even smaller than he’d initially thought. A knot fisted in his gut. If he hadn’t driven by, would the kid have died? The weather wasn’t frigid, but the temp had definitely dropped, and being soaked could chill a person quickly. The kid didn’t have on a rain parka, or anything waterproof. Caught unprepared, even experienced hikers died in this weather. Owen didn’t like the odds.

What the hell was this boy doing? The most probable explanation was that his passenger was a runaway.

Most kids took off for a reason. Taking the kid to the hospital would most likely send him right back to what he was running from. Owen tightened his hand on the wheel. One step at a time. Get the truck back to Rollie’s and give the kid time to wake up.

\* \* \*

Keira jerked awake. The car was moving. Had she fallen asleep at the wheel? With a gasp, she sat upright. Her eyes flew open and she reached for the steering wheel. Her hand landed on the dash. Lights from an oncoming car blinded her. She screamed.

“You’re okay. I got you. You’re safe.”

A male voice seeped into her consciousness. “Who are you? Where am I?”

“You’re in my tow truck. You were walking in the downpour, and I almost didn’t see you. Then you passed out. I’m taking you to the hospital. You’ll be okay. You’re safe.”

“No. No hospital. I’ll be fine.” She glanced around the cab. “Where’s my bag? Where are we headed?”

“We’re about five miles from a little town called Spencer. Do you remember walking on the mountain road?”

The rain had seemed to come from nowhere. She’d been walking for a while when the sky broke open. Within minutes she and her backpack had been drenched. She’d been so cold. The sound of a truck behind her had startled her. The big rig passed her and came to a stop. This huge man jumped out and offered her a ride. His voice and words sounded trustworthy.

*People lied.*

He’d told her to take a picture. That suggestion made her feel better, safer. “Yes. You stopped and offered me a ride.”

“Good. We’ll get you help.”

“I don’t need a hospital. I’m fine, really.” She shot the stranger a glance. “Just drop me off in town.”

“You a runaway?”

A gasp escaped her lips. She lifted her gaze to his, pushing her still-wet coat hood back, to see him more clearly. “Why do you ask that?”

He glanced at her and his eyes widened in the lights from the dash. “You’re a girl.”

She leaned against the door, slipping her fingers into the handle.

He held up his hand. “It’s okay. You’re fine. You’re safe. I thought you were a guy. A kid. A boy.” He shook his head and whispered. “Shut up, Owen.”

She studied the man closer. He'd removed the billowy rain cape but he still seemed huge. His rain-slicked hair was pushed back from his face and plastered against his head. His jaw was shadowed. The rolled-up sleeves on his flannel shirt exposed muscular arms wrapped in a waffle-weave thermal shirt.

"Let me try this again. I'm taking this tow to the shop. Spencer is a small town, and at this time of night there won't be much open. My car is close, though, and I can give you a ride to wherever you need to go."

"Does this town have hotels?"

He glanced her way. "You didn't know where you were going? You weren't headed to Spencer?"

She swallowed. "I knew the next town was Spencer, but nothing else."

"How'd you get—"

"Does Spencer have hotels?" she asked, cutting him off.

"Yes, but the nice ones will be shut down for the night. It's tourist season and most will be booked anyway."

"Oh. It's a tourist town?" she asked.

"Yeah, but not crazy touristy. I mean, we double in size for a few months, but mostly it's a nice little artist mountain community. I'm not big on crowds, and this is my first summer here, but so far it's been okay."

He drove the truck around another bend, and the town unfolded before them. On the left, a large beautiful older home welcomed them with lights ablaze on the lower level.

Spencer. She'd arrived. Anticipation and trepidation vied for dominance in her chest. Tomorrow she would see the buildings and landscape in the daylight. She hadn't lied. Things had happened too fast for research.

"You didn't answer me. Are you in trouble? Are you a runaway?"

She gazed out the side window at the dark passing landscape. Runaway. Her whole life had been one desperate move after another. *Can you ever run away?*

Glancing back at the huge man beside her, she smiled. "You're a good guy. I appreciate your help. But I'm okay. Thank you for your kindness. Just get me to town."

"I have to drop off the truck. I'm willing to take you anywhere you need to go."

“What about the not-so-nice places to stay in this town? The other hotels?”

“How’d you get on that stretch of mountain? I didn’t pass other cars. Did somebody dump you? Are you afraid? I’m friends with the local police chief. He can help.”

Damn, he was persistent. “No. I don’t need the police. I don’t need anyone.”

“Maybe we should take you to my friend, Gage. He’s a doctor. He could check you out. How old are you?”

“When you offered me the ride, I remember you said you weren’t going to talk. Did you forget?” she asked.

“No. But—”

“But what?”

“Is my ass going to end up in jail for transporting jailbait?” He snapped out.

She couldn’t stop the chuckle. “I’m over eighteen. You’re safe. And, I’m fine. I can take care of myself. All I need is for you to drop me off in town.”

With a sharp left, he took a side road and then another left, ending up back onto the main road they’d traveled on into town. A couple of minutes later, they approached the big old-fashioned stone mansion she remembered seeing as they’d driven into town, with welcoming lights in the lower level.

He glanced at her before grabbing his cell from the console and hit a button. “Hey Zoe, your lights are on. You up? Thought you might be. Hey, I’ve got a friend who needs a place for the night. You have any open? Good. Thanks. We’re pulling in now.”

“This is Zoe’s place,” he explained. “She owns the Blue Spruce. You’ll be safe and comfortable here. I wouldn’t feel right dropping you off at any of the motels with open rooms. Do you need money? I can help you out.”

“I have a little money. Is this place expensive?”

“No. Zoe is reasonably priced.”

He guided the tow truck into the drive beside the Blue Spruce sign. The storm had ceased as quickly as it started, leaving the air fragrant with pine. Climbing from the cab, he grabbed her backpack from the back seat, and met her at the front of the truck. She walked beside him to the big porch where a woman waited to greet them.

“Hi, I’m Zoe Barlow. Welcome to the Blue Spruce.”



Keira pushed the hood from her head and reached out a hand. “Hi. I’m Keira. I hope we didn’t wake you.”

Zoe smiled. “No worry. I was waiting for Chet to come home.” She glanced at the crumpled vehicle. “Are there more wrecks to pick up?”

“No, that’s the last one. Chet should be home soon,” he offered. “Did you say you have coffee?”

“Yes, a fresh pot.” Zoe looked at Keira. “Or tea and a snack. Complimentary with your stay, along with breakfast in the morning. Why don’t we get you settled? You can take off those wet clothes and take a shower to warm up.” Zoe sized up the dripping backpack. “I have something dry you can put on, and then you can join us for a bite to eat.”

As they reached the second floor, Zoe advised Keira she’d be sharing the Jack-and-Jill bathroom. Handing her the key, she reminded her to come down for a snack.

The room was lovely. A colorful bouquet of fresh flowers graced a well-polished oak dressing table. An antique chest of drawers was pushed against the far wall. On either side of the queen bed, tables supported globe lamps in a soft green with delicate roses painted on the base. The intricately designed wrought iron headboard decorated the soft rose-colored wall between two windows.

Keira’s artistic eye was drawn to the bed quilt. The traditional wedding pattern had been stitched on a soft grey background. The intertwining rings were teal, lavender, varying shades of pinks, soft blues and peach. The bed was stacked with matching pillows, comfortable and cozy with a fresh palette.

Nothing stark or sterile. No white walls. No clinically blunt furniture. The space was warm and welcoming. A gentle place to retreat and relax. If only she could.

Staying here and avoiding the larger chains would be beneficial—no national database. She had to keep under the radar; being caught was too dangerous for everyone. The only issue would be the price. She’d already been traveling four days, using more money than she’d hoped.

Tomorrow she’d check out the town and see if he still lived here.

Thirty minutes later, showered and wearing the sweatpants the kindly woman had insisted she take as a gift, Keira hesitated outside the doors of the dining room entrance.

She nervously swiped her hands over the soft fabric. The matching baby-blue sweatshirt with the Blue Spruce logo was warm and comforting. She shouldn't be doing this, but she was hungry and alone. Zoe had kind eyes, as did the big man who'd found her. This one meal couldn't hurt.

She took a deep breath before entering the dining room. Owen sat at the table with her hostess and another older man. "Oh. I'm sorry. I'll come back."

Owen stood. "No. Join us. We were waiting for you."

Zoe glanced up and smiled. "You'd better hurry dear, or these two will have eaten everything. Tea or coffee?"

"Tea, please."

As she approached, the older man rose from his chair and held out his hand. "Hi, I'm Chet. I hear you'll be staying for a while."

"Um—uh, yes if I can afford the price, sir."

Zoe filled a cup, placing the saucer in front of the empty chair that Owen pulled out. "Sit. There's no charge for tonight since the night is almost over. We'll discuss the rest after we've eaten." Zoe glanced up, surprise lit her eyes. "Your hair! The braid goes well-below your waist. Have you ever cut it?"

"Yes, but it's been years. I've always found it easier to keep it braided or in a bun rather than messing with hairstyles."

"It must take forever to dry. Did you find the hair dryer? Do you need a second one? No wonder you were so cold. You must still be warming up."

"I will dry it when I go back up. I did see the dryer under the sink. Thank you." Keira took her place at the table, hoping no one had heard her stomach rumble. Other than coffee, she hadn't eaten anything for almost two days.

She surveyed the food laid out. Six large sandwiches were stacked on a plate, carrots, celery and pickles on another. Bowls of coleslaw, potato salad and mixed fruit filled the table center. There was another plate with cookies, brownies and cinnamon coffee cake.

"Oh, I should've asked, are you vegetarian?" Zoe asked.

Keira shook her head.

“Good. We have ham or chicken. I always hate choosing. Would you like to share half of each with me?”

“That’s perfect.” Keira agreed. Taking the coleslaw bowl that was handed to her, she added a scoop to her plate. Passing the bowl to the right, she and Owen almost collided dishes as he passed left. He chuckled, switching hands, then making the transfer. The fresh crunchy salad was a treat to her vegetable-starved senses. The fresh fruit was ambrosia. They allowed her to eat in peace.

Keira was amazed at how quickly the food disappeared. The two men ate until the plates were empty. They discussed the big wreck on the highway and were thankful that the injuries incurred seemed to be treatable. When everyone was finished, the two men rose and started clearing the table. Keira joined them. The simple task grounded her, relieving her stress.

“Thank you for your help, Keira. Why don’t you go get some rest? Breakfast is served between seven-thirty and nine-thirty.”

“Please, Miss Zoe, how much is the room?”

Zoe smiled and glanced over Keira’s shoulder. “If you’d like to stay, we could let you have the room for the next two nights. It’s booked after that, but I can help you find another place. I have friends in hospitality, and we support each other all the time. The room was available, so you’re helping us out. How does two hundred sound for the two nights? I’ll need the room by noon on Friday.”

Keira stifled a sigh of relief. She suspected they were giving her a break, but hoped the lack of customers was true. She wasn’t in a position to turn down such a generous offer.

After excusing herself, she headed upstairs. Closing the door, she leaned against it and took a deep breath. The food helped. She no longer felt so anxious, and the trembly sensation had left her body.

She crawled into the soft luxurious bed, snuggling under the covers. The kindness, the food, the safety held fear at bay. Still wide awake, she stared at the ceiling. Maybe this would work. Maybe she could get free. If only she could find the man with the answers. Maybe then she could sleep.

\* \* \*

Owen gave Zoe a hug, and led Chet outside.

“What the hell are you up to now?” Chet admonished.

Owen opened the driver’s door, reaching inside to grab his wallet. Stepping back, he slipped five hundred-dollar bills from the sleeve and handed them to Chet. “Give that to Zoe. I told her I’d cover the difference on the room cost. Tell her I said thank you, and if there’s a problem, have her call me.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Chet persisted.

Owen glanced up at the light in the upstairs corner bedroom. “Did you hear her stomach growl?”

Chet nodded.

“Her backpack weighs more than she does.” Owen shrugged. “I think she’s got trouble. I think she’s running. She said she saw Spencer on a map. Maybe she can rest here, take a few days to think through what she’s doing and where she’s going. Nobody that young should be on their own.”

“You can’t fix the world, son.”

Owen slapped his friend on the shoulder and climbed behind the wheel. After starting the engine, he rolled down the window. “If you think she’s trouble, have Zoe let me know.”

Chet patted the hood and headed back inside.

Owen sat for a moment, studying the light in the upstairs corner room. A slight shadow drifted across the window frame. He’d been shocked that the kid turned out to be a woman. A beautiful woman. She’d been ravenous. He didn’t think she’d noticed Zoe slipping extra food on her plate. She’d been pacing herself, consciously trying not to show her hunger.

Zoe had noticed as well. A genuinely good person, she’d assessed the situation and known exactly how to handle Keira. Serving everyone until the food was gone, making sure that Keira kept getting refills. She’d even caught on when the cost came up and he’d brushed his nose with a finger.

Yes, the room had been empty due to a last-minute cancellation. Still, the Blue Spruce was a landmark and coveted destination for its location and reputation. There would’ve been a customer waiting in the morning. He realized that the two hundred Zoe

had whispered in his ear was below what she could normally make renting the room. He'd tried to give her enough to cover the cost.

He watched as the woman walked past the windows again and the light went out. His chest tightened, a disturbingly familiar intuition when trouble was near.

\* \* \*

Voices in the hall woke Keira with a start. Jumping from the bed, she glanced around in a panic. The Blue Spruce. She looked down at the sweatsuit she still wore. She glanced at the clock on the table, surprised it was already eight-thirty. How had she slept this late? She was wasting time.

Washing up and refashioning a quick braid in her hair, she checked the clothes she'd hung to dry. They were still wet. Damn.

Leaving the suite, she made her way to the breakfast room. An older twosome sat at the table in front of a window, and a young couple with a baby and toddler occupied the table nearest the entrance. Her hostess filled a coffee urn at the breakfast bar and checked the assorted trays.

Zoe glanced up and smiled as Keira approached. "Good morning. Did you sleep well?"

Keira smiled back. "Very well. Thank you."

Zoe handed her a plate. "I just put out fresh coffee and tea. These are the pastries and fruits. We make eggs, waffles and pancakes to order. On every table you'll find a menu for the day's selection. I'll give you time to decide and be right back to take your order."

Keira made tea and chose a cinnamon cake and a bowl of cantaloupe before sitting at a secluded two-person table by the window. Warm in her hands, the green tea was a perfect temperature and soothed her.

She'd managed to reach her destination. Now what? How would she go about finding him without calling attention to herself? She needed to be discreet. She couldn't leave a trail to be followed.

A lovely younger woman with curly black hair took her order and headed back toward the rear of the house. The woman paused in the doorway and glanced back at

Keira. A flutter of unease crossed over her as she watched the woman retreat into the kitchen.

While she waited for her breakfast, the other diners left. A few minutes later, Zoe came out with her eggs and bacon.

“Are you here visiting friends or family?” she asked.

Keira smiled and repeated her refrain. “No, I’m slowly making my way across the country. Taking a break between semesters while I decide on a new major.”

“You’re backpacking?” Zoe asked in disbelief.

Keira blushed and looked away. She’d never been a good liar. “My car died and I’ve been walking, hitchhiking, and taking buses when I could afford them.” She met Zoe’s gaze. “I was hoping with the tourist traffic, I could find a job in Spencer to build-up my cash reserves. Waitress, bar work, cleaning. Can you tell me a little more about the town? Where I might get work?”

Zoe studied her intently, then seeming to make a decision, she nodded. “Eat your breakfast, then we can talk.”

The food filled the large plate, but Keira devoured every bite. Being full was a luxury. Between fear, anxiety, and being broke, she’d been cautious on her food purchases. Peanut butter and crackers had gotten her through the first two days. The two after that, she could barely remember.

Zoe returned to gather her empty plates. “If you’re planning on staying in town for a while, we need to find you a place. Before I forget, I’m sure all your clothes got soaked. Gather your laundry and meet me in the hall at the back. We’ll start your wash, then we can sit in the parlor while I arrange flowers. I’ll tell you about the town, where you might find a job, and maybe we can find you a room.”

They started laundry, and Keira followed Zoe back to the parlor. The black-haired waitress who’d taken her order was in the room arranging fresh flowers in a vase. Nine additional vases sat on the sidebar waiting to be filled, and a second table overflowed with fresh flowers. The woman glanced up and paused, brown eyes searching. Keira swore she could *feel* the woman’s scrutiny.

“Vianna, this is Keira. She got caught in that awful storm last night. Thank heavens Owen found her, and we had that last-minute cancellation.” Zoe crossed to the table and selected a vase.

“Hi.” Keira forced a smile. The other woman met her gaze and her eyes warmed as did her smile.

“Want to help us arrange the flowers?” she asked.

Keira considered the table filled with beautiful blossoms, colorful dahlia, lilies, roses, delphinium, hydrangea, carnations, and gardenias. “What a variety. They’re all lovely.”

“Mom grows most of them in her backyard and only has to order a few. She has quite the garden. I can show you later.”

Keira took in the two women; they didn’t resemble each other in the slightest.

Zoe smiled. “This is my daughter-in-law. She’s married to my son, Ryder. I’m blessed that she calls me mom.” Zoe winked. “She’s going to be a mom herself. And I’m almost as excited as Ryder.”

Vianna chuckled. “Thank god you aren’t as overprotective as he is.”

Keira relaxed. Her fretfulness and trepidation had her seeing suspicion where there was none. These people had no reason to believe anything other than what she told them.

“I’d love to help. Do you have a set design?”

“Oh no. Have fun. We have them all over, in every guest room, on dining tables, and in the entryway.... which reminds me that one needs to be redone today. I’ll go grab the container.” Zoe took off.

Keira selected a vase and several flowers, then joined Vianna at the table. Zoe returned with a large mason jug that she placed to the side and selected a smaller jar. Zoe and Vianna giggled and joked as they filled their vases, stealing what they called ‘select blooms’ from each other. For a few moments Keira immersed herself in the colors, fragrance and composition.

She finished her arrangement and studied the design. How long had it been since she’d been able to create for the simple joy of creating? No expectation, no deadline, no guilt—the simple combination of white flowers with complementary scents and the leafy greenery.

“That’s stunning,” Zoe exclaimed.

Keira drew herself back from her contemplation. The two women stared at her with shining eyes.

Vianna nodded. “Lovely.” She tugged her cell from her pocket. “I’m taking a photo so we can remember what you did.”

Zoe chuckled. “I love flowers and all the different colors. My tendency is to keep adding to a vase because I want the whole garden in one place. But this is exquisite. Simple and elegant. Soothing.”

“The whole design is relaxing,” Vianna added.

Humility flooded Keira. “No, yours are lovely and vibrant. Mine is plain.”

“Eye of the beholder,” Zoe said with a smile. She retrieved the large vessel used for the entryway. “Please, will you do this one to welcome our guests?”

Surprisingly moved Keira nodded, letting their praise for the beauty of her design wash over her. Only the beauty, no other demands.

They worked in companionable silence for a few minutes before Zoe spoke. “You mentioned you need work. How long do you think you’ll be staying?”

“Not long. A few weeks.” Keira kept her gaze lowered.

Zoe cleared her throat. “You need something off the books.”

Keira met her eyes and nodded.

“That’s going to make it a little harder,” Zoe admitted. “Most businesses in town do a full background check. We may not be the lodge, but we want the business they bring us.”

“The lodge?”

Zoe hesitated, then glanced at Vianna. “You haven’t heard of Aspen Gold Lodge?”

“No.”

“Aspen Gold Lodge is an exclusive resort for people with lots of money and prominence who don’t want to be bothered by paparazzi, autograph seekers, or political opponents. The lodge is self-contained, but their business does bring attention to the area. Everyone in Spencer is security conscious.”

Oh, shit. An abundance of security was the last thing she needed.

“How’d you get here dear?” Zoe asked.



“A trucker gave me a lift when my car died at a truck stop. He’s the one who said I might be able to get work here.”

“Why—”

Keira needed to stop the questions she sensed coming. “Please, tell me someone will give me something for a week or so.”

“Obviously, you could work at the floral shop, but she can’t afford help this summer. You mentioned you could waitress. The places that pay well and where you could make the best tips would be Spampinato’s Fine Italian or The Golden Grille. They both require a full background check. The hotels I’d send you to also have a set staff for tourist season. The Back Porch Bar would be okay. Although, if you want bar work, I’d go to the Wild Card first. Ace runs a tight ship, and he watches out for his staff,” Zoe explained.

“He’ll sometimes give a traveler a temp job,” Vianna offered.

“True, but with Ruby pregnant, I hear he’s been a little pickier.”

“Ace?” Keira asked.

“Ace Joseph. He owns the Wild Card Saloon. He inherited the property and business from his father and his father’s father. Spencer is an old town and many families who live here are multi-generational.” Zoe paused, “We also have to find a place for you to sleep. I’m booked solid starting Friday, the seventeenth.” Zoe stood. “Can you girls finish the flowers? I’m going to make a couple calls to see if anyone has an opening.”

When the bouquets were finished and the parlor cleaned and put back in order, Keira turned to Vianna. “My laundry should be done. I’m going to get dressed and walk into town.”

“There are bikes out front if you’d like to borrow one. Zoe won’t mind.”

“Thank you.”

Vianna walked with her to the hall and paused. “You stopped in the right town. There are a lot of good, caring people here. I’m sure you’ll find help.”

Keira smiled, nodded, and turned toward the laundry room.

“Keira,” Vianna called.

She turned back to the open parlor entryway. The probing expression on the other woman’s face sent a chill up her spine.

As though changing her mind, she smiled. "I'm glad you came here."

[END OF EXCERPT]

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