

Fields of Glass

PRESCOTT FAMILY ROMANCE

BOOK THREE

ALYSSA SCHWARZ

CHAPTER

One

GIVING UP WASN'T an option.

Despite what the parched earth might be telling him.

Kneeling, Micah Prescott scooped his hand into the dirt on the edge of the parking lot. The pale brown dust slipped through his fingers. Not a hint of moisture.

And, according to the wide blue, cloudless sky, nothing on the horizon either. Just perfect. Another drought was the last thing Micah needed on top of his growing mountain of problems.

He released the remaining handful to the wind and stood up. The bank papers in his jacket pocket crinkled with the movement.

It didn't matter what they all said. The ranch wasn't dead yet.

Micah shoved back his baseball cap and rubbed his forehead. The tension headache he'd been fighting all afternoon now pulsed at his temples.

"I've never been late on a payment, not once in fifteen years—"

He wanted to shake away the memory of his voice this morning at the bank. He hadn't been begging.

Just...reminding.

"I'm sorry it's come to this..." Stupid Jackson, sitting behind his mahogany desk at Bank of the Rockies.

“Yeah, me too. How am I supposed to raise seventy-five thousand dollars in thirty days?”

Jackson had left the question unanswered even as Micah stormed out of the office, not caring who might be watching.

Probably all of Lake City had figured it out, anyway.

He was about to lose the ranch that had been in his family for generations. Yeah, he was *that* son. Not the successful veterinarian like his younger brother Tye. He thought he'd finally been able to resurrect his father's legacy, if not his name. No wonder he felt their stares on his back, the cold shoulders from a town he'd grown up in.

Again, what did they expect from Micah Prescott?

He glanced at the digital display above the bank's sign, noting the late hour. Great. He'd already lost half a day in town, and all for a fool's errand.

Around him, the town buzzed with activity. Families and tourists popping in and out of shops. Noise spilled out from the open-air restaurants lining the streets on either side of him. On any other day, he could appreciate the perfectly clear fall day or the quaintly preserved mountain town.

He breathed in a steady breath, and a faint tinge of smoke made his heart race. Turning, he spotted a handful of construction workers smoking beside their work trucks.

“Are you serious? One spark and you could light the entire county on fire!”

His warning barely lifted the head of one of the crew. He should march over there and put their cigarettes out himself. He took a step in their direction and halted, clenched fists relaxing a fraction. Confronting them would only amount to putting a Band-Aid over a gaping wound. Colorado faced droughts annually, and this year was no exception.

Only rain and a miracle could change that.

“Finn, come here boy.” Micah blew a sharp whistle, and a mottled cattle dog with one blue eye and the other brown bounded toward him from behind a thicket of trees.

Micah opened the passenger door of his once-white '89 Dodge Ram, and with one solid leap, the animal hopped in. Finn barked excitedly at Micah, as if ready to get back to their sheep.

“Almost finished here, and then we can go home. I promise.”

The dog calmed as if he understood—which, after a few years working the ranch with Micah, perhaps he did.

Micah stroked the dog's flat coat. *Just calm down. Think.*

The papers in his jacket pocket crinkled with the movement. Grabbing the bank's letter, he opened the glove box and shoved the stark white envelope in with the rest of his projections and ideas for the ranch he hadn't gotten to share with the managers at the meeting. The metal click of the latch echoed like a nail in a coffin.

Ready to leave everything from today behind him, Micah reversed his truck out of the bank's parking lot and drove as fast as the multiple stop lights and crosswalks allowed. A few miles south, he turned off the main highway and eased into his smaller hometown. Not much more than a few restaurants, a post office, a general store, and the all-important bait and tackle shop lined the street. A few new houses had sprouted up over the past decade, but besides that, it looked nearly the same as it had all his life.

Everywhere Micah looked, the place seemed... tired. A once-brilliant Main Street of Easter egg pastels now faded under the high-altitude sun. If it weren't for the summer tourists, the mining town of Lake City might have all but become a long-forgotten memory buried within the Colorado Rockies.

With Finn as his copilot, they slowed at the single stop sign and pulled into the parking lot of the Gold Bar Café. Its log exterior and rustic mountain character made it a popular place with locals and tourists alike, and the barbecue burger with homemade fries could nearly make a man forget his problems.

Nearly. But he'd give it a try.

Finn lifted his nose and wined as the smell of bacon and fried potatoes wafted into the car.

Micah only planned to be gone for a few minutes. Twenty, tops. But between the dry heat outside and the pathetic look Finn was sending him, how could he say no?

Besides, he knew from experience that Pauline wouldn't bat an eyelash. Micah patted his thigh, and the dog immediately jumped down from the seat as if having expected the invitation all along.

A little bell above the door announced their arrival.

Even in September, hardly a table or booth sat empty. He caught a few familiar faces as he looked around the room. Jenny from the post office glanced at him, then turned away from where she sat at the counter. Wayne and Joe sat at the corner table, drinking coffee. A few groups of unfamiliar faces gathered around the larger tables, backpacks slung over their chairs, conversation and laughter erupting in bursts like a tractor backfiring. Tourists.

Pauline pointed to his regular stool, as if he'd ever sit anywhere else. "I'll get you a coke."

He just might survive the day, given the smell escaping the kitchen. Barbecue and buttery biscuits.

He walked to the end of the bar, and like the socially outcasted leper he was, no one stopped to say hi. Fine. It wasn't like he needed or expected friends—he knew what the Prescott name meant in this town. And his scars certainly didn't help ease up on that general opinion.

Micah sank onto the vinyl seat, and within minutes, a waitress he hadn't seen there before greeted him.

"Howdy. What can I get for you?" The girl slid a pen from behind her ear.

He checked to make sure Finn was settled on the floor beside him before placing his order. "I'll have the rancher's special, but without the mushrooms."

"Great choice. Anything to drink?" She couldn't have been older than eighteen, but the way she smiled at him—young and innocent and a little flirtatious—made him feel guilty for even stepping foot inside.

"Just a bowl of water for Finn."

She smiled at Finn, who was already fast asleep, and returned her gaze to Micah. "I meant for you, silly." A slight flush colored her youthful face. She had to have been at

least a decade younger than him, but that didn't seem to stop those fluttering eyelashes. He envied her carefree attitude; he just didn't want it directed at him so intently.

"Just a coffee, thank you." Anything with enough caffeine to tame his mounting headache.

Her airy chuckle followed her toward the kitchen, leaving him alone to stew over his thoughts.

Once she was gone, he pulled his phone from his pocket and stared at his reflection in the blank screen. He had to make the call eventually. But the thought of admitting to his younger brother that he'd failed rankled. He was the oldest, the one who was supposed to have all the answers. He'd taken over the ranch when Dad died, made sure Tye went to veterinary school.

He raised the phone to place the call, which felt like a brick in his hand, when the screen lit up with a text from Caden.

Oh, no. What had that cousin of his gotten himself into this time?

God knew he shouldn't trust Caden to operate the hay baler on his own, let alone manage the ranch for an entire day. With Micah's recent luck, he'd come back home to a half-plowed field or the hayloft in flames.

Sure, Callie would be nearby in case things went sideways, but he could only infringe on his neighbor's goodwill for so long.

"Storm's coming. I can feel it." Pauline herself stepped up to the bar, red-and-white-checkered apron tied around her waist. The skin around her eyes wrinkled as she smiled—something sweet, almost forgiving in it—and she tipped the coffee carafe to fill his cup.

If only that were true. While sitting in the bank's lobby, the local radio station had predicted nothing but hot weather and laughable humidity levels. But if Pauline from the diner thought she knew better...

"Don't give me that look," she said, handing him a plate of steaming hash brown and her famous brisket. "The last time my knee acted up like this, it rained for two days straight. The river nearly flooded its banks, unless you've forgotten." She rubbed her

knee as if to support her statement. “And based on how it’s hurtin’, I’d say we’re in for a real doozy.”

Micah picked at the pile of hash browns before moving to the brisket. He understood a lot of things, but how an arthritic knee could predict the weather with more accuracy than a team of meteorologists and all their fancy equipment was not one of them.

“Mark my words. That drought everyone’s been talking about, the one that’s got all of you frowning into your coffee cups as if they hold the answers, it’s about to end.” She bobbed her salt-and-pepper head, making her aquamarine earrings sway like raindrops, before disappearing through the swinging kitchen door. A few seconds later, she returned and propped a plate of blackberry pie topped with whipped cream in front of him.

“What’s this for?” He eyed the glossy berries and tried to remember the last time he’d splurged on something so sweet. Not that he’d turn up his nose to a slice of Pauline’s pie.

“It’s on the house. A thank you for working on those cabinets in the kitchen. I don’t know how you managed it, but they’re almost as good as new.”

Micah’s face grew warm. “There’s really no need. All I did was tighten a few screws and sand some edges. Anyone could have done it.”

“Nonsense. Now, eat up. I know you’ve got more than enough room in that stomach of yours.” The bell above the door chimed, and she waved toward whoever had entered. “I’ll leave you to it. But when I come back, I’d better see both those plates licked clean.” Whisking the coffee carafe from the counter, she sauntered toward one of the booths by the window to greet the newcomers.

Micah chuckled at the woman’s determination to see the good in everybody. He’d like to believe that as well, but despite his best attempts, he’d learned the hard way that people, no matter their intentions, would let you down one way or another. Best to be as self-sufficient as possible and leave the rest to God.

Micah nursed the remainder of his coffee and, having finished his meal, turned to the pie before him. Despite the meal he’d just eaten, Micah’s stomach gurgled at the

tempting scent of warm pastry and jammy blackberry. Unable to resist, he dug in, savoring each bite before he had to make the hour-long drive back to the ranch.

Micah paid for the rest of his meal, slipping a generous tip to compensate for the slice of pie, and ducked out the front door with Finn on his heels.

“Come on, buddy. Let’s go home.” In one leap, the dog jumped through the open car door and crawled to his spot in the middle of the bench seat. When he turned around, his tongue lolled to the side, a wide grin spreading across his face if ever Micah saw one.

For what was hopefully the last time that day, Micah climbed into his truck and started the ignition.

The paved road soon gave way to dirt, and they continued up the narrow, winding valley. With few cars and fewer people, he could finally breathe again. These days, the town held precious little attraction to him, and even less so when the only reason for him going was to sort out his financial troubles.

He’d pray for a miracle every day if he thought it would help. No matter how hard he tried, how many seasons he worked the earth and tended the sheep, he only ever managed to scrape by.

A few years ago, he and his mom had finally surfaced for air long enough to make a few much-needed repairs to the barn and outbuildings. He couldn’t begin to describe the waves of relief he’d felt then. For once, everything was right in the world. His mother was happier than ever, managing almost an entire year without slumping into one of her moods, and he finally had the time and resources to start planning for the future.

All seemed fine until the bank sent him notice that they were recalling the loan.

Apparently, the threat of another drought was enough to make the managers quake in their polished leather loafers. He bet none of them even owned a decent pair of boots or knew a thing about a hard day’s work.

Micah frowned and slowed his vehicle as it rumbled across a series of deep washboards in the road. Finn sat up at the noise and pressed his wet nose against the glass.

Micah released a pent-up breath. At least his mom didn't have to suffer through this again. Aunt Nora and Uncle Greg had been kind enough to invite her down to their place in Florida. As much as he missed having her around, he knew the distance was good for her. Staying in a guest house on the beach, all she had to worry about would be when to go golfing and which drink to order at the country club.

He almost smiled at the thought. His mom would sooner fight a bear than lug around a bag of irons. But if she was happy there, so was he.

The road smoothed out once again, and they picked up speed on the straightaway. His headache dulled to a faint pulse, likely due to the three cups of coffee he'd downed at the café, and he tried to focus his thoughts on a solution.

He and Caden had a healthy flock of sheep this year, and if things went as planned, they'd also have the alfalfa harvest come October. He could sell off part of the flock and make a decent profit if need be. He'd hate to lose so many good sheep, but they were far easier to replace than land. It might take some calling around, but surely he could find a buyer this late in the year.

His mind flicked back to the series of emails he'd received recently from a company interested in buying a portion of his land. After reading the first one a few months back, he'd forwarded the rest to his spam folder. He'd rather sell his property to the bank than palm off a piece to some unknown corporate entity. Mr. Francis G. Riley could email him all he liked, but that was one thing Micah would not budge on.

He drove past the gated entrance to the Landry's old ranch, the *For Sale* sign staked into the earth, and a twinge of uncertainty tightened in his gut. If all else failed, he might not have the luxury of that decision.

"Well, Finn." Micah turned to face his companion. "It looks like we have the next month cut out for us. Do you think we can do it?"

Finn wagged his short tail, and Micah took that as a *yes*. He smiled. "Look at me, taking advice from a dog. I really must be going crazy."

Finn barked again, and Micah laughed.

Praying for a miracle, he returned his sights to the upcoming month. Thirty days was more than enough to bring in the harvest, get the sheep ready, and find a buyer.

He'd been through rough patches before, and he'd always found a way through. This time wouldn't be any different. And with Caden's help, it was as sure as done.

At least, so he hoped.

They crossed the next bridge and veered up the rise when the first raindrop splashed against his windshield.

CHAPTER

Two

“DON’T QUIT ON me now,” Grace pleaded with her glitchy phone while doing fifty down a country road in the middle of nowhere. She smashed her thumb against the dark screen, and her maps program lit up long enough for her to catch the words *Lost Canyon* before it blacked out.

Pellets of liquid sleet pattered against the windshield of her orange VW bug, her wipers doing double-time to keep up with the torrential downpour. Grace squinted ahead at the road, gripping the steering wheel white-knuckles. Where did this storm come from? She’d made certain it wasn’t going to rain when she set out for this trip, double-checking both weather apps on her phone before leaving home.

A bolt of lightning lit up the sky, followed by a deafening explosion of thunder. Suddenly, she was eight again. Similar car, similar storm. The last time she’d driven through something like this had been with her parents. The memory was foggy at best, but she’d never forget the rain. Or the headlights that had come out of nowhere.

Hands slick with sweat, she cranked the defrost to its highest setting, not caring that her fan had threatened to give out ever since the last snowstorm back in May. A wave of damp air filled the car, coating the windows with a thin film of moisture. Worry mounting, she wiped her hand across the cool glass to restore her vision of the road.

Soggy nothingness greeted her. Not even an illuminated sign to indicate she was heading in the right direction. She’d turned off the main highway a few miles back, crossing the dry riverbed

on one of those rickety bridges often seen in the movies. The last car she'd spotted had been heading in the opposite direction toward town. And that was over half an hour ago.

Radio static blared in the background, an unwelcome reminder that she's volunteered for this assignment.

"Nice job, Francis Grace Riley. You sure know how to pick 'em." She squeezed the steering wheel, causing the black leather to dimple under her palms. Her life had been a series of poor decisions, and she prayed this spontaneous trip wasn't one to add to the list.

The least she could have done was notify her boss about her impromptu site drop-in. One week of unpaid leave to track down a stubborn rancher and persuade him to sell—that's what she'd convinced herself she had to do. So far, she hadn't gotten a single reply from Mr. Prescott about her company's proposal. Either the man didn't have decent Wi-Fi or was as stubborn as the cowboys in the movies. But one way or another, he'd have no choice but to listen to her once she showed up on his doorstep.

Betsy, a friend and coworker, had warned her, "Leave the big decisions to the executives. Why worry over something you can't control?" Unlike Grace, Betsy had everything going for her—a wonderful husband and a stable family. Not to mention her uncle owned half of the business. God had handed life to her on a silver platter, not the flimsy paper plate that had been Grace's life so far.

On the other hand, her boss Katrina, would have understood and supported the assertive business move. This was Grace's chance to show the partners at Prospect & Gould she had exactly what it took to secure this deal. She'd prove to everyone just how much she had to offer, and if that meant driving three hours over treacherous mountain passes and back roads to get there, so be it.

That is, if she ever managed to find her way out of this winding canyon.

The headlights flickered against the uneven road like a bad horror film.

"Come on, Cordelia. Just a little farther." Grace gave the dashboard a good smack, and the flickering stopped. This car had been a lemon when she'd purchased it from her aunt ten years ago, and it wasn't about to start making lemonade anytime soon.

The engine rattled as she drove over the rutted road, and another pang of doubt crept in. Maybe she shouldn't have gone about this alone. If she'd been willing to wait, she could have notified her boss about her plans and borrowed one of the company trucks instead. But with Katrina out on another project, now seemed like the perfect opportunity to take some initiative.

She'd made it this far. No reason to turn back now.

The road curved ahead, and Grace pumped her foot against the brakes. The lights on her dashboard dimmed a few seconds before a new noise began—something that could only be described as an angry monster growling from beneath the hood.

An indicator light flashed red above the steering wheel. Panicked, Grace navigated the car toward the gravel shoulder and pulled the emergency brake. The headlights flickered and went out, the engine's horrible clatter dying with them.

Grace fumbled with the keys in the ignition and turned.

Nothing.

She tried again.

Silence—not even the clicking sounds of the engine trying to turn over.

“No, no, no!” Grace squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed a shaky hand across her forehead and into her straw-colored hair. *This can't be happening. Not now. Not here.* She tried to look down the stretch of road. The darkness seemed to engulf her like a blackout curtain. Had she not looked at the clock minutes before, she would have thought it well past midnight, not early afternoon.

She reached for her purse and spilled its contents across the passenger seat. Without a light to go by, it took her a minute to sort through the mess of crumpled receipts, business cards, and a bottle of allergy medicine before she found the one map she'd printed out before leaving her apartment. Squinting at the small print, she went to click on the overhead light, only to remember it wouldn't turn on with a dead battery.

Can this day get any worse? Releasing a heavy breath, she grabbed her phone and tapped the screen until a picture of a mountain meadow illuminated the darkness. She quickly swiped through her contacts list, bypassing her coworkers' numbers before dialing her aunt. Not that she needed to check in with her. It had been years since she'd moved out, but she could really use a friendly voice right now.

After the second ring, it went silent, and Grace stared at the dark screen.

Call disconnected.

“It's okay, Grace. Just calm down. I'm sure once the storm clears, someone will show up. You'll see.” But the idea of accepting help from a total stranger churned her stomach.

Grace bit her bottom lip and pulled her arms in tight to her side. She was not about to have an emotional breakdown. Not while stranded alone on a mountain backroad. There had to be something she could do to fix this, anything to get her back on the road and to her destination.

If it was even possible, the sky grew darker. The wind bore down on her small car and pelted the windows with water from all sides. Was this her punishment for trying to do something on her own? God's way of telling her she was better off pushing papers as nothing better than a glorified assistant?

God, if you're there, I could really use some help right about now.

Another bolt of lightning flashed over the trees. Grace held back a yelp. She tried to regain the composure she'd fought so hard to perfect, but her shaky hands would not cooperate. So much for that prayer. What had she been expecting, her car to magically start up again? She might as well wish for a corner office and premium parking while she was at it.

Thunder rolled down the valley and vibrated through her bones. A warning to turn back.

She glanced up, half expecting to see a monster lurking in the shadows with her luck, and gasped as the glow of a car appeared beyond the trees.

Twin headlights glared in the rearview mirror. She watched with mixed emotions as a truck crept to a stop behind her. Grace held her breath and waited, heart pounding rapidly against her chest. She'd seen this movie—the girl stranded on the side of the road only for an ax-murderer to find her. Grace didn't want to end up on the front-page news. At least, not for something like that.

An excruciating minute went by without any movement from the mystery driver. Perhaps he had chosen to wait out the storm like her.

Grace scanned the inside of her car for anything that could be used for self-defense if necessary. Too bad she'd packed her curling iron away in the trunk. With few options, she settled on the compact umbrella tucked behind her seat, locked the doors, and waited.

A door opened behind her, and a giant shadow of a man stepped out. With the headlights behind him, Grace couldn't make out his features beyond a set of wide shoulders that would have dwarfed her five-foot-six stature. In his left hand, he carried something with a long handle that may or may not have been a dangerous weapon. A crowbar? Maybe a bat?

She looked down at her hands, and suddenly her collapsible umbrella seemed like a not-so-perfect form of defense.

Holding her breath, she imagined every crunch of his boots against the gravel until his large shadow fell across her window. He rapped on the glass twice, but the pounding rain distorted whatever he said.

The man jiggled the locked door handle and then pounded his fist harder against the drenched window.

Please, God.

Grace's heart was in her throat. She knew she shouldn't have come out here on her own. It had been a foolhardy idea to make a name for herself. And she most definitely shouldn't have skipped that last oil change. But she couldn't change the past. God help her, if she survived this, she'd do whatever He asked—go back to church, volunteer more, donate half her shoe collection...

In an act of uncharacteristic courage, she pushed the door open and jumped out, swinging the umbrella in a wild arc at the stranger.

The man raised his hands to block the unexpected blow, grunting at the dull impact, and dropped what was in his hand. The object clattered onto the pavement. Grace shifted and took aim before the man could charge. Brandishing the umbrella like a baseball bat, she stepped forward and her shoe collided with something heavy. She gasped at the sharp pain in her toes and watched as the object skidded across the ground and stopped beneath the sole of a leather cowboy boot. The stranger lowered his hands with caution and bent to pick up what appeared to be a heavy-duty flashlight.

Time seemed to slow as he stepped back into the light, the truck's headlamps illuminating his features with long shadows. Despite the water clumping on her eyelashes, her gaze traveled the length of the man's flannel-cased arms to his broad shoulders and up his shadowed face. His gaze locked with hers for a moment before a dog's excited yip broke the tension.

Grace's mind fought to catch up with reality. The animal leaped from the man's truck and trotted in her direction as the rain soaked into her shirt and shoes. The man made no move to intervene as his dog shoved a wet nose against her knee.

Grace shivered. She relaxed her grip a fraction on the umbrella and, with caution, reached down to stroke the animal's damp fur. The man remained at a respectable distance, for which she was grateful. When the dog seemed satisfied with her greeting, he turned and trotted back toward his owner.

The stranger didn't speak, but the dog seemed to calm down the moment his free hand lowered toward its upturned head. He made no attempt to approach her again, but a series of silent questions seemed to radiate from him.

She looked down at the umbrella still clenched in her fist. Grace's face and ears grew impossibly warm despite the cold rain soaking her to the skin. Dozens of reprimands flooded through her mind for her hasty overreaction, but none of them assuaged the embarrassment that threatened to overwhelm her.

She dropped the umbrella like it was a snake and looked once more into the face of a man who was decidedly not an ax-wielding murderer.

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