

House of Belonging: A Hesse Creek Novel

Andrea Thome

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Mysterious and intimate elements elevate this optimistic romance.

Andrea Thome's *House of Belonging*, the third book in the Hesse Creek series, is an intriguing romance with a surprisingly mysterious layer underneath.

A recent transplant to Aspen, Colorado, Laina is a talented chef and entrepreneur who is working to open up her own restaurant. The move is career-focused, but Laina also has deeper reasons for a change of scenery—she wants to escape the negative people in her past, and to move onward and upward.

Characters are thoroughly developed, down to their pasts, memories, family structures, and friendships. Personalities are formed with attention to detail, even for supporting characters. The connection between Laina and Logan, a man who has been trying to get her attention, is dynamic and deep. Their sexual chemistry is strong, and several sexually charged exchanges happen before they form a solid relationship. When they finally succumb to their feelings, a great relationship develops, despite Laina's initial impressions of Logan. Both characters have secrets in their past; as they learn more about each other, they discover how to deal constructively with those issues.

Sex scenes are described in detail, and stay fun and slightly erotic. Relationships are realistic and healthy; Laina and Logan complement each other well. Their discussions of personal issues feel authentic, and their progression is enjoyable to track.

Dialogue, however, often reads as forced and artificial, standing in strong contrast to how characters' personalities are developed. Friendships develop quickly despite apparent roadblocks, and characters exhibit little hesitation when it comes to moving forward with one another, even when they are given cause to pause. Logan's decision to forgive Laina for her early deceptions rings as false, particularly in its speed; however, these are characters who are fast to forgive one another's flaws.

There is no conflict to speak of in most of the story; a late-developing hiccup involving Laina's past is more predictable than suspenseful. Positive outcomes are assured for almost every situation, and this good fortune comes to seem unrealistic. Serious issues, including abandonment, addiction, and suicide, are addressed with minimal stress or conflict, and their inclusion sometimes feels crass. The absence of emotional responses from characters on such fronts is disconcerting.

House of Belonging is more than just a romance. It is not only smart and engaging, but also has elements of mystery and intimacy, along with strong, dynamic, and positive characters.

KATIE ASHER (April 13, 2018)

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