

Aspen Gold

A Novel by

Janet Dailey



Little, Brown and Company

Boston Toronto London

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NOVELS BY JANET DAILEY

Touch the Wind
The Rogue
Ride the Thunder
Night Way
This Calder Sky
This Calder Range
Stands a Calder Man
Calder Born, Calder Bred
Silver Wings, Santiago Blue
The Pride of Hannah Wade
The Glory Game
The Great Alone
Heiress
Rivals
Masquerade
Aspen Gold

A Learjet streaked across the crisp autumn air, its nose tipped down in a slow but steady angle of descent. Below, the Rockies loomed, mighty upthrusts of granite bristling with spruce. It was a wild land, an ageless land, harsh and beautiful by turns. Its unbridled grandeur was limitless, constantly challenging the strong and mocking the weak — and always indifferent to man's attempts to tame it.

Here, where great herds of elk once grazed the high mountain meadow, five hundred head of crossbred Hereford and Black Angus cattle trailed across the autumn yellow grass, flanked by a half dozen riders. On the right, a river of aspen gold tumbled down the stony breast of a mountain slope, crashed through a black-green wall of pine, and spilled its bright yellow flood onto the meadow.

Sunlight glinted on the jet's polished surface. Old Tom Bannon caught the flash of metal and threw back his head, directing his gaze skyward, away from the cattle being driven to the winter pasture near the headquarters of Stone Creek Ranch.

The ancient Stetson hat on his head was brown and weather-beaten like the eighty-two-year-old face it shaded. The big hands folded across the saddle horn were speckled with liver spots, and age had fleshed up his big-boned frame and shot his hair with gray.

His widely spaced and deep-set eyes looked out from beneath shaggy brows and searched the flawless October sky for the source of the light flash that had jarred him from his silent reminiscences of

past autumn cattle drives. The sight of the sleek aircraft hurtling up the valley like a white arrow flying low — too low — brought his hard, square jaw together.

“Will you look at that blasted fool?” Old Tom flung a hand in the direction of the plane, directing the sharp-edged words at his son and namesake, Tom Bannon. “What in thunderation is going through his head to be flying that low? It’s a damned fool stunt, that’s what it is.”

Following the line of his father’s outstretched arm, Tom Bannon spotted the private jet. At thirty-six, he was a younger and leaner version of his father, with a face like the mountains, full of crags and hard surfaces, a face that wasn’t handsome, yet one any woman would look at twice. Those who knew him well never called him Young Tom, or even Tom; he was simply Bannon. He’d been that from the first moment his father had set eyes on him and proclaimed, “He’s a Bannon, right enough.”

“What d’ya bet it’s one of those idiots from Hollywood taking a scenic tour before landing in Aspen?” Old Tom challenged.

When Bannon saw the insignia of Olympic Pictures painted on the plane’s white fuselage, he had an idea who was on board, but he didn’t waste time on speculation. Instead his glance sliced to the cattle bunched in front of the open gate as the droning whine of the jet’s engines began to make itself heard.

“Ned! Hank!” he shouted to the two riders on the flanks. “Push ’em through the gate!”

He spared one look to the rear of the herd, locating his nine-year-old daughter, Laura. She trailed behind, her head bobbing from side to side, her slim shoulders dipping and swaying, her fingers snapping to the beat of the rock music coming over her headset. Oblivious to everything but the song, she hadn’t heard his shouted order.

Bannon whistled a shrill command to the two cow dogs trotting alongside her pinto. Like twin streaks, they shot after the herd, harrying them from the rear while Bannon pushed at the balking leaders, reluctant to leave the summer range. Ignoring their bawls of protest, he rode his buckskin against them, urging them forward with his voice and the slap of a coiled lariat against his thigh.

From the knoll, Old Tom watched as the first of the cows went through, stiff-legged and suspicious, heads lowered in distrust. But

one look at the plane speeding through the sky and Old Tom knew they'd never get the rest of the herd through. The plane was so close he could see the pilot's dark aviator glasses and the faces pressed close to the cabin's porthole windows.

He yelled anyway: "Don't let 'em break. Don't let 'em break!"

The jet thundered by, a scant three hundred feet above the mountain's shoulder and the herd. The noise of its engines caught up with them, breaking across the cattle in a roar that vibrated the air and the ground. The aging red roan beneath Old Tom — a horse that never turned a hair at the blast of a thirty-ought-six between its ears — sank into a crouch, then spun in a half circle, joining the cattle that wheeled as one and bolted back across the meadow, their tufted tails raised high in panic.

For Old Tom, the sight of the stampeding herd and the racing riders was a patch from his youth, when half-wild cattle had run on the ranch. Caught up by the memory, he suddenly felt young again himself and spurred the roan after the herd.

Far ahead, Old Tom spotted his granddaughter sawing on the reins, regaining control of her frightened pinto. He took an instant pride in her skill. From her earliest talking days, he'd taught her to ride like that — loose and straight in the saddle yet always balanced, prepared for any sudden moves by her mount.

Then he saw the wall of aspens beyond, and she was forgotten. If the cattle made it into that dense timber, they'd scatter like leaves in the wind. It would take a day — maybe two — to gather them up again.

"Keep 'em in the meadow!" he shouted. "Don't let 'em get in those trees!"

But the fading rumble of the jet's engines and the loud drum of cloven and shod hooves drowned out his call. Then Old Tom saw that the warning had been needless. Bannon had seen the same thing, and had the buckskin stretched out flat, streaking to catch the leaders and turn them before they reached the timber.

Old Tom watched. There'd been a time when he and the old roan could have made a race of it, but no more. No more.

Inside the jet's lushly appointed cabin, Kit Masters sat on her knees, her shoes kicked off, her long legs tucked beneath her as she leaned

across the back of the pewter velvet sofa to look out the window. A hand slid across her back, then settled with familiar ease on the rounded jut of a hipbone. Kit smiled, recognizing the touch of that hand. She glanced back, automatically tucking the loose tumble of honey blond hair behind an ear as John Travis folded his six-foot-two-inch frame onto the plump sofa cushion, angling his body toward hers.

He flashed her one of his trademark smiles — quick, crooked, and wicked — a smile that changed his face from merely sexy to dangerously charming.

“The pilot said we should be flying over your place shortly. Anything look familiar to you yet?” John Travis briefly peered out the window, the downward tip of his head bringing into view the sun-lightened streaks in his darkly gold hair.

“Nearly everything.” Idly Kit studied his lean and faintly aristocratic face. It was a strong face, handsome with well-defined bones and a dimpled chin, a face made even more unique by its combination of charm and blatant sex appeal. A combination that had proved to be irresistible to the world at large ever since John Travis had burst onto the Hollywood scene fifteen years ago, soaring to almost instant stardom.

Looking at him, Kit was struck again by the illusory feeling that she’d known John Travis all her life, when, in fact, she’d met him for the first time just six short weeks before, at a party she’d attended only days before auditioning for the female lead in his new, yet-to-be-filmed movie, *White Lies*. A role she’d ultimately won, with the shooting scheduled to begin in a matter of weeks.

Kit turned back to the window, smiling when she recalled the crazy roller-coaster ride her life had taken these last six weeks — a ride full of heart-stopping speed and surprises. She’d loved every minute of it. Yet at the same time, she looked forward to the chance to finally catch her breath.

“If it’s all so familiar to you, tell me where we are.” John Travis arched a challenging look her way, a faintly ironic color to his blue-gray eyes.

“We’re flying over Stone Creek,” Kit replied easily, suppressing a slight twinge of pain, her nerves tensing at the sight of it.

“Stone Creek?” He peered out the window again. “I don’t see any creek down there.”

Her soft laugh drew a glance from Chip Freeman, the director and screenplay author of *White Lies*. But the instant his myopic eyes, aided by bottle-thick glasses, registered the blur of granite and gold mountains beyond the plane’s windows, he turned back to the padded black-leather bar trimmed with chrome. The quick bobbing of his Adam’s apple betrayed the fact he was a white-knuckle flier of the highest order.

Kit’s agent, the stout and stubby Maury Rose, gave no indication that he’d heard her as he continued his nonstop hustling of publicist Yvonne Davis, determined to get Kit the lion’s share of media attention at the charity dinner J. D. Lassiter, the billionaire owner of Olympic Pictures, was giving that evening.

Paula Grant was the Learjet’s one remaining passenger, a veteran soap actress who possessed that exotic combination of flaming red hair, porcelain skin, and green eyes — a hard and sleek kind of beauty that matched the bitchy characters she portrayed so well. She listened with only half an ear to the byplay between Kit and John Travis as she gazed out the window, intent on the mountain scenery, her deep leather cabin chair swiveled in a conversational mode toward the sofa.

“Stone Creek,” Kit explained, “is the ranch that adjoins ours.”

Ours. She sobered at her choice of pronouns. Silverwood could no longer accurately be called *ours*. After the death of her father eight months ago, ownership of the four-hundred-acre family ranch had passed solely to her.

The image of her father — the dark and handsome Clint Masters — came readily to her mind. She had recognized long ago that she’d inherited his blood, his recklessness, and his insatiable love of life.

She hadn’t been back to the ranch since the funeral — not by choice, but by circumstance. She tried and failed to imagine the ranch house without him in it, without his laughter to fill it.

“Look at all those cows running across the meadow,” Paula Grant announced to no one in particular. “And those cowboys chasing them. Good Lord, Kit, don’t tell me the Old West is still alive?”

Kit spotted the stampeding herd and groaned in dismay. “Oh, no, we’ve spooked the cattle. Old Tom’s going to have my head when he finds out.”

“I take it Old Tom owns the cattle.” This close to her, John Travis noticed the sweep of her lashes, the faint freckling across her nose, and the curve of her mouth.

“He does,” she replied, her smile radiating that breezy friendliness that had first attracted him to her.

On the surface, Kit Masters seemed typical of thousands of blond wannabes who possessed a kind of sunny and innocent California sexiness that had always had its place in Hollywood. Yet it was the unusual lake blue color of her eyes that lifted her out of the commonplace, eyes with a depth that suggested many things. He wondered if he’d ever uncover all her layers as he breathed in the warm, teasing fragrance of her perfume. It had been a long time since he’d more than indifferently wanted a woman. But there was nothing indifferent about his feelings toward Kit Masters.

“They’re moving the cattle down from the summer range,” Kit offered in absent explanation. “When I was growing up, Dad and I went over to Stone Creek every spring and helped with the branding and ear-tagging, the vaccinating, culling, and castrating, then drove the herd up to the high country for the summer. In the fall, we’d help bring them down,” she recalled, and thought of Bannon, who was so inextricably woven into all her memories of the past. The thought of him revived the old hurt — and the thready tension. She pushed them to the back of her mind. After ten years of practice, she’d become quite skilled at that.

“I simply cannot picture you punching cows, Kit,” Paula Grant stated with a bemused shake of her head.

John Travis couldn’t help agreeing with Paula Grant’s observation, especially when he glanced at Kit, seeing the confident and self-assured tilt of her head.

Kit laughed at her friend’s remark and immediately adopted a thick drawl. “Well, Paula honey, I’m plumb sorry you can’t see me punching cows, but I did it just the same.” She abandoned the accent. “Daddy had me on a horse before I learned to coo — to my mother’s horror, I might add. By the time I was two years old, I had

a pony of my own. At three, he gave me a miniature lariat and I drove the dogs and chickens crazy trying to rope them. When I was six, I was riding a full-sized horse." Her smile widened. "Of course, my mother countered all that by enrolling me in ballet class, making sure I took piano lessons, and dragging me off to concerts in the Music Tent and performances at the Wheeler Opera House. If I was going to be a cowgirl, she was determined to make me an *urbane* one."

"Very urbane," John Travis agreed, taking in the drops of chunky gold that dangled from her earlobes and mixed with strands of long blond hair that ran faintly lawless back from her face. A trio of heavy gold bracelets circled her wrist and clashed with the bright coral jacket she wore over a grape-colored cashmere tunic and slacks. A gold flyaway coat, carelessly thrown over the arm of the sofa, completed the bold and thoroughly modern ensemble — an ensemble that few women had the flair to carry off with any degree of sophistication. Kit was one of them.

"Paula, John T. Look." She pressed closer to the window, her expression showing an excitement that made her appear much younger than thirty-two. "There's Silverwood. My home."

Picking up on the warmth in her voice, John Travis glanced out the window. Attachment to a place was something he'd never known growing up as he had on a succession of military bases scattered over half the globe. At seventeen, he'd run away to California rather than face another move to another base and another strange school. He'd taken up acting on a dare, trading one transient life for another.

With idle curiosity he studied the buildings nestled at the apex of a triangularly shaped valley, walled by two sprawling, snowcapped ridges of the Rocky Mountains. A picturesque barn, weathered gray by the elements, sat in the center with wood fences stretching to make square designs across the valley. In a grove of aspen trees stood a rambling, clapboard house with three gables and a porch that wrapped all four sides of the building.

"It looks positively rustic and quaint, Kit," Paula said on a note of rare approval.

"It does, doesn't it?" Kit murmured, caught up in the memories of the good times she'd had there — and the sad ones.

"It's the setting that does it," Paula stated. "The mountains rising

behind it. The fabulous fall colors. I thought nothing could rival autumn in New England, but this” — she lifted a ringed hand to indicate the view from the jet’s window — “this is incredible.”

Kit’s gaze wandered from her childhood home to the mountains that autumn had painted with distilled sunshine. Drifts of canary yellow gleamed between solid ranks of spruce marching up a granite slope. Farther on, still more masses of slender white trunks rose from the forest floor, waving their crowns of saffron, lemon, amber, and topaz.

“I told you how glorious it would be at this time of year, Paula, but you wouldn’t believe me,” Kit said with a light trace of smugness. “You’re such a cynic. You should have been born in Missouri instead of Vermont.”

“Cynicism is necessary for survival in this business,” Paula replied. “When you’ve been in it as long as I have, you’ll find that out for yourself.”

“So you’ve said. But you know me — I’m an incurable optimist.” Kit shrugged in unconcern.

“It’s a pity you aren’t shooting your movie now instead of waiting for winter, John,” Paula Grant remarked. “This scenery is spectacular.”

“Careful, Paula,” John Travis mocked. “You’re starting to sound like a tourist.”

“After the charity benefit tonight, that’s exactly what I’m going to be for an entire month,” she declared, fairly gloating. “No more early-morning calls, no more long days, no more endless pages of dialogue to learn, no more working six days a week. You can’t possibly know how ecstatic I was when the writers decided it was time to kill off Rachel —”

“— and the producers had to buy out your contract,” John Travis inserted.

“That, too,” Paula admitted in a purr. “But after seven years on *Winds of Destiny*, I think I’ve earned a long and highly paid vacation. Don’t you?”

“Pay no attention to John T.,” Kit said. “He’s spent the last two hours with Chip thinking like a producer instead of an actor.”

“It shows.” Paula turned back to the window. Something caught

her eye and she edged closer to the pane. "That mountain," she murmured. "It looks like it's made of solid gold."

"Considering the price of real estate in Aspen, it might as well be," John Travis observed dryly.

Paula gave an absent nod. "I've heard the cost of even a small place is sinfully high."

Privately Kit hoped they were right, then immediately banished the thought and its overtones of greed.

"That's Aspen coming up, isn't it?" Paula asked.

Through the window, Kit watched the town take shape, spilling across the narrow valley of the Roaring Fork River and onto the shoulders of the walling Rocky Mountains.

Ski runs snaked down the slopes of Aspen Mountain where one hundred years ago black-faced miners trudged wearily home from their shifts in the silver mines. Ultraluxe, ultramodern mansions littered the mountainsides where once mining equipment stood guard over the entrances to the richest silver mines in the nation. Fashionable shops and trendy boutiques lined Durant Street, the former locale of Aspen's red-light district prior to the turn of the century. Here the rich and celebrated came to play where silver kings, railroad barons, and European royalty once visited.

Its tree-lined streets had known the rattle of horse-drawn streetcars, the rumble of freight wagons, the glitter of fancy carriages, the bleating of flocks of sheep, the tramp of ski-combat troops during the Second World War, the swish of skis, and the purr of Mercedes Benzes.

Kit smiled when she considered the uniqueness of her hometown — from rough mining camp to silver boomtown to near ghost town to world-class resort — a story Hollywood would have called *Cinderella Meets King Midas*. For once, they would have been accurate.

2

A bell chimed twice. John Travis picked up the receiver to the wall-mounted phone and pushed the lighted button, opening the direct line to the cockpit. He listened for a minute, then passed on the message.

“We’ve been cleared to land. The pilot wants us to buckle up.”

Turning from the window, Kit uncurled her legs and searched for her shoes. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Chip Freeman at the bar, bolting down the remaining juice in his glass. A smile ghosted across her mouth as she silently wondered if Chip had found a new source of Dutch courage.

She located her Bally flats and slipped them on while Chip made his way to the leather chair next to Paula’s, his face pinched and white, his gaze fixed on his destination, looking neither to the left nor the right and missing the commiserating smile Kit sent him.

“Poor Chip,” she murmured to John Travis as she felt along the back of the sofa cushion for the other half of her seat belt. “He looks like he needs a tranquilizer. You should have kept him talking about the film until we had landed.”

“We’ll be on the ground soon.” He cast an amused, but not unkind, glance Chip’s way. “He’ll make it. He’s a big boy.”

A particularly apt description, Kit thought. Charles “Chip” Freeman looked like an overgrown boy with his cowlicks and thin, gangly frame — something of a cross between the class genius and the class

nerd with a little ninety-pound weakling thrown in. But in her estimation, he was more genius than anything else, both creative and intense.

Like her, after years of struggle, Chip was making his first major movie, complete with big-name stars and a fifty-million-dollar budget. The announcement naming him as director had stunned Hollywood. Granted, he'd written a brilliant screenplay in *White Lies*, incorporating both a compelling storyline and broad commercial appeal. But as a director, he was regarded as too experimental, too outré. True, his last few films had received great critical acclaim, but they'd died at the box office, an unpardonable sin in corporate Hollywood.

As far as Kit was concerned, her future in films couldn't be in better hands than Chip's. Of course, she had the advantage on the moneyheads at the studios. She knew his skill firsthand. Seven years ago, she'd worked under his direction in a local-theater production of *The Glass Menagerie*. The result had been pure drama and pure entertainment. By the end of the show's run, she'd been playing before sold-out crowds. He was good. With this film, he finally had the chance to prove to his multitude of detractors just how talented he was and receive the recognition he justly deserved. Kit was as happy for him as she was for herself.

A whirring hum vibrated through the cabin as the wing flaps were lowered. Chip blanched at the sound and dug his fingers into the ends of the chair's padded leather arms. Paula patted the hand nearest her reassuringly and Chip instantly grabbed it and hung on. Unable to free her fingers, Paula glanced at Kit and shook her head at the hopelessness of the man's terror.

But the action prompted Kit to wonder again at the relationship between Paula and Chip. Sometimes they squabbled like brother and sister; at others, they seemed more like good friends; yet a few times she'd suspected they were lovers. It was odd that she didn't know. She considered Paula her best friend in Hollywood. For the last three years, they'd worked together on the daytime drama *Winds of Destiny*.

John Travis leaned closer. "Will you hold my hand?"

"Why? Are you scared, too?" She smiled, knowing better.

"I could be," he replied, much too drolly.

"And pigs have wings." But she slid her hand in his just the same,

fitting palm to palm and linking fingers, liking the warm and simple intimacy of holding hands with him.

At the table, Yvonne Davis shoved the last of her notes into her black crocodile case and clicked it shut. Maury Rose scooped some jelly beans out of the candy dish and settled back in his seat, his short legs barely long enough to let his feet touch the floor. A toupee of nut brown hair, sprinkled with gray to match the rest of his graying hair, covered the crown of his head. As usual, he wore a three-piece suit; he had a penchant for them, preferably made out of a fabric with a shine to it, like sharkskin. But the snug-fitting vest couldn't conceal that he was some thirty pounds overweight. Instead, it acted as a girdle, straining to hold in his spreading paunch.

"Don't forget to mark down that reporter from *People* magazine," Maury admonished, his rapid speech pattern and faint accent betraying his New York origins. "I don't want him mistaken for a paparazzo. You got that?"

"He's already on my press list, Mr. Rose." The Texas-born publicist peered at him over the top of the flame red frames of her half glasses, a thinly veiled irritation in her voice at his insinuation that she didn't know her job. "In fact, I believe I arranged for him to come tonight." But Maury was too thick-skinned for her cloying barb to register. Recognizing that, she turned toward Kit. "How long since you've been back to Aspen?" she asked, making an obvious bid to change the subject.

"If you mean for more than a long weekend, it's been years," Kit admitted. "I always planned to, but invariably, time, money, or circumstance worked against me."

"I know what you mean, honey." Yvonne nodded. "When I left Houston, I thought I'd be back every year to visit my family in Tomball. And in the last sixteen years, I've been back maybe four times. You get so busy with your new life, you just seem to forget about your old one. I hate to think how many friends I've lost track of over the years. But it can't be helped, I guess." She set her case on the floor next to her chair.

"I guess it can't." Kit thought about Angie Martin, her best friend in high school, and felt a similar regret. Once they'd been notorious for their marathon phone conversations. They'd kept in touch off and on after Kit had moved to L.A., but lately it had been more off than