

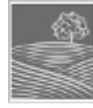
A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, about to kiss. The man is wearing a grey ribbed sweater and the woman is wearing a red sweater. They are surrounded by Christmas decorations, including pine branches, red and gold ornaments, and snowflakes. The background is a soft, snowy white with falling snow.

SINCLAIR  
JAYNE

LIGHTING UP  
CHRISTMAS

# LIGHTING UP CHRISTMAS

SINCLAIR JAYNE



TULE  
PUBLISHING

Lighting Up Christmas

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## Acknowledgments

I want to thank my long-time friend and colleague, Jane Porter, of Tule Publishing, for helping me kindle the initial sparks that flamed *Lighting Up Christmas* into being. It is the first story I've set in Oregon, my adopted home state, and I was so thrilled for the opportunity that I melded a few of my favorite towns into one—Bear Creek. I also want to thank fabulous author Megan Crane. The *#oregonporn* spectacular shots of southern Oregon that she posts on Instagram continually awe and inspire me. And finally, I want to thank my friend, Jenny Ko, who gave *Lighting Up Christmas* a cultural sensitivity read and two thumbs up. She is contemplating the insanely beautiful career of writing romance at some future point. Jump in anytime, Jenny. Best job ever.

I hope you enjoy *Lighting Up Christmas*.

Best wishes,

Sinclair Jayne

# CHAPTER ONE

“**T**HE ANSWER IS no, obviously.” The mayor clearly took pleasure in uttering his favorite word and the cutting four syllables following it.

“The answer should be yes,” Riley Flanagan countered with her megawatt smile. “The designs are innovative. The LED lights will save energy and last far longer and save the city money. And by creating a Garden of Lights in River Bend Park, it will not only light up the first annual Christmas Market, but it will bring more people, more families downtown at night for the holiday celebrations.”

The mayor looked deeply unimpressed. The three city council members and five city planners wore expressions in various shades from patience to curiosity, and all of them, except the mayor, were listening, so Riley ramped up her pitch.

“More people means more money for shop and restaurant owners, and that means more money for city coffers. The Christmas Garden of Lights can be themed each year. We can hold a contest to involve citizens. It can become a town tradition and bring more tourists into our historic downtown instead of everyone heading out toward the interstate and Medford for the big box stores or into Ashland or Jacksonville for the holiday and celebration shopping and dining.”

Why didn’t he get this? Bear Creek, with some strategy and capital investment, could become a thriving tourist destination instead of a “let’s keep driving—Ashland’s only twenty more miles” town. True, the population was growing— young families drawn in by the natural beauty of surrounding Oregon’s Rogue Valley.

“Bear Creek, with its river and proximity to Table Rock’s hiking trails and Mt. Ashland, wineries, and historic downtown, could become a destination town. We just need to distinguish ourselves, and the Christmas Market is one event we hope to have annually, but it’s just one weekend a year.

The Christmas garden would run all December, and families and couples could visit and walk through the garden at night and then walk down River Street and do some shopping and eat out. It's a no-brainer."

Riley sucked in a quick breath. Oops. She shouldn't have said that last word. The childish singsong "No Brain Bane" danced in her head while Mayor Jeffrey Bane continued to regard her as if she were a widening pool of spilled coffee on his rather ornate desk. That was the unfortunate side effect of growing up in a small town and not leaving. Everyone remembered your challenges from childhood.

Jeffrey Bane might be a politician—slick and handsome enough to make women do a double take on the street, and the oldest son of a wealthy family with pioneer roots that owned the largest chunk of dirt in the region—but he'd struggled to learn to read in elementary school.

Not that she'd ever taunted him. She'd been assigned to help him.

But plenty of others had. She'd been sent to the principal's office twice for slugging a few bullies in her day, which was how her three older brothers had problem solved. Riley had soon learned her words made better weapons and "tools of protection," as her mother had said during the first serious sit-down talk Riley could remember from first grade.

"Let me get this straight, Riley." No Ms. Flanagan for her, though the two earlier presenters at the city council work meeting had been referred to deferentially by their surnames. "You are proposing that Flanagan & Sons Electric receive a city contract to decorate the park with some ode to our town's agricultural past while we are knee-deep in a recession following the brutal fires in Southern Oregon this past summer where we lost two of our hometown heroes."

Her heart pinched. She'd known both of the two smoke jumpers who'd been lost. One, Enrique Reyes, had been her best friend's fiancé.

"Your father and uncle are finally taking 'a vacation of a lifetime,'" his air quotes matched his snitty tone, "and will be



gone all of December, January, and February—essentially they have become snowbirds, leaving you as the only Flanagan standing.”

That was another problem with towns hovering below ten thousand residents. Everyone knew your family business, including that her three brothers and two cousins had wanted no part of it or in staying local.

“I still have a crew,” Riley reminded Jeffrey Bane, keeping her voice low, pleasant, and—the biggest achievement of all—devoid of sarcasm, but she could feel her blood heat.

She stuffed down the emotions. She had to keep it together or she’d turn bright red. Was “Lobster Mobster Flanagan” playing in his head right now? Not that her oldest uncle, who hadn’t been a part of the three-generational business, had been a mobster, exactly.

“And students from the community college.” Pride tinged her voice. She taught a class there each semester and took on apprentices every year.

“But no dear old dad or uncle,” Jeff said.

Her dad and uncle weren’t retiring completely, but they wanted to cut back. Riley wanted to expand the business to include more commercial accounts and add landscape lighting design. And when she let herself dream even bigger, she toyed with the idea of having a small storefront where she could sell her chandeliers and sconces she created out of reclaimed materials, specialty bulbs, timers. The shop would have an office in the back where she could meet with clients and discuss their electrical, lighting, and landscape lighting design needs and desires. She imagined...

“And still a titanium-hard no.” The mayor leaned back in his huge black leather swivel chair, crossed his arms, and kicked up his feet in his expensive-looking leather dress shoes with no scuff marks, soles up on his desk. His smile was a deliberate taunt, and he waved his fingers toward the door like he wore a crown.

She squared her shoulders and forced herself to face him calmly, keeping her pleasant, professional expression in place like she was still on the small stage of her high school musicals and plays.

“I have shown the council a PowerPoint presentation of the Bear Creek Christmas Light Garden. I’ve included the costs to the town and the estimates of the financial benefits to local shop owners and Christmas market vendors from the increased tourist foot traffic by analyzing the economics from other light displays in other northwest communities. I’ve also broken down the energy savings over a ten-year period if the town switches to the more advanced lighting for the Christmas holiday displays on River Road and Main Street. I’ve included a steep discount since it would be Flanagan & Sons’s first year designing the lights for the town and creating the Christmas Light Garden in River Bend Park.”

She would essentially be working at cost with no payment for herself.

But so worth it for the marketing opportunities. People would come from all over—Medford and Grant’s Pass—and those far larger towns would serve up a lot of potential customers for her budding landscape lighting design.

Riley Flanagan spent a lot of time planning for the future.

“A little late for this presentation”—Jeff uncrossed his arms to make a slashing gesture with his hands—“with Thanksgiving tomorrow and the Christmas season kicking off on Friday with the tree lighting ceremony and Santa parade and the Christmas whatever whatever.”

Shouldn’t the mayor be all about promoting the town, not knocking it backward?

“Christmas Market,” Riley said softly. “And I did sign up for a time to present months ago. My time slot kept getting canceled at the last minute.” She could feel her eyes laser into him.

“Indeed?” he challenged softly.

He'd never liked her. After she'd spent hours and hours with him in the reading nook in elementary school, he'd gone out of his way to torment her in middle school and then ignore her in high school. Her mom had said it was pride. Riley had just been trying to be nice. Helpful. She hadn't expected thanks for her childhood good deed, but she did think her professional future shouldn't be undermined either.

The other council members stirred; confusion crossed their features.

"It is a good plan, Riley," Jennifer Nevens spoke up. "And you've given us a lot to think about. It's just the timeline is so tight, and our budgets are set in July."

"Which is when I started trying to get on the agenda," Riley said firmly. Mr. Butter Won't Melt in My Mouth Mayor hadn't treated her as fairly as any other constituent. "My costs are below what you are currently planning to spend."

She knew because she'd checked. Town budgets were public information. "And the timeline is tight but manageable," she said confidently. She had already created, in her opinion, some beautiful designs focusing on nature over the past couple of years when she'd started exploring the idea, so she'd have a base to start. Who needed sleep? Besides, with her family away—she ignored the pinch of dread—there would be no one to caution her to slow down, relax, put her ambition on simmer, and her aunt's favorite: find a man.

Jeff's expression soured as if he'd bitten into an unripe, bitter grape from one of his family's hundreds of acres of vineyards—only one of their enterprises.

"I've emailed the presentation and figures to all of you," Riley said. "Thank you for your consideration."

She resisted looking at Jeff and adding a "not" at the end. She closed her laptop, caught up her sturdy backpack, and slid her computer into its case as she swanned out of the general meeting room at city hall. She wasn't going to get the project despite giving them a mind-blowing win-win bid.

Jeff Bane was too petty and still No Brain Bane. He thought of himself, not the town that he had theoretically planned to lead.

The town council and city planners, still steeped in tradition and caution, were too enthralled by Jeff's five generations of wealth and power in their small corner of the world to consider thinking outside a Bane's brain.

Outside, Riley let loose a growl. He'd won this round. But she wasn't giving up.



“HOW'D IT GO?” Her best friend, Sophia Gonzales, looked up from her computer the moment Riley, holding the folded edges of a white bag from their favorite bakery, Running Fox, in her teeth and a tray of coffees in one hand, opened the door to Sophia's shop with her free hand.

Sophia crossed the wide-planked hickory floor she and Riley had spent hours restoring last year when Sophia opened her store, Lost and Found Objects. She took the coffee tray. “Release,” she said softly, her dark eyes sparkling.

Riley plopped the bag on the counter like a well-trained pooch. “I bring yummy sustenance to counter the yucky reception of the meeting.”

“That bad?” Sophia's eyes darkened.

Riley plunked down on a zebra-pattern triangular stool Sophia kept tucked behind the sales counter just for her.

“My presentation was fabulous.” Riley kicked out her long legs and opened the bag. She held it out to her friend, giving her first pick of the croissant sandwiches. “I think a couple of the town council members were interested, and definitely a couple of the city planners listened intently and smiled, but not enough to kick Jeff off the throne he squats on in his own mind.”

Sophia smiled ruefully. “He is a tyrant. And he's getting worse.” She swung her long curtain of hair behind her in the

ultimate disdain toss that would be Lizzo approved. “He came in here yesterday.”

“Here?” Riley looked around the small, eclectic store that so reflected Sophia’s love of vintage and repurpose and crafty. She represented many Oregon artisans. Sophia had even snagged a few of Riley’s lights she’d created, priced them astronomically high, in Riley’s opinion, and while Riley had cringed waiting for the scoffing to commence, sold them within the first couple of days. “Jeff probably doesn’t even use the same toothbrush twice.” Riley laughed. “And judging by his immaculate clothes and the fact that the soles of his shoes are pristine, I’m sure he thinks a speck of dust is fatal.”

She peered into the bag since Sophia was taking her time. She was hungry. Their heads bumped.

“Impatient.” Sophia laughed at her. “I’ll have the veggie one. I’m craving avocado.”

“Who doesn’t?” Riley demanded. “That’s why both sandwiches have avocado. Fruit of the gods.”

“I am not feeling very godlike today,” Sophia said. “I have so much new inventory to unpack before the Christmas season starts that I actually broke a sweat.”

“No,” Riley teased. Sophia’s aversion to exercise and sweating was well documented. It had only been one of the many contrasts between her and her fiancé. Their differences had made their relationship thrive, Sophia always said. Enrique had been such a fitness buff. And he’d loved the outdoors—hiking, camping, kayaking. When he’d died in the fire, Sophia, still deeply grieving, had started walking and then running trails through the remaining woods he’d loved so much. Riley ran with her, not wanting her to grieve alone. The runs brought Sophia some peace. She said she could feel Enrique’s spirit.

“Hopefully, your sweat broke out when Jeff walked in, and he was so shocked, he turned right around and left.”

“No such luck. He stayed and looked around.”

“He did?” Riley stopped chewing and looked around Sophia’s shop with the large front windows and the clever merchandise display accessories Enrique had made with reclaimed wood, along with the refurbished farm equipment and supplies Sophia and Riley had been collecting for years at barn sales.

“Was he looking for a present?” Riley was shocked. Jeff always bragged that he did his shopping in San Francisco or Portland, both over three hundred miles away and not contributing to Bear Creek’s financial bottom line.

“Noooooo,” she drawled out thoughtfully. “I don’t think so. He noticed your saxophone light and asked about it. He asked if the artist’s products were up to code, and did I check the business licenses of each vendor.”

“Bastard,” Riley said calmly between chews. “He’s been dodging me for months. I had to all but storm the castle walls today, and now I find out he’s been skulking around and spying on my side hustle. He’s probably checking my business licenses and electrician certs and training as I speak.”

“Maybe he was looking for a gift,” Sophia soothed, looking at the small collection of old band instruments Riley had converted into light fixtures. “He did play sax in the high school jazz band.”

“For a hot minute to get girls.” Riley made a face. She’d played in the band and the jazz band, and having Jeff show up for rehearsal off and on for one semester had been her least favorite school experience. He rarely practiced and wanted everything to come easy.

He also had used all his hot air to talk, not play.

A dark-green customized truck parallel parked in front of the shop.

“That’s a beauty.” Riley hopped off the barstool to get a closer look.

“Trust you to notice a truck more than the man.” Sophia rolled her shoulders and then her neck working out her kinks.

“That color is to die for.”

“It’s green. Same color as your eyes.”

Riley snorted. “Indecisive hazel. And custom rims. Wonder what other upgrades lurk under the hood in the belly of the beast.”

“Why don’t you go feel up the truck?” Sophia teased. “Its owner just went in the Caffeinated Goat. He’ll be a while.”

But he wasn’t.

“Mobile order, smart.” Sophia sighed. “Look at the way he walks, all fit and sophisticated with a touch of swagger.”

Riley was still looking at the truck. And then she noticed a small logo on the door. Her heart leaped, and a partially formed plan surged into her brain.

“I gotta go.” She stuffed the last of the sandwich in her mouth and wiped her hands on her best pair of jeans—not her brown or black Carhartt work pants today in concession of her meeting with the council and city planners. She spared a moment to think about the brownie she’d left in the bag hoping to split with Sophia. It had still been warm.

She shoved open the door.

“Hey!” She hustled and blocked the driver side door. “I’m Riley Flanagan, lead electrician at Flanagan & Sons Electric.”

He stopped short.

Riley resisted the urge to lean back against all that high-gloss, vivid green metal that had not a speck of dust. And how did he manage that, living way out on the former Tully land? She hadn’t been out there since he’d taken possession more than eight years ago. She’d heard he was planting a vineyard, but he didn’t live there full-time and did much of the work himself, hiring a local vineyard management team he consulted with and often worked beside to learn. For the most part, she’d heard he was immensely private, quiet, and a true do-it-yourselfer. Riley aimed to change that. If she could get one winery account, others would follow. She was sure of it. And wineries had a lot of events where the owners wanted the properties to look elegant and unique both day and night.

A lot of curiosity, resentment, and rumors swirled around Zhang Shi since he'd bought the land Jeff Bane and his family had been angling to get for decades. Riley had heard the Banes were shocked and pissed, and when the new owner, who was a Silicon Valley high-tech entrepreneur, made no effort to integrate into the town, his rep had taken a bigger nosedive. Likely he didn't know or care, but Riley saw an opportunity.

She smiled, pulled a card out of her olive-green Carhartt vest pocket, and did a little disappearing card trick, letting it tumble down her arm before holding the card—in the shape of needle-nose pliers—in front of him.

Her brother Drew had taught her the trick when she was twelve. She'd perfected it and was also pretty handy playing with liquor bottles at parties. She had jumped in to play mixed drink bartender more than a few times.

“We're neighbors. Sort of. Used to be.” Although caretaking or housesitting didn't exactly count. And he didn't look impressed, although with his very reflective aviators, she couldn't tell what he was feeling or thinking. She, however, looked determined.

“I wanted to introduce myself,” she said. “I'm very familiar with the old Tully property, and with you starting a winery and maybe a tasting room...” She was fishing here—she'd heard that he'd ordered building supplies from the local lumber and hardware store but also materials from farther away. Since she'd been stalking wineries to try to reel one away from the bigger commercial electricians in Medford and Grant's Pass, she read the winery trades.

Zhang Shi and his winery weren't listed.

Who grew grapes without selling them or the juice?

“If you're in the process of expanding or converting any of the old outbuildings on the property”—she knew there were several vintage barns because she'd volunteered there to care for the horses as a kid in exchange for riding lessons—“you'll want to upgrade your electrical.”



It was then that she registered the man's rather extraordinary beauty, and he became a man, not a potential client. Riley didn't like that one bit. She couldn't quite breathe right. And she felt as if the earth had done a funky ten-degree tilt on its axis, spinning her off-balance.

He was tall—taller than her. Asian, with thick, black hair that grew back from his high, square forehead and was long enough to brush his shoulders. She couldn't see his eyes—windows of the soul weren't they called?—but his beautiful, full, firm lips looked like Michelangelo had sculpted them and then likely taken a nap to celebrate his artistic achievement.

*What does he kiss like?*

And why was she thinking about that instead of business? Sheesh, she was getting way out in front of her horse. But Zhang Shi could kill at poker. He rivaled the Easter Island statues with their impassive regard.

Riley shoved down her trickle of unease.

“I'm happy to take a look at the existing infrastructure and bid out an upgrade that meshes with your future plans. No cost for a bid. No pressure. Flanagan & Sons have been serving the electrical needs of the Rogue Valley residents and business owners for three generations.”

Silence.

One. Two. Three.

“No.” Awkward silence.

No movement. Then another one, two beats, and why was she counting like she was back in jazz band?

“Thank you.”

But he didn't move.

“Excuse me,” he said finally, his voice deep and melodic but curt.

That was when Riley realized she was pressed up against the door of his truck like she was slow dancing with it.

“Oops.” She laughed. “Can’t blame a businesswoman for trying.” She hopped up on the curb, still enjoying the view of him. Dang, he was broad-shouldered. He looked fit. There weren’t all that many men she didn’t look directly in the eye or secretly enjoy when they had to look up at her. “Sweet truck.” She gestured to the classic 1965 F100 she had bought and restored in high school. “That’s my baby. Pippy.”

He looked at her truck and then at her. She waited for him to ask about the name. If she could engage people in conversation long enough, they came over to her side. Unless they were named Jeff Bane. Men with trucks liked to talk about them. But she got nothing. He nodded and then opened his truck’s door and reached in to put his massive coffee drink in the cupholder.

*Charmer.*

What a waste of his movie star good looks. Riley shook her head at his quick dismissal and returned to Sophia’s store.

“That was a total bust,” Riley announced. “That man may be hot as hell but about as appealing as a blood blister.”

Sophia stared at her, her dark chocolate eyes wide and pouty lips pursed in shock.

*No. Way.*

Riley shoved her hands in her back pocket and rocked back on the heels of her work boots. Sucking in a breath she turned around. Her pounding heart dropped to her stomach. It wasn’t like she hadn’t created more than her fair share of awkward moments in her life, since her mouth often popped open before her brain fully engaged, but usually she avoided disaster with clients. And future clients.

What was one more?

She somehow grabbed a hold of her cheeky attitude that often saved her and turned around. “Hello again. Fancy meeting you here.”

## CHAPTER TWO

**H**ER HAIR WAS a deep and vivid red brown. Rust.

Her smile shiny white. Like her two-toned classic truck.

He'd been struck stupid by her enthusiasm and hadn't really processed what she said when she pulled the weird trick with her business card. She couldn't be serious. Who did that?

This woman who glowed like the sun, apparently.

He still wore his sunglasses. Inside. Like a celebrity. But who cared what she thought?

Easier this way. The brightness of the fresh layer of snow as he drove down from his vineyard had been tear-evoking, but even on a gray day he'd wear them in town. They made him feel safer, more comfortable, less on display, and less of a target for an ambush conversation.

Except she'd had no problem cornering him.

What was her name? She'd told him. It was on the card she'd showily handed him. Didn't matter. Not like he was going to call her and have a stranger tramping all over his land giving opinions, making assumptions, and gossiping about what he was or wasn't doing right.

He'd had enough of that growing up.

And with his start-ups.

He wished he hadn't come into the store. But the unusual light fixture he'd seen through the window had spurred him to action, and now he wasn't sure what to do with his hands. He wished he'd brought his coffee.

He looked up at the twisted roots of a mature grapevine hanging from the high ceiling by rough-looking rope wrapped in copper wire with a few pebbles woven through the wire. The vine had been turned into a chandelier with unusual golden filament light bulbs hanging down from it at different lengths, casting a warm glow over the shop.

It managed to look rustic but elegant. The simplicity and function appealed to him. And the light's grounding in nature. An old vine. The roots, symbolizing a permanence he'd never had but had craved, and sweated for but that still proved elusive.

He'd been working on planting a vineyard as a "hobby" for nearly a decade—learning, planning, getting his hands dirty. It had been sort of a vision quest—something his grandfather had once tried. But now Zhang wasn't sure what should come next. He'd planned. Cleared some land. He'd farmed. He'd harvested. He'd made the wine alongside his winemaker—apprenticing himself. And he'd bottled and waited.

Now what?

"You got yourself a winery," his vineyard manager had laughed and clapped him on the back like he'd scored a touchdown instead of engaged in an expensive learning challenge and overly indulgent gift to his driving curiosity.

But a winery meant people. Staff. Customers. Judgment. The natural culmination of his efforts, only nothing about it felt natural, which even Zhang knew was dumb. He abhorred the idea of any of his projects not being a stellar success, but a winery was far outside his area of expertise, and he would have no Jackson—former roommate and classmate—to coordinate the public face of it.

His appreciative gaze lingered on the light—much more appealing than dealing with the card-wielding woman, the shop owner, and his unexpected head full of doubt.

If he did open his winery for an appointment-only tasting room, this vine light could be what he thought was called a focal piece of décor. It was something Brin had yelled at him during their first "fight" when she'd tried to "refresh" the monochromatic look of his penthouse condo and he'd objected. His city penthouse condo might still be mostly monochromatic, although he'd started adding a few paintings from Northwest artists. Maybe this light would make him feel more settled in launching a winery.

“I want that.”

Both women looked up at the light fixture and then back at him.

“You want to buy the...?” the woman with the long, dark, glossy hair asked him doubtfully.

Oh. He hadn't been clear.

She smiled. “I'm Sophia Gonzales the owner of Lost and Found Objects. Welcome to my store. Is this your first time in?”

Small talk. Not interesting. Not his skill set. “How much?”

He didn't see a price tag. It could be part of her shop's decoration. But this was America. Everything was for sale for a price.

“Ummmmmm.” The owner looked at the other woman—a shopper or her friend, he'd never been good with the undercurrents of relationships.

“If you are interested in that particular style, I could bring a selection by for you to choose from this afternoon,” the redhead who'd blocked his truck said and offered him another brilliant smile. Her eyes seemed to change colors even as she smiled and talked to him. They exuded energy. It was as if she glowed, vibrated with life. It was rather fascinating. “Say in a couple of hours?”

“A selection?” He didn't want to choose. He was bad at choosing. He wanted that one. This was why he was here. Now.

“Choices spice up life.” She winked at the other woman, who laughed.

“I choose this one,” Zhang said firmly, his gaze still on the light.

Firm declaration. No give. Stamped with arrogance. Jackson would have known to back off.

*God, I sound like my mother.*

But it was hard to switch gears. And the light would add a personal touch.

Being less rigid should be on the list.

First, a hobby.

Second, a way to connect to his roots in a way to persuade his grandfather to come live with him so he could take care of him—this was why he'd bought a ridiculous amount of dirt. For his grandfather. But his grandfather had yet to agree to come. So Zhang, who had become fascinated with the art and science of wine when Jackson had dragged him to several Napa wine tastings when they were doing product launches, had decided to grow different varietals of grapes to prove to his grandfather that he, too, had an affinity to land and that he meant to stay.

The hobby vineyard had continued to take on a life of its own—almost like it was one of the monsters he'd created in one of his early video games—strangling him unless he found a way through or out.

But the land brought him peace he'd never had.

Solitude.

Acceptance. A purpose.

He knew he'd likely take the next, logical step and this light was part of it.

Only he was damn near throwing a tantrum over a literal root, which was not on his list.

Would Brin whisper in his ear that he was being absurd? And why was he still thinking of her two years after she'd walked? She likely hadn't given him another thought.

"I need a light in my tasting room," he explained, which he rarely did. "I have a soft opening for friends and colleagues Friday." He didn't. Not really. It was more of a work session with some of his closest staff for a new, in-development product. "I'm releasing my first ice wine and a few other varietals."

Why had he added that?

“You must be excited,” the woman said. She’d told him her name moments ago. He should try to pay attention to that—put that on the list. Jackson was so good at remembering names and the stories that went along with them.

“That’s an accomplishment,” she continued. “Southern Oregon doesn’t often get enough snow and chill factor to make an ice wine.”

True. But he owned one of the highest elevation vineyard sites in Oregon.

“Are you in the wine industry?” That was something Jackson would ask. Learning to chat wasn’t on Zhang’s list, so he wasn’t sure why he was making the effort now.

“No. I don’t even drink wine. Electrician.” She smiled and fairly bounced on her toes. “Which is why I want to assess your juice—electrical, not grape.”

Who needed electricity? She could plug herself in and light up the town. Her energy should exhaust him, but he was strangely keyed up and off-balance, and he wanted to get out of here.

“The light.”

“I…” the shop owner began.

“The light was a gift for Sophia’s grand opening and designed with this space in mind.” Pushy redhead interrupted his negotiation.

He looked up at the light, easier than looking at her and not showing his exasperation. He took a picture with his phone. He’d had to pull out diseased vines—a lot of them. He still had quite a pile, but with the land so dry the past few years, he’d avoided burning them even during the few weeks in late autumn when the burn ban sometimes lifted.

Maybe he could make something similar.

“In the same amount of time, and with less inconvenience to Sophia’s business as she’s preparing for the Christmas shopping season that starts day after tomorrow, I could bring a

selection of similar lighting designs to your winery and install it safely. Installation's on the house."

"You?" She confused him with her energy and so many words spoken so quickly.

"Electrician, remember?"

"And you know the lighting designer?"

"Intimately."

She smirked. He blinked. Most women didn't brag about their lovers so publicly to strangers. And then an image of her—pale skin, intriguingly freckled, and her swatch of rusty hair streaming across soft, citrus-scented sheets—splashed so vividly across his retinas, he squeezed his eyes shut as if the sensual feast were real.

He was losing his mind up on his mountain alone. He, who loved quiet and solitude, was finally on overload. How long had it been? Since Brin. Two years and counting. Not that he had been.

And now he was picturing a stranger naked.

In his bed.

He turned to walk away but risked a last look at the light. Something about it. The shape. The visual. The idea behind it. The symbolism. The warm orange glow that made the ice in his chest hurt just a little less. His grandfather would love it.

He wanted that light. He didn't want to choose another.

But he needed the light. It was the next step forward. A check off his list.

"You said you know the Tully property." He swung back to look at her. "You know the south quadrant with the oak savannah. It has the classic old white barn and then the smaller barn fifty yards back in the trees. I'll be working there all afternoon."

"I'll see you soon."

"I want a light like this one. Not a selection," he warned and waved his hand as if cutting the idea of choice in half.



Letting her onto his property was compromise enough.

“I might change your mind,” she said impishly, seemingly not intimidated by his curtness like so many were, even long-term employees. Jackson was always warning him.

“Unlikely,” he said firmly and left the shop before he did anything else out of character, but not before he heard her last words.

“Challenge accepted.”

The door swung shut.



“WHAT JUST HAPPENED?” Sophia demanded.

“Opportunity.” Riley bounced on her toes.

“Why didn’t you let me sell him the light?”

“Because it’s yours. It was my gift to you, and it’s perfect for your space. Don’t worry. I’ll split the sales price with you on the new light or lights.” She rubbed her palms together and squeezed, trying to find an outlet for her enthusiasm. The day had gone from a crushing disappointment to this—a chance to get on the old Tully property again, a sale of one of her lights, and a chance to pitch him her electrical services.

If she could pull a contract at his winery, other wineries, especially new ones that cropped up in the valley, would be more likely to use her services. She’d be building the Flanagan & Sons brand closer to her vision.

“Yeah. That’s what I’m worried about,” Sophia said. “Half a commission. Riley, I’m not sure you should go up there on your own. He seemed...”

“Hot. Sexy. Brooding. Arrogant. Cranky.”

Sophia laughed. “All that and more.”

“Did you see the way the muscles of his quads were outlined in his pants? And his shirt stretched across his shoulders and his pecs? And his tight butt when he turned

around? Vineyard work does a body good. It could become the new CrossFit.”

“I was worried about you up there alone,” Sophia said. “But maybe I should go with you to protect him from your assessing eyes and roving hands.”

“I’m a professional,” Riley said. “Hands off the clients at all times.” She made jazz hands. “I won’t even think about trying to pinch anything or bouncing quarters off certain parts of his anatomy.”

“You need to get out more.”

Riley opened her mouth with a retort and then quickly closed it. She hadn’t seen Sophia lighthearted and teasing since Enrique died, and with the holidays coming, she was especially worried about her bestie.

“Well, here’s my opportunity,” she rephrased. Not like her to think before she spoke. She mentally high-fived herself.

“I thought you were all ‘hands off the clients.’” Sophia jazz handed back at her and then pretended to pinch something.

“Imagination only, and not when I’m on the job.” Riley openly laughed.

“Seriously, Riley,” Sophia began.

Riley pulled her into a tight hug. She was so happy to see Sophia smile. It had been such a dark, dark summer and fall, and she knew this wouldn’t be the end of her friend’s grieving, but to hear her laugh, to see her smile without the pain shining through, to see a light in her eyes even if it was just this morning, made Riley feel like the day was shiny with birds singing, flowers blooming, and warm air wafting in the smell of baking bread even though it was late November.

“I’ve got to get to my garage,” Riley said quickly. “See what lights I have to show him. Maybe I can upsell him two.”

“He doesn’t seem open to persuasion.”

“Don’t harsh my fantasy,” Riley objected. “I’m a businesswoman with legendary skills.”

“I hope you’re talking about electricity,” Sophia admonished. “Although the small space next door is going to be open after the Christmas pop-up shop closes in mid-January. We could be neighbors, and you could have a shop to sell your lights.”

“And be out of business with a storefront of inventory in a month.”

“When you show your lights, they sell,” Sophia argued.

“And who would run my shop while I’m out on calls?” Riley pushed down the tug of the dream. “I love being an electrician and facing the unknown of each day. Plus, I like the struggle,” Riley admitted. “People expect a man a lot of times, and they get me, bossing my crew, which earns more than a few double takes even in the twenty-first century. Also, I’m mentoring the next generation.”

“I know,” Sophia said softly, and her beautiful face was etched in sorrow. “I was being selfish. I get lonely.”

“You see me a lot,” Riley said. “And I’ll be here tonight to help you unpack and check in inventory.”

“Thank you, Riley.”

Riley hugged Sophia again. “I’ll text you when I’m leaving for Fire Ridge and also when I’m leaving his property,” she promised. “Do you want me to bring some dinner for our work party? I’ve only got one small job later this afternoon scheduled.”

“That sounds great. But we’ll do takeout from Leeks. You bring a bottle of wine and whatever you want to drink.”

“It’s a date. See? I get out.”

Ninety minutes later, Riley turned off Stagecoach Road to Old Ashland and continued to drive until she came to an unmarked gravel road flanked by a large boulder, likely left by a flood a millennium or two ago, and a stand of birch trees.

She paused for a moment and absorbed the snow-dappled vista. Bear Creek and the surrounding Rogue Valley always got more than a few inches of snow a few times each winter,

but up in the Siskiyou foothills, one could almost count on a white Christmas. The stark, pristine, endless beauty always stole her breath.

“Work, Riley.”

She shifted her truck into a lower gear and headed up into the hills. This was a business opportunity. She intended to seize it and wring out the juice—ha ha, pun intended. Her dad and uncle wouldn't have to worry about handing the business over to her. They could stop hoping that one of her brothers or cousins would have a change of heart. They wouldn't dare. Flanagan & Sons was almost hers now, and no way would she not put her own mark on the family business.

“Zhang Shi,” she whispered as she bounced over the rutted road. His name sounded like a whisper or a bird song—something she'd hear on a summer breeze when hiking or trail running up Table Rock.

She'd googled him, hoping the information would give her insight, but he was more of an enigma than she expected. No personal social media accounts. He had been born in Hong Kong and raised there as well as London and New York. He'd attended Stanford on a full scholarship but had his own tech start-up jacking up his bank account long before he'd graduated.

“Stalker much?” she murmured, looking at the Rosie Riveter string ornament dangling from her rearview mirror. It had been a gift last Christmas from one of her students in the Girls Tackle Trades entrepreneur and business program Riley and several other local businesswomen had initiated a handful of years ago at the local middle and high school. Now coding and a robust STEM program had been added to create a two-week summer program for area girls.

Riley had been lucky. She'd been born into a family with a business, and her father hadn't known what else to do with a girl except treat her like his three older sons.

“You can nail a sale,” she mantra-ed as she reached the top of the first hill.

Wow. Man. Oh. Man. This view never got old. Not ever. She hadn't realized how much she missed coming up here until this moment.

Fire Ridge was her favorite spot in the valley. And she'd once had her run of it. But the former owner and horse breeder and trainer, Leah Tully Moore, had sold her family property unexpectedly. Riley had worked on Sundays in the stables since she'd been twelve, and as she'd hit her early twenties and had continued to volunteer, she and Leah had discussed the possibility of her carving out five acres for Riley to buy. Riley had worked and saved since her teens but acquiring a small slice of heaven had been snatched away with the surprise sale.

This afternoon she could drink in the view for a few moments.

Riley dragged her mind back to the here and now—the only thing that mattered—and tore her hungry gaze away from the rolling hills. She wasn't sure what she'd expected. Acres and acres of vines. But a lot of the land was still untouched—rolling hills of pastureland dotted with oak savannahs. And then as the property steeply climbed, evergreens. But there were three hills that had rows of sticks pointing darkly and accusingly up at the blue sky. And then one off to the side, higher up. Still, not nearly as many as she'd imagined. He had—what? She eyeballed the property. Fifteen acres planted? More?

The entire property was more than 580 acres. Once sheep and goats had grazed, along with the horses Leah had raised. The goat cheese Leah had made had covered the property taxes while Leah focused on her horses.

She'd never told Riley why she'd sold. Riley hadn't even known Leah considered walking away from her three generations of Tully property. Just like Riley had never considered another career other than being a part of her family business. But something in Leah had seemed changed, broken, after her marriage and astonishingly quick divorce, and she'd stopped communicating very much. Even though Leah had

been more than ten years older, Riley had felt like a friend but not a good enough one. Her heart clenched.

“Pull your head out of the past, Rye,” she counseled as she finally turned away from the vista and headed down the switchback road and then drove up the next hill toward the barn where she’d spent so many hours in her youth. “You’re here for a sale and a business opportunity, not to reminisce and regret.”

Regrets were for...she searched for a word.

Her brother, Simon, would have had a word ready that began with a P and would make her sock him in the arm and give him a dose of regret.

She smiled, thinking of Si, the brother closest to her in age—Irish twins, only twelve months apart. Her poor mother had cheerfully admitted that Riley being an oops was a welcome surprise because after three boys, she hadn’t wanted to take another spin of the gender roulette wheel a pregnancy would offer.

Riley pulled up fairly close to the open door of the smaller barn where Zhang had said he’d be working. This must be the winery. She looked behind her at the massive barn that had once felt like her second home. What was he using that for? She didn’t see any sign of animals. Maybe an event space?

She couldn’t picture him presiding over large wine release parties. But if he could afford the land and to plant grapes, he could afford the staff to run it all while he remotely enjoyed his hobby or investment, however he chose to.

Riley shut off the engine, hoping her distracting thoughts would follow suit. She hopped out of her truck, half expecting Zhang to emerge from the open door where Leah’s sheep had once slept to keep them safe from the hungry coyote population.

Her tummy flipped, but no Zhang.

*What a beautiful name.*

“You’re acting like it’s middle school all over again,” she muttered, disgusted. Determined to be her usual professional,

outgoing self, not beset by nerves and inconvenient feminine interest, she strode into the smaller barn, shoulders back, head high and work boots crunching in the fresh dusting of snow. And then she stopped short in the entry as a massive ladder forming a tunnel inviting bad luck loomed in the dim light of the entrance. She looked up, up, up. Zhang straddled a huge beam; his long, muscled thighs gripped what looked like highly polished reclaimed wood anchored by massive iron brackets. But it was the sliver of taut, darkly tanned flesh exposed as he reached up to finish installing a burnished copper warehouse-style pendant light that made her mouth pop open.

She tugged her gaze away from Zhang and instead looked critically up at his evenly spaced industrial-looking lights.

There was a lot of yuck to unpack, in Riley's professional opinion. The look was utilitarian. No aesthetics. If he only wanted function over form, she'd have grudgingly agreed, but he had neither. It was the lack of efficient light distribution along with the utter disregard for style. A shallower, wider hood would provide more light, and raising them higher would also increase the light's reach. At least they were LED bulbs.

This looked like a box store, not a winery.

"Need a hand?" she called out cheerfully.

What company had upgraded his original power grid, and why hadn't she heard any buzz in the community? What kind of a load were his circuits carrying, and how many had he had installed? She longed to look around. She had never worked on wiring a winery since her training and commercial internship more than ten years ago. The demand for juice could be intense depending on what he had planned in the barn. She'd been right. This was the wine cellar—the massive, stainless steel equipment and racks of stacked barrels proved her hunch.

But he had a large, reclaimed wood table on casters pushed awkwardly in a gloomy corner and some stacked leather cubes and chairs still in shipping plastic piled up near the table. Was he planning to also have the tasting room in the cellar?

That seemed like it would be loud and chilly to wine tasters dressed in flirty, stylish clothes, as Southern Oregon could definitely bring the heat even on the slopes of one of the area's largest mountains in the summer.

Zhang scrambled down a ladder and closed the distance across the polished acid washed concrete floor smoothly and silently all while she'd been silently judging his electrical setup. He now stood beside her, aviators still on.

It was sexy as anything, when it should have seemed pretentious.

"I plan to install the light I'm purchasing up front over the bar." He walked toward the massive double barn doors that were rolled only partially open to let twin shafts of pale winter light pierce the gloom that was assisted by the placement of several windows every twenty feet or so high up near the roof line of the barn. Those were new yet looked as if they were original.

She tried not to notice his innately sexy, fluid walk but found herself staring anyway.

*Get your mind out of the gutter.*

"Where is it?"

*What?*

Oh. The light. Not her mind. Sheesh. She was a professional, and even in high school when her hormones had supposedly been running amok, she hadn't been this boy crazy—though calling Zhang Shi a boy was like calling the Mona Lisa a nice painting.

"Impatient much?" She dug for spunk, not wanting him to know he was getting to her.

But she wasn't going to win new clients with sarcasm, and while Flanagan & Sons was reasonably successful, most customers in Bear Creek were still expecting her dad or uncle to show up and give them a bid or fix something. And not many clients had yet ceased to make some variation of the joke demanding to know where the sons were.



She'd once responded that her transition would take a little more than a year, which had gone over about as well as anyone would have expected in rural Southern Oregon once the misogynistic septuagenarian client had understood what she'd meant. His granddaughter had thought she was hilarious, though.

Wooing commercial clients was a high priority, and she couldn't afford to vent her feelings, but someday, her tongue seemed determined to slip its leash. Still, Riley felt she was making progress. She'd redesigned her company's webpage after taking a web design class, and she'd launched an Instagram account and uploaded more than a few how-to fix-it videos to YouTube that received a rather astonishing amount of views and positive comments.

Small steps that would one day have a big pay off if she could keep her cheeky mouth shut.

Starting today. She would not criticize his light placement.

Riley pulled herself back from the brink. "I brought a selection of the vine light collection for you to choose from," she said easily, pleased that she sounded like she had more than one toe in the lighting design business.

"I wanted the one I saw."

"How do you know?" she asked curiously. "You have no idea what I'm bringing to show you."

"I don't like choices."

"Why?"

"Too much choice clouds the mind."

Again, her mouth hung open for two embarrassing seconds that seemed way too long before she clicked her teeth together. "Variety is the spice of life," she said lightly. "I'll bring them in."

Of course he followed her to her truck. Riley tried to ignore his imposing presence. And the delicious scent wafting around him. It was a combination of cedar or pine and sandalwood and waffles. She eased open her truck's tailgate

and began to unwrap the tissue and Bubble Wrap around the first light.

“How many did you bring?” he demanded, looking at the boxes.

“Let it never be said that I am unambitious.”

“Are you the artist?” he asked rather grudgingly after another silence.

Riley felt her very fair complexion prickle with heat, which was dumb. But words like *artist* still made her feel like lightning would cook her for her pretention.

She was an electrician.

But she was more than her profession, and she needed to get over her budding imposter complex, especially when she eventually won the city contract to create the Christmas Garden of Lights. It was only a matter of time. If not this year, then next.

Without saying anything, he turned around and stalked off.

He was so physical and abrupt, like he was constantly late for something. Who knew, maybe he was.

“Bring them over here,” Zhang said. He held a chain in his hand that had heavy duty clasps on each end. He hooked it around on the runner for the sliding barn door and then spread the chain across the door’s opening and hooked it on the other side.

Riley brought the first twisted old vine. This one was wrapped with twinkle lights that had grape-style silk leaves twisted around each light and three long, pendant, old-fashioned filament bulbs hanging down at various lengths. She thought he would jump in and help her. But no. Arms crossed, Zhang stood back and watched each light emerge as she added it to the chain.

His face could have been stone, his expression hidden by the way-too-cool reflective aviators. And his lips that could have been sensuously full were firmed like granite.

*Ignore him.*

Riley climbed up the step ladder, hooked on the light fixture, and returned to unpack another light. His silence was its own language. Riley remembered advice her friend Hannah had given her in a public speaking and debate class: imagine everyone naked when you're nervous. That would be disastrous here. She'd probably trip and break the light. Or drown in her own drool.

Zhang Shi definitely needed to dial down the hot factor. Only she totally suspected he wasn't even trying, which made the tension so much more embarrassing. She moved the step stool and hung the next light, holding her breath and waiting for a reaction.

Riley was accustomed to shock and awe when her vine lights were displayed. Accolades over her cleverness and vision. How did she look at a broken tree branch or half rusted milk bucket from the forties and think of creating a light fixture? Sophia had been encouraging her to sell them at craft fairs or in a shop for a couple of years now.

She wasn't used to silence. Or no expression and crossed arms.

She released the breath she'd unconsciously been holding. She hadn't plugged them in yet. Riley swallowed her dismay and on her third trip back to her truck, she put a little swoosh in her step, dredging up a bit of cocky that had helped her many times over in her life. Between being tall with bright red hair that had thankfully grown more auburn, and doused with more freckles than any foundation could cover should she choose to try, Riley had faced more than her share of unflattering comments growing up. Add in the fact that she excelled in what was still in rural Oregon considered a man's field and Riley had developed a thick skin and perky attitude to deflect potentially hurtful comments. Zhang Shi couldn't not pierce her armor.

And she was not leaving without selling one...no, make that two of these lights.

She kicked her tailgate up and closed after her last trip and then hung the last light on the chain. She connected them to

the extension cord she'd brought and then the power cord.

“Wait for it.” She drumrolled on her thigh and then flipped the red switch.

“Voila.” She waved her hand toward each one of her creations and did a little bow. “These are the lights I have remaining in my vine series. I have made...created other styles of hanging lights using reclaimed materials, but these are the vineyard designs using materials found on a local vineyard property.”

He walked closer to the first light. “Whose?” he asked, not turning to look at her.

“Ummmm.” Why was she so unsure of herself? She was a businesswoman. A teacher. A volunteer in the community. A...a...a lighting designer. And an...an...artist.

*See, Sophia. I can toot my own horn.*

Silently.

“From yours, actually,” she admitted.

“Mine?” He turned now, and even though she couldn't see his eyes, she could feel them.

Sheesh. He probably imagined her skulking around his property in the dark.

“You would make a really good CIA interrogator,” she said and then nearly laughed at her stream of consciousness blurt. So much for her thirties ushering in a new era of poise. “I collected the vines long before you owned the property. The old vines had been part of a small, orphaned vineyard Grandpa Tully had planted as an experiment decades ago. A couple of rows had to be dug up to create a new fence line for another pasture the former owner, his granddaughter was going to lease out to a local farmer. Also, the former owner, Leah”—Riley struggled to say Leah's name without the sad break in her voice—“wanted to create another trail through the woods for her students to ride that would link up with some of the snowshoeing trails up on Mount Ashland.”

“I’d never seen old grape vines before—the long roots and the shapes and the wood being smooth in some place and gnarled in others was fascinating. I asked to take some even though at the time I had no idea what to do with them or really any space to store them.”

Not that she had a lot of space now to store or to build the things she collected.

“I’ve owned the property for more than eight years.”

Suspicious much? Definitely an interrogator.

“I was a teenager when I collected the uprooted old vines,” she said, striving to remain cheerful and not sound defensive. She’d been born and raised in Bear Creek and Oregon’s beautiful Rogue Valley. He didn’t even live here full-time. “I worked in the horse barn on Sundays in exchange for riding lessons,” she found herself explaining. “I was able to fit eight in my truck.”

“Where are the other two vines?”

“What?” She felt like he’d zapped her back into the present. Strange, as she wasn’t usually a muller lost in the past. Maybe because it was the holidays and all of her family would be separated, pursuing their own lives and fun.

“You brought five today. One is in the gift shop. Where are the other two?”

Math. Why was this man distracting her so badly? It wasn’t just his looks. Or his magnetic aura. Or that he was an enigma. Or the way his hair was so thick and springy that it just begged her fingers to roam through the inky locks. It was the full package.

No. She had to get a grip. He definitely wasn’t getting to her. It was her fierce desire to land a commercial contract and his interest in her light that had her off her game.

“Two are at my house. One in my kitchen and one outside on my covered patio deck I built with my brothers.”

“And if I wanted to see those lights, would you run me off like you did today?”

“I thought you didn’t like choice,” Riley teased, smiling because she got him.

Only she didn’t. No expression except her own looking back at her. And she really wanted this sale.

*Backing up now.*

“I don’t know if I would use those words for our interaction this morning,” Riley recalibrated. “I made that light specifically for Sophia’s store. I personalized it for her, and this year’s been tough on her for a lot of reasons, one of them financial, and I didn’t want to put her in the position of parting with something she loved for money.”

She had not meant to be so rawly honest. And staring at her pale face scrunched with earnest pleading and vulnerability reflected in his dang mirrored aviators made her want to kick herself. And him. The shades gave him an unfair advantage. Where could she get some that didn’t cost half her monthly income?

“I like that you are loyal,” he said, unexpectedly, his voice low and thoughtful, and a weird river of warmth spread through her. “A good friend to your friends.”

“Friends and family first,” she whispered. “And community.”

He nodded and then stood under each light, looking up and then walking around to see them from different angles.

“It really depends on where you want to hang the light,” she said. “If you’d like, I could stand on a ladder or take off my work boots and stand on the bar and hold up each one, and you could take a picture before you choose the fixture you prefer.”

“Tell me about the rocks embedded in this rootstalk.”

“Aren’t those cool?” Riley was thrilled that he’d noticed her favorite light. She gently touched each pebble she’d forced into the grooves along the gnarled root. “They’re almost translucent. I took a long time thinking about what colors and shapes to put together. I found the stones in the vineyard row that had been pulled up. I’ve always loved rocks and shells. I

collect things, and I don't even know why. I just feel compelled and then later, sometimes years, I find a new home for them—a place to belong.”

She pressed her lips together. As usual, she was talking too much—giving too much away and likely boring him.

“A place to belong,” he murmured, his voice so low, more like a thought that she found herself leaning toward him.

*That's what we all want.*

Riley's errant thought pierced her—it's why she loved the valley, Bear Creek, the family business. She'd wanted to belong. She needed to, and she did. Her roots were deep and nourished.

But what did Zhang Shi feel as he worked his mineral rich land climbing up an extinct volcanic range? Her breath snagged in her throat, pressed on her chest. He'd lived in so many different countries and cities and had bought a property hundreds of miles from his home and work. He lived nowhere full time. Was he far from friends and family?

She saw her eyes widen as she stared at her reflection.

Why had he done it?

“How did you personalize the light fixture for your friend?” Zhang asked, and Riley heard an unexpected current of curiosity.

“That's private,” Riley said firmly. “When I get a commission, I personalize the light to what I think will best reflect my friend or client.”

What would she create if he asked her to create a light from the beginning?

What would suit him?

Riley was only beginning to get an inkling, and the flare of interest was visceral. She really wanted to create something for him that no one else would or could. She had no idea what yet, but she really, really wanted to find out.

## CHAPTER THREE

“SO HOW DO you intend to personalize it for me?”

Zhang removed his specially polarized aviators.

He liked that she was tall. That he could look directly into her warm, greenish eyes that reminded him of summer. He now understood that trite phrase “her face was an open book.” He could practically read her mind.

He had a strong feeling that what you saw was what you got, but couldn't that same thing be said of his mother? Of Brin?

And he hadn't fared well in either relationship.

But this was not a relationship.

It was a short sales transaction that he was purposely dragging out when he had so many other things demanding his attention. And he had no idea how to choose between five different lights—similar but different.

“I'll take all of them.”

“All?” she parroted, eyes huge like Quest—the anime character he'd created for the pilot of his first video game when he'd been fourteen, a supposed prodigy. She actually looked like Quest, and the resemblance had been unnerving him since she'd appeared out of nowhere and blocked his escape in his truck.

She was his prototype come to life.

Spooky. Intriguing.

Was this what had happened to his grandfather to turn him inward, away from life? Was this fantasy and reality blurring how it had begun? He wasn't ready. He had too much he still wanted to accomplish.

She must not want to sell all of them to him. And what would he use all five for? His business partner Jackson, luckily his opposite in most things, would like one.



“You think that is excessive?” He dragged his attention from her appearance, not wanting to freak her out, which his focused eye contact had done to many people since he’d been a kid, only one of the reasons he often wore shades. “You need to keep some stock? I’ll take three. One for the wine bar, one for the house, and one for my business partner, Jackson.”

“Which ones?”

He liked her smile. It was impish, like they were sharing an inside joke.

Something inside him cracked a little. No. No. No. He didn’t want to open himself up. Not again. It was always a disaster. And each time it was harder to heal the wound so that he could focus and function again.

“The one with the pebbles and two others.”

“You really have no preference?” Riley pursed her lips and regarded each of the lights. “They are quite different. This one is more natural wood, just a clear polyurethane stain. It’s more modern, sleek and austere. This one with copper wires wrapping a few tips of the roots is more massive, so when choosing the lights, you’d want to have an idea of the space and the type of bulbs you want to have hanging down—and the length of the pendant lights.”

She talked a lot, voicing each thought out loud, where he could go hours, maybe days without speaking and be content.

“I don’t need a pity sale.” She spun and glared. “I designed the lights differently, hoping to appeal to different tastes and different spaces. They were imaginative, springing from nature and the landscape. I used materials I’d found, materials on hand from the place where I found them. I pictured them speaking to different people and finding different homes.”

“Are you deliberately talking yourself out of a sale?” He was goaded into speech when he’d wanted to be done.

“Quite likely, and it wouldn’t be the first time.” She smiled as if that were something to be proud of.

“Then no wonder this year has been full of financial troubles for you and your friend.”

“Ouch.” Twin slashes of color painted her high-rounded cheeks. “Was that supposed to insult me? Sophia’s troubles are not a stick for you to pick up and poke me with, and my company is three generations of skilled electricians and very financially healthy.”

Each word was precise. Not angry. But strong.

And here was where he should apologize. Probably. He searched for the appropriate words.

Hands on her hips, she looked up at the lights.

She had interesting bone structure. Wide cheeks but a narrow chin that jutted out almost like a nob was on the end of it. With her red hair, he supposed that was a double advertisement that she was determined, stubborn, and fierce.

Good for her.

Life was pain and challenge. Strength was necessary to find some peace and beauty.

“Is the big barn going to be an event space?” she asked.

She didn’t seem angry. That was good. He’d often had the power to irritate women without meaning to—his mom, Brin, his employees initially when he’d started his first and then second company before he learned how to better communicate or hire someone to do it for him. And then make Jackson Cooper CEO.

“To be determined.”

Riley mounted the ladder and picked off the one he’d asked for and carefully laid it on the wine bar he’d had custom built. Then she picked up the largest light and carefully laid it next to the first. For the last light, she chose a smaller, more austere light that she’d hung with only two frosted glass pendant lights.

What had driven her decisions? He probably didn’t want to know. Jackson, who knew how to interact with people without upsetting them and how to initiate and close a sale like it was as easy as breathing, would have asked and turned it into a

flirtation. Zhang often had women spinning around, spines straight and walking out of a room on a loudly exhaled huff.

Riley picked up the two remaining lights and reboxed them, her movements graceful and efficient. “What I was trying to discern and to explain earlier is that the lights are different styles deliberately,” Riley said, and her husky voice held none of the earlier warmth. “I was entertaining myself, trying to learn new things while also showing a range of design options that would appeal to potential buyers so that I could eventually take some commissions.”

She swallowed hard as if trying to stem the flood of words.

It fascinated him that she could speak so easily.

Share so fully.

And he needed to get her on her way.

“They are meant to be individual. Personal.”

Clearly, Riley Flanagan had an artistic flair, but her skills as an electrician were to be determined, and not by him. He wanted to be self-sufficient on Fire Ridge. Recharge his batteries and think and operate in peace—not answer to anyone unless he reached out.

“Also,” she was talking again, “if you’d given me more information, I could have chosen which lights would fit better where. Installation is part of the purchase price. With the—”

“I can install them,” he said quickly, not wanting to bring her up to his partially finished home. Double no.

“Installation can be tricky, and they require a—”

“I’ve got it from here. How do you want payment? Venmo? PayPal? Card?”



A DEFINITE DISMISSAL. It stung a little, Riley wouldn’t lie about that. But she was surprised how much it bothered her both on a professional level and also on a personal level. No, Riley admitted. Maybe she was more of an artist than she cared to

admit. She didn't like the idea that he felt her lights were interchangeable.

Ugh. She was being precious.

"I have a Square and Venmo and PayPal, so whatever suits," she said airily, trying hard not to look at the bar as she loaded the truck. She didn't like its placement in the room, especially if this area was going to be a tasting room. It wasn't welcoming at all. And didn't use the space for views or to create conversational areas where couples and friends could sip and savor and chat.

"How much?"

Duh.

She should have thought about that when she'd been wrapping up the lights. Or driving up here. But no. She'd been more focused on pitching her electrical services, and that seemed to be a bust. He practically vibrated with the need to usher her out.

"Five hundred each," she said, thinking that it was an easy number but maybe too high, and perhaps she should factor in a discount since he was buying multiple. "And free installation, of course."

"I know Bear Creek is a small, unremarkable town, but with the wineries, Ashland theater schedule, and Jacksonville's music festival so close this year, and all the hiking and river activities, the area's overrun with tourists. You could double your prices," he said, pulling out his phone to make the payment.

"Three thousand then," she countered, stung by his Bear Creek diss and amused by his upsell. "And free installation and a complimentary examination of your power grid and electrical for the property," she added with, hopefully, her best innocent expression.

"Not necessary."

She gave him her Venmo account, feeling a bit shocked when he paid the three thousand.

“I was joking.”

“I wasn’t.”

Riley carried the two boxes out to her truck and loaded them in the back while she wrestled with the temptation to ask him if any of the old vines were still on the property. They’d likely been mulched or burned years ago. And if he didn’t want her looking at his electrical system, he surely didn’t want her tromping over his property.

“I like your name. It sounds pretty,” she said trying to make conversation. “I looked it up to see what it means and sometimes Zhang is a surname. Was it your mother’s...?”

“Choice? Obviously,” he said curtly stalking back to the barn.

Riley sighed. She’d ‘obviously’ irritated two successful men today. She was on a roll. She followed him to ensure she hadn’t left anything and for a last look around and slapped another card on his bar. He’d likely circular filed her last one, and he probably was going to struggle with the installation and call her while biting back his irritation and manly embarrassment.

Not her first rodeo with ruffled male egos.

But as Riley took one last, longing look around the small barn that years ago she’d hoped to convert into a workshop if Leah received permission from the county to subdivide five acres to sell, she couldn’t stifle the spurt of hope, born from determination that someday soon she’d be back.

And she’d install the light where it belonged.

“If you’re going to use this for a tasting room, you could have an outdoor patio area with a pergola with grapevines on each post winding up and over the top and add potted evergreens strung with lights. That would be beautiful in all seasons, especially if you are having any late harvest or ice wine events around the holidays.”

Zhang Shi rolled the door shut in her face.



“YOU SHOULD TRY it on.” Sophia pushed a deep royal-blue sheath-style wrap dress at Riley after they’d split a chicken teriyaki bowl and a salmon and ginger and veggie bowl from their favorite food truck down on River Road near the park.

“Yeah, right. I’m going to try on a dress.” Riley laughed as she assiduously folded hand-knit sweaters a local artisan had supplied today. Riley had sanded and stained the reclaimed lumber from a barn teardown last week and had hung up the shelves in the empty shop next to Sophia’s store that was going to be a holiday co-op pop-up for December and January.

“You wear dresses.”

“Hardly ever, but I’m objecting more to the fact that I have been working all day and now most of the evening helping you. I’m tired and sweaty and stuffed from the late feast. Not conducive to modeling a beautiful vintage dress.”

“We’ve definitely worked off all calories tonight, even the speedy ones that like to hide and sneak onto my hips when I’m not looking,” Sophia said. “Thanks for coming. I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t shown up. The other women who said they’d help with the pop-up took off early or had conflicts.”

“I’ll always show up, Soph. Always. And stay to the end.”

Sophia blinked hard, and Riley turned back to the shelves. The store next to Sophia’s had been empty for a few months, and Sophia had come up with the idea for a few local artisans to pool their money to rent the space at a discount for a couple of months. Sophia had offered to coordinate the inventory and purchases and supervise the high school interns who were helping as part of their business and marketing class. They had designed a website for the pop-up with Riley’s help and recruited friends to volunteer after school to help with the sales and restocking.

Unfortunately, because they were kids, they couldn’t work too late. So Riley had helped Sophia unpack the merchandise, check it in on the computer system, and then put it up for display.

It was nearly midnight, and they were both punchy tired.

And not finished.

“That sweet moment we just had won’t get you out of trying on the dress,” Sophia cajoled, waving the dress as if Riley were a recalcitrant bull pawing the ground. “If you do, I’ll let you go home early.”

“Early?” Riley laughed. “I’ve already passed my pumpkin state and am now squash soup.”

“Your pumpkin state would be super appealing in a blue dress.”

Riley kicked off her work boots. “Okay. For you. And you get one shot with your phone but not on Instagram, because I’ll scare everyone out of coming here or buying any locally made or vintage clothing items.”

“Yeah. That’s going to happen,” Sophia grumped, but her tired eyes shone as Riley shucked off her work pants and peeled off her thermal shirt.

“I have a makeshift dressing room,” Sophia said, looking out the large front window to see the deserted street with the old-fashioned streetlights that the fire department and city volunteers had already wrapped with red lights over the past couple of days. “Show off. I swear you don’t have an ounce of fat.”

“Or boobs.”

Riley took the dress from Sophia and slipped it over her head.

“Happy?” She belted the dress with the thick, silky tie that wrapped twice around her waist and tied a messy bow. Riley struck a dramatic pose with the back of her hand limp on her forehead and the other one on her lower back.

“I do declare I’m feeling so faint from all the dancing.” She fanned herself with her hand. “Perhaps a glass of peppermint schnapps to kick off the holidays.” She blinked several times at Sophia, who stared at her.

“Show’s over.” Riley plucked at the bow.

“Stop.” Sophia stayed her hand.

“Oh right. I promised you a picture.”

“I want more than one,” Sophia said, and then she pulled at Riley’s ubiquitous braid, loosening her hair and spreading it around her shoulders.

“If Mr. Aviators could see you now,” Sophia said.

“He’d turn right around and walk out the door,” Riley said. “Slam it in my face for the third time today while enunciating ‘no.’ I inspire that word in a lot of men,” Riley noted.

“No is not the word that comes to his mind.” Sophia pulled out her phone and began to boss Riley into poses. “Stand here, look over your shoulder, put your hand on your hip—no, not like that, like this, chin down. Hold this.”

“They have professionals who do this and look fabulous,” Riley said. “And you are not to post these. No one will take me seriously ever again.”

“You are too worried about your image. You don’t have to play boyish to get hired.”

“I don’t play boyish,” Riley objected.

“Yes, you do. You’ve always acted like you’re one of the boys. You were even the kicker on the freshman high school football team and the JV team sophomore year.”

“That’s because Jerome got hurt twice and I played a lot of soccer and my brother Drew was the quarterback and he’d made me play with him all the time growing up, so he knew I could kick the stuffing out of anything not running in the opposite direction.”

“Still, you flew your tomboy flag loud and proud.”

“Still do. I had to. My brothers and cousins would have eaten me alive. I would have been a snack leaving them hungry for more.”

“Well, you look amazing in that dress. The color, the fit. You dominate. Queen,” Sophia sung out showing Riley the pictures.



Riley scoffed, barely looking, and then Sophia cupped her cheeks and looked deep into her eyes. “Look. See yourself. See what I see. See what others see.”

“I don’t need to,” Riley said. “I don’t want to change. I’m good.”

Besides it would feel too much like giving up, giving in, proving to her stepmom and her aunt that they’d been right—all she needed was to change the way she looked to be lovable. Glitter on her eyes, gloss on her lips, a blow-out. Sexy dress. And men would find her attractive. But that wasn’t her. She’d do it if and when she wanted. On her terms. A man wanting that woman wouldn’t want her.

“You don’t have to change; you just need to branch out a little sometimes. Take a risk. It’s just like you wanting to change up Flanagan & Sons, right? You want to grow in a different direction, not give up the residential work but add commercial jobs, hire more employees, offer landscape lighting design, and sell some unique lighting fixtures. You’re still going to be the boss of Flanagan & Sons. You’ll still be an electrician. You’ll just be doing more things, adding some different skills into the mix.”

Riley made a face and took Sophia’s phone. She scrolled through the pictures quietly, trying to see what Sophia wanted her to see. She felt a little itchy, like her skin was too tight, embarrassed like she’d been caught lying or—

“Wear it Friday.”

“What? I’m finishing up outdoor Christmas lights on the houses of five more clients Friday. I’ll be up and down ladders and on roofs all day.”

Sophia laughed.

“At my birthday party at the shop, you goof. Remember? It’s a holiday dress thirty party. You promised to play bartender. Did I mention it’s a dress party?”

“About thirty times,” Riley said. “Good thing I like blue.” She tried to smile.

“And blue loves you.”

“I’m not supposed to dress up for Thanksgiving at your folks’ am I? Or Christmas?”

“No. It’s always casual. They know we’re working. But for the thirty dress party, wear the dress or I will put this on the shop’s Insta.” Sophia snapped a picture of Riley sticking out her tongue.



THE DRESS WAS pretty stunning. Riley looked at herself in her full-length, antique mirror Friday night, turning one way and then another. It was already dark. She’d decorated the outside of her bungalow along Bear Creek for Christmas even though her brothers and cousins weren’t coming home. Riley was trying not to take it personally and not to dwell, with various levels of success.

At least she wouldn’t be totally alone.

She had Sophia.

And her own need to help Sophia through the first Christmas without Enrique, which was why she needed to get herself in gear and get over to Lost and Found Objects. Sophia and their friends were waiting.

It was probably going to turn into a shopping party, knowing their friends and their constant quest for self-care, which often involved spa days, wine, and shopping.

Self-care. That must just be the excuse they used for fun. Riley didn’t crave escape. She loved her job. Had big dreams about expanding. She enjoyed teaching and mentoring. And she also had her lighting designs for relaxation. Sure, she didn’t have time for much, but it was fun to go to flea markets and barn sales with Sophia and steal an hour or two to work on a new light. What else could she need?

Her stomach rumbled. She snapped a selfie of herself to prove to Sophia that, yes, she was on her way and, yes, she was wearing the dress. She laughed. Maybe this coming year she would be better at eating during the day. And learn to cook more than a handful of basics.

“Note to self,” she murmured.

She swiped on mascara and then, as an impulse, she dug through a drawer to find an eyeliner and some glitter her stepmom had purchased for her birthday. Riley hadn’t worn much makeup since...well, never really.

But the dress demanded more.

And she wanted Sophia to feel supported.

Let it never be said she was stuck in a rut, unwilling to try something new.

So glam queen it was! She would just have to be careful as she helped Sophia with the last-minute preparations for the party. The makeup would probably rub off during the evening but hopefully not on the dress or any of Sophia’s merchandise.

She traced over the black line that she’d extended well beyond her eye in a pop star style, added a dash of royal-blue, glittery eyeliner and then fanned her face, hoping it would dry before she got glitter all over her eyelids.

Riley carefully outlined her lips and added a neutral tone. With her bright hair, she felt that red lipstick would look out of place. She gently ran a brush through her full hair and gave it a light spray that was advertised to minimize frizz and curl. She’d spent thirty minutes blow drying and flattening it, and she wanted it to look good at least long enough to make it through the door.

She made a face at her unfamiliar look and headed for the door to grab a cashmere wrap scarf—that would be fine for the ride into town. Just as she tucked her phone in her purse, it rang.

She didn’t hesitate to answer.

“It’s Zhang Shi.”

“Yes, Zhang.” She jammed her feet into the black high heels she’d ordered on Amazon and nearly fell on her first step. “Great,” she muttered.

Silence.

Dang it. He was a client. Hopefully. At some point in the future.

“Great,” she repeated, pouring enthusiasm into her voice and sounding nearly manic. What was wrong with her? She knew how to talk to men. Well, he wasn’t a man. No. He was a man. But he was a client. Sort of. “Sorry, I was trying to get my shoes on and stumbled.” *OMG, TMI.* “How are you?”

If only she could restart the entire conversation.

“Eating crow.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

Riley started to nibble on her thumbnail but remembered just in time that she had put clear polish on her short nails and that she’d ruin her lip gloss.

“You were right. I needed an electrical assessment. I overloaded the circuits. And I have about fifty people who will start arriving in another hour or so. Are you available to rig a fix?”

## CHAPTER FOUR

**T**HIS WAS A disaster.

And why he didn't have parties. Or plan social events. Well, he did have to occasionally "feed the social beast," as Jackson happily claimed, only they hired an event planner who dealt with the details and hassles and who interfaced with Jackson.

But he was on his own here. Trying to take on a bit more of the business schmooze, as Jackson called it. Learning to be more social was now on his list since the company kept growing. He'd thought tonight would be good practice. A small group of colleagues and contacts along with a handful of friends. Simple. Low key. A wine release party but also a chance to socialize and talk shop and future projects in private.

He was introducing three varietals, two late harvest whites and his surprise ice wine. He felt unaccountably proud and nervous—more nervous than he was about his tech product and program launches. Wine was just another product, and yet it felt more personal.

He'd been feeling exposed for the past two weeks. Riley with her lights on Wednesday had only exacerbated his feeling of vulnerability. He hadn't felt this unwound and unsure since his first quarter at Stanford many years ago. He knew there was a lot of curiosity about what he was doing so "far away" in his mountain retreat.

Jackson was worried he was losing his edge or his mind. Since he'd barrel tasted and blended with his winemaker, he'd started wanting to share his wine. But how?

This was the first step. Maybe.

*A strike through your self-improvement list.*

Or a strike against him.

Jackson had repeatedly asked what was driving this shift to the land. He'd bought him a hoe as a joke. Zhang wondered if

the truth would reassure him or freak him out.

Not that he cared, exactly, what anyone thought about him at this point in his life, but he hated to fail. And a blackout and having to call Riley Flanagan definitely felt like failure.

He heard Riley's truck long before he saw her. Relief crashed through him, embarrassing in its intensity. But chefs and employees of the two food trucks, the bartender, and the band were looking to him to solve the problem.

At least the heat lamps still glowed red and warmed the immediate area. He had several generators, but for the first time, he hadn't self-problem solved. He hadn't wanted to do anything to exacerbate the problem—like electrocute himself or burn down the winery.

The truck pulled up with a flourish, parallel to the door. Zhang braced for her brilliant smile and "I told you" smirk.

Riley left her truck's headlights on and opened her door. She dropped her two work boots on the ground, and then he saw a glimpse of deep blue and long, pale, and very bare legs as she hopped out and her feet disappeared into her unlaced boots.

Zhang stared, mouth dried up in shock. He tried to reconcile the image of Riley from Wednesday to this vision of blue with the silky, rusty tresses that flowed down her back like lava.

"Hi," she said and strapped on her tool belt low on her hips over the dress and then put a helmet on her head, the headlight already on.

"Hi," he answered, feeling rather ridiculous. When was she going to mock him? Tell him how stupid, short-sighted, and arrogant he'd been?

She reached into her truck and pulled out a barn jacket, ubiquitous in rural Oregon, Zhang had learned. "Judging by the food trucks, I think I know what happened," Riley said cheerfully. "I know you're Mr. Do-It-Yourself, so if you'd like to help, grab a helmet—it's on a hook in the back seat of my

truck. There's an extra pair of gloves in the tote hanging off the back of the driver's side headrest."

Zhang hurried to her truck, easily finding the items and another toolbox. The truck was immaculate. What had he expected, dirt and chaos?

He had.

Riley just seemed so easygoing, which made him think slapdash—an accusation his mother had hurled like a curse when everything wasn't precise, immaculate, and perfect the first go. Slapdash was, according to his mother, one of the highest forms of disrespect.

And why was he giving her memory any bandwidth tonight?

Zhang jammed the helmet on his head, surprised it fit. It was a man's helmet. And men's gloves, large. Did she normally have a partner?

He could just imagine Riley's response if he asked—that wide grin, the bright light that shone in her eyes when she was amused or riled.

Riley already had the circuit breaker off and the fuse box open.

"You have a generator hooked up yet?"

"Yes, but I—"

"You'll need to run the food trucks off of that. I can reconfigure a fix for tonight, but the trucks will overload your system. I can get you more juice and redistribute the power to even out the load and upgrade." She tilted her light up when she spoke to him. "You'll need at least one new electrical panel, which will take about eight hours to install. I can email you a bid tomorrow. I will need at least one other crew member, but it's still my professional recommendation that you have an electrician look at your electrical and discuss your power needs now and your growth plans. I can replace the panel on Monday, but I can get you up and running tonight if we keep the load at the regular capacity."

“What about the band?”

“Let me talk to them.”

“Ok.”

“That’s it?” He could hear the repressed laughter in her voice, and he fought the urge to smile. “No, Riley, be off with you, I can do it by myself,” she sang out.

“Not tonight,” he said, tackling the obvious. “I’ve interrupted your very important evening,” he said, still not able to reconcile the brief image he’d caught of her backlit by the lights in her truck as she’d poured out of the driver’s side door—vivid, midnight sky-blue dress hiking up over her pale, toned legs and her bare feet with pale pink painted toes disappearing into the ruggedly battered work boots.

The image had been disturbingly sexy.

And he didn’t want to go there with a woman right now.

Especially not with a woman who lived locally.

And made him feel so out of sorts, he forgot how to speak.

Not that he bothered to try all that often unless he needed something.

“I texted Sophia that I’d be a little late, and she said you could pay her back for the inconvenience by donating a bottle of wine to her cause.”

“What is her cause?” he asked curiously, not knowing who Sophia was except perhaps the woman who owned the shop. That was the thing with small towns. Everyone knew each other and assumed the same even of newcomers. He’d thought after a lifetime of living in cities and penthouse high-rises and teaming universities, he’d want that.

He thought a more peaceful life and schedule would lure his grandfather to visit and perhaps stay. Bring him back to the land—give him a purpose once again. His grandfather had cared for him. Given him a home. He wanted to do the same.

Zhang had thought he’d fit more easily in Bear Creek than he had in the expensive Palo Alto and then Cupertino



enclaves. But he didn't. He didn't know how. So, he'd mostly stayed on his mountain. Ordered supplies. And chartered a private jet to fly him to his headquarters when Zoom meetings and conference calls wouldn't suffice.

"Turning thirty." Riley grinned. "She's being a drama queen about it, so we're having a red dress thirty party, only she's seen me in red, so she relented and picked out this blue dress."

Was he supposed to compliment the dress?

Defend her and say she'd rock red?

He knew not to make personal comments to employees, especially women, and technically she was providing a service he would be paying her for, so... "What kind of wine does she prefer—reds or whites? Dry? Sweet?"

"From what I can tell, wine that's not running away." Riley's voice was muffled as she scrolled out some different colored wires from a roll and held them in her teeth while she clipped off the length she needed. "Zhang, I'm teasing about the wine."

He could see the tip of her tongue, the flash of her white teeth, and the curve of her lips when she said his name.

He'd never liked the sound of it better.

"I'm not," he said stiffly, stepping back. "You can pick a bottle for your friend and one for yourself."

"Thank you." She paused. "But when I drink, which isn't all that often, I'm more of a beer girl."

He jerked as if she'd goosed him. "Now that's a challenge."

"Yes," she smiled. "Do you accept?"

*Yes* was on the tip of his tongue, but he drew back from the brink.

"Do you need help," he asked, "or should I power up the two generators?"

“Bock, bock, bock, bock, bock,” Riley clucked under her breath.

“Cute. Generators, it is.”

“This won’t be too long,” she said. “Let me talk to the food truck staff to see what they need and then take a look at your generator before you kick it on and plug in the trucks. Then we’ll see what the band needs.”

He nodded.

“Wait. You’re being weirdly agreeable and worrying me. What happened to my Zhang Shi?”

Her Zhang? He blinked and tried to ignore the flash of warmth.

“Why are you going so easy on me?” she demanded “I thought I’d have to promise you my firstborn to get a peek at your electrical.”

“Definitely not. I’m never having children.”

He didn’t even know the words were going to come out of his mouth. Or that they’d sound so harsh in the quiet of the dark—lit only with her headlamp and his. Beside him, Riley jumped.

Her face was pale in the harsh headlamp, freckles popping out through her foundation and powder. Her wide eyes, a warm, green with dark yellow flecks, stared at him. She’d been teasing. He’d overreacted.

“Zhang.” Riley reached out for him, but he pulled away.

He didn’t have to explain himself to anyone anymore. Zhang pulled off the hard hat and turned off the headlamp.



WHAT HAD JUST happened?

One moment they’d been almost joking around, or she had because he’d seemed more approachable. Then his walls slammed up so hard it was like one of those crime shows where the prison cell door slammed shut when the criminal

finally got their punishment. And the heavy music drumbeat justified doom.

She'd somehow struck a nerve—again—and released the Kraken.

*Dramatic much?*

“Stop trying to find answers to other people’s problems, Riley,” she muttered under her breath. “Focus on what you’ve got going on.”

Twenty minutes later, she'd replaced the breaker. The six ugly overhead lights in the cellar came on, casting a cold, white glare. Maybe on Monday, if he hired her, she could convince him to swap out the bulbs for something warmer, if not switch the industrial lights to something more aesthetically hip.

Through the open door she saw a small courtyard, marked off by potted evergreens, lit up with white twinkle lights.

He'd taken her advice.

Riley tried not to read anything into that and failed. After being shunned by the town council about her Christmas Light Garden in River Bend Park, it was validating to not be ignored, even if it was a tiny, tiny win. But a beautiful one.

But as she headed out to check in with Zhang on the generators, she noticed that her vine chandelier wasn't hanging above the bar. The bar—a spectacular custom or restored piece that definitely needed to be put in a place of honor to show it off. The thick beams above in the barn practically screamed to be used, too.

Screw it. She'd already irked him over something else tonight. He was having a party. Her chandelier light would be a conversation piece if nothing else. And if she shifted the layout of the bar and seating area about ten feet to the left and five forward, the tasting room configuration would visually work better with the heated, outdoor seating area Zhang was currently getting a fire started for.

To think was to act for Riley. She rolled the bar. Moved the vintage rug and low sofa and the ottoman-style cube chairs.

Then she retrieved her extension ladder and got to work.

“What are you doing?” Zhang asked, looking up at her on the ladder.

“What I wanted to do on Wednesday.” She screwed in the final screws to hold the track in place. Hopefully, he was polite enough to not be positioning himself to look up her dress. Actually, he seemed too fastidious and distant to pull that creepy stunt. Zhang was definitely not interested in catching a flash of her panties. He probably didn’t even notice she was a woman. That should not prick her pride, but it did. “Hand me the light, please.”

Riley climbed down the ladder enough to grab the light and then climbed back up.

“Go stand by the door and tell me the height that you like.” She fed out some of the rusted chain and let the chandelier dangle down over the bar.

“Lower by nine chain lengths.”

That was oddly precise. She complied.

“Perfect.”

She clipped it up on the track, checked her work and climbed down the ladder. She put a battery in the remote. “Before we turn this cutie on, I want to move the Christmas tree lights to a different circuit.”

He ran his hand through his hair. “The power is that tenuous? One more light and poof!”

“This will work tonight, and I’ll reconfigure starting next Monday. I have jobs booked all weekend or I’d come earlier.”

“It’s Friday night. Monday morning is early,” he said. “I expect you’re waiting for an apology.”

She dropped down next to him.

“Not holding my breath.” She smiled to take the sting out of the words, she hoped. “The client is always right except when he’s not.” She nudged him with her hip. It was like

trying to budge a redwood. “I thought you were having a party. You look like you’re facing a firing squad.”

“I hate parties,” he said in a low voice she barely heard as she released the catch on her extension ladder.

“Then why are you having one?”

“Business. I’m not good with people, which is news to no one.”

Riley’s heart stuttered. How awful to feel that way. But why open a winery? Wineries were all about people and events and connections. Sharing good times and the literal fruits of one’s labor. Zhang seemed more like a high-tech guy locked away with three computer screens and a fancy Bluetooth keyboard that took up an entire desk. Or she could picture him as a stockbroker or investment guy. Buy. Sell. Hold. He seemed decisive. All about success and money.

“Obviously,” he said.

She didn’t know what to say to that. Her normally agile brain and running commentary mouth was stubbornly silent.

“The light looks...good.” Zhang finally broke the silence.

High praise.

Luckily, she left that alone in her brain, still reeling with sympathy about his not being good with people confession, and of course burning with curiosity as to why Mr. Stay On My Mountain would open a winery, and why he never wanted kids.

She looked up at the forty-year-old vine dangling above them. Her head brushed his shoulder, and for a brief, crazy second, she had the impulse to lean into him. Have some human contact. Riley was such a physical person, and she had friends she could hug in greeting, but it wasn’t the same as having a man, having someone special.

She stuffed down the sigh and instead looked up at him, almost challenging him to dare utter another “good” adjective in her presence.

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” she told him. “The lackluster *good* is about to be banned forever from your vocabulary in about two minutes.”

“Why two?”

Riley smiled, stalked outside, and switched the circuit that the trees with the Christmas lights were on. Then she reentered the winery.

“Close your eyes.”

“Huh?”

“Just do it.”

Looking wary, Zhang closed his eyes.

“How do you like me now?” Riley teased as she hit the remote for the vine light.

## CHAPTER FIVE

ZHANG KNEW WHAT he was doing. He just wasn't sure why.

It was Monday morning, ten thirty.

And he was making muffins for Riley. Riley and her crew of two.

The Friday party, by all accounts, had been a success. Most everyone had returned to the Bay Area. A few had stayed at area hotels, B&Bs, or VRBOs to do more wine tasting. He'd surprised people with the winery. In a good, dark horse way. People had stayed late. Eaten, listened to the music, drunk wine, and sat around the roaring fire and discussed their different projects.

Jackson had VCs lined up to meet for their future project that was still for the most part under wraps—the team all signed NDAs. Jackson had been floored over the winery. He considered it a business perk, a place to set and to close deals. He'd even suggested investing in the winery as a silent partner and adding a vacation house or small vintage Airstream trailer park where they could team build or pitch to clients.

Not a bad idea financially.

Zhang's hobby could become a partial business expense and tax write-off. And he'd have an infusion of cash and a reason to continue to plant more varietals or different clones. But personally, he'd lose his sanctuary. He'd be opening his gate, literally, to having more people around. Several other friends and colleagues had asked about investing in the winery once they learned how many acres he still could plant. And when he'd let them know that only a small percentage of the vineyard-friendly land in the entire Rogue Valley had been planted, that had generated a lot of interest.

If he pursued Jackson's enthusiasm, Fire Ridge would no longer be solely his. It wouldn't be his retreat away from work. It would be an extension of work. But the solitude was wearing even on him.

And he was frugal enough to want to spread the financial risk but private enough to not want others tromping through his vineyard, tearing up the ground with ATVs, using the beautiful trees for target practice or whatever kooky idea rich, entitled millennials would get up to out here. He didn't want colleagues visiting and posting who knew what and setting off a stampede of Cupertinoites snatching up retreats all over the valley and Napa-izing it.

How silent was silent, he'd wondered when Jackson and his fiancée, Charlize, who was their company's event planner, had talked about investing with him or buying land of their own as a legacy, something for their as yet unconceived children.

Would it be worth it?

He often baked when he wanted to think.

Zhang scowled at the muffins as they cooled on the rack.

Were muffins too obvious? Would Riley read something into it? Women often did. But muffins held no hidden message or agenda. They were simple. Flexible. Healthy or indulgent.

Like these. Shredded zucchini; torn, fresh spinach; red pepper; and aged white cheddar with savory seasonings. A good late-autumn muffin. Hearty.

Riley and her crew had arrived at seven and started work. It was about time for a break, and the muffins would be welcomed. Right? A thank you for putting his project early on their schedule.

"Don't overthink." He put the muffins in a container with a vented lid.

He'd already driven down from the house to greet them and open up both barns this morning. He'd planned to stay and observe the work, but he found himself staring—trying to reconcile the Riley of today with the glamorous but still coolly efficient and bold Riley of Friday night. Today's Riley had her hair in the fat braid. She wore her thick work boots, Carhartt pants, a plaid shirt, Carhartt vest, and thick gloves. She'd looked ready—tools and equipment. No makeup, her



expression intent, issuing the plan for the day with her two assistants.

There'd been no sign of the woman who had arrived Friday night in a sleek dress that had hugged her slight, elegant curves. She'd shimmered. And the incongruity of the dress and the work boots, gloves, and hard hat had intrigued him and poked his love of irony.

Friday night he'd been tempted to touch her to see if her skin was as soft as it looked, and he most definitely could not give into any impulses like that. Not again. Colleagues were off-limits, especially after Brin.

And Riley was temporarily working for him on his property. He needed to be respectful of the barrier at all times.

So why was he making her muffins?

Full circle. Irritated with himself, he picked up the muffins and headed out. He made muffins because he liked to experiment with recipes. He was also being a good host. He'd even made a large carafe of coffee.

Nothing underhanded or inappropriate about that.

Even if he hadn't been able to stop thinking about her all weekend. He liked that she seemed impervious to what Brin had called his moods, his awkwardness, his silences.

She treated him like a normal man. Teased him. Conversated without impatience if he didn't answer right away or in the right way. She was full of life. Warm where he was so cool. Kind, never once mocking him with an "I told you so."

So, yes, she was still in his head.

Even though he hadn't spoken to her other than to nod this morning before going for a long, long run. After his shower, he'd thrown together the ingredients for the muffins and answered emails while they baked.

He headed down in his truck. He often used a gator when traveling around the property. It was easier, but it was cold, and he had the coffee and muffins and might need to go into town later. When he parked near the barn next to Riley's truck,

he sat for a moment, picturing how he would act. What he would say to make this casual.

It was dumb to feel awkward on his own property. This was his domain. They were providing a service. He was providing a fee. But bringing the muffins made it feel far more intimate. He'd provided niceties for workers before. Bottles of water. Snacks. Lunch. Why did it feel different this time?

One word.

Riley.

And then, she was there, poking her brilliant head out the barn door, grinning at him like she was happy to see him.

“Good morning, Ice Wine King, welcome to my lair.”



FOR SOME REASON, it felt like the sun had come out when she'd heard the truck, and Riley rushed to the door like she was expecting packages for Christmas. And there Zhang sat, lit up by the sun, dark and mysterious against a backdrop of snow and acres of dormant vines.

He looked like a movie.

Beautiful.

Remote.

So, of course, she opened her big mouth.

She wanted to make him laugh. Instead, she was acting like they were friends. They weren't.

Yet Riley wanted to be.

Something about this man just begged for connection. Warmth.

Not that he'd see it that way. Sophia and everyone at the red dress thirty party Friday night had had a lot of teasing advice and speculation to pass around about Zhang Shi. And they'd toasted him as they'd consumed his wine. Riley had thought to try some, but everyone was commenting on the bouquet and flavors, which made her self-conscious. What if

she didn't taste the same things? And then the wine—in a smaller bottle than what wines were normally bottled in—was gone before she'd worked up her courage.

“Did you want to check the work?” Riley wiped the smile off her face—she was goofy being so happy to see him. He was a client not a friend, and not a particularly friendly client.

“You sent me a very detailed bid,” he said.

She nodded. She had. That was something else she'd changed from her dad and uncle's way of operating. Everything computerized, parts and labor priced. Her bids were highly detailed, and when there was something she wasn't sure of, she estimated to the best of her ability and told the client why and where there might be some discrepancies.

On rural properties and especially with historic properties, there were often lots of unexpected issues, and she felt owners needed to know that upfront. Many of them expected it and weren't particularly worried; they were often rich, and the purchased property was a second or third home.

The Bear Creek area wasn't the tourist draw that many of their neighboring towns were, but it did have its share of vacation homes as it was surrounded by natural beauty, close to winter activities on Mount Ashland and summer activities along the Rogue River. It was also an easy drive to the amenities of larger towns and the cute artistic offerings of Ashland and Jacksonville. And only a four-hour drive to the huge metropolitan areas of the Bay Area to the south and Portland to the north.

“Okay, if you don't want an update, I'll get back to it.”

“I brought muffins.”

The word *muffin* coming out of Zhang's gorgeous mouth was so unexpected, she popped her head back out.

“Did you say muffins?” she demanded.

A slight head bob, and she could swear his glass-cutting cheekbones colored just a little bit. Riley was charmed to her booted toes.

“Muffin is my favorite word.”

And for a split second, not even enough time for the image to get to her brain, Riley thought she saw the slightest quirk of the left side of his mouth. She took it as a start and vowed that she was going to get him to smile, and then she was going to make him laugh.

She rolled open the barn door and struck a pose, one arm sweeping wide.

“Welcome to Fire Ridge Winery. Men bearing gifts of muffins and coffee are heralded as heroes.”

In the act of getting out of the truck, Zhang paused.

*Oops. Totally overdid it.*

Nothing new there. Riley strode forward. “You were planning to share the muffins,” she said, mock serious. “Or did you come to tease me? It will be awkward if I have to stare at you and salivate while you eat.”

Was that too weird of an image? Probably, but it was out there, so she just smiled and hoped he took it as a dumb joke.

“I have muffins for everyone. You don’t need to share,” he said, and Riley sternly kept her smile in check. It was like she was Mrs. Norton, her third-grade teacher, shutting down any hint of levity.

“And I don’t tease,” he said as he stood before her.

That, she could believe.

“It’s still early,” Riley said breezily. “And you don’t know me that well, but I guarantee another couple of encounters with me and you’ll have a whole bank of ideas upon which to make withdrawals of subjects to tease me about. If our acquaintance continues, you can open up other bank branches full of teasing deposits.”

He stared.

“I’ve known her since kindergarten.” Jake Miller, one of her electricians, came over to introduce himself. “She doesn’t make any more sense the more you get to know her,” he said,

pulling off his gloves as if to shake hands, but Zhang made no move to shift the large carafe of coffee and the bag of muffins so that he had a hand free to shake.

Zhang looked around the room, not at them.

“I brought coffee if you needed refills. And muffins.”

“They smell delicious,” Riley said. “Won’t you join us?”

He looked like he would refuse, and some little imp kept her mouth in motion.

“There are a couple of things I want to show you, and something else I want to discuss, get your thoughts on before we proceed.”

There wasn’t. Well, there was, but she’d planned on talking to him later in the day, but he was here now, and something inside of her whispered to keep him there.



“THESE ARE SCRUMPTIOUS. Delicious. Heaven in a paper wrap. And the snowflake wrappers add the perfect touch of whimsy.” Riley reached for a third muffin. “Splitzies?” she asked him.

“Pardon?”

She tore the muffin in half with her long, delicate white fingers that seemed like they shouldn’t or couldn’t do such difficult and dirty tasks as working around tools and wires and voltage all day. He winced at the sexist thought. Riley would probably cuff him if she were a mind reader.

She waved the muffin at him. “You know you want to,” she urged.

He did. She was so... He didn’t have words to describe her. Natural. Unfiltered. He remembered a woman from his grad school program, Elle from Alabama, who’d been wicked smart with a mouth always in motion, and her cuttingly funny commentary in that syrupy drawl had been addictive. Wide open. That was it. One of the members of their cohort had

called Elle wide open. Elle had batted her eyes and made a sexual joke, but that hadn't been what was meant.

She'd had an energy. An approach to life. Elle and Riley would have hit it off, leaving him in the conversational dust. He wondered where Elle was now. He'd not bothered to keep in touch. It was Jackson who tethered him to the here and now, and his PA Dustin Schell, who ran interference and kept his schedule.

Elle had tried to push him out of his shell. He hadn't been keen, but participating more in the everyday aspect of running his company, not just the development, was on his list. "Step by step," his grandfather had said. "Word by word," he'd encouraged when he would walk with Zhang to the park and prod him to talk to a dog or a child or a shopkeeper.

"Yes, I'll go splitzies." Zhang tried the word out for the first time.

"You won't regret it."

Jake and Davis Holt, the other electrician, poured some of the coffee and thanked him. Then they saluted their boss. "Want me to check the ground?" one of the men asked Riley. "See if we can cut a trench? It might be too frozen."

"Yesssss," she seemed hesitant, "that works, but I really want to get that trench in. It won't get better until mid-March. Then we'll jump back to what we were doing. I want to do a walkabout," Riley said to Zhang, pulling her iPad out of her work bag. "If you have the time now?"

He nodded and watched Riley peel her half of the muffin carefully out of the paper, her fingers nimble and graceful. She bit into the still warm muffin, and her eyes closed.

"Is that anise?"

"Yes," he said, pleased.

"These are better than the muffins in town at Jas's Running Fox Bakery, but don't tell her that, because I'll be cut off forever and then you'll be stuck with me driving up here, tongue hanging out, begging for a daily muffin handout."

She was kidding. Probably. But the image was disturbingly real, and he almost said something he shouldn't, like he'd have a bag ready for her. Because he wouldn't. That would be weird. She was definitely teasing. Right? He'd always been bad at this. Maybe because he'd been trying to master so many languages but hadn't wanted to speak. Or maybe it was organic. He just missed context clues or the intent that crouched in the tangle of words.

"Why are they better?" he asked.

"Your flavors are subtle. Unexpected. The muffin is much lighter, fluffy, and I like the smaller size. I don't feel guilty, like I've got to run five miles."

"Are you a runner?" Why did he ask her that? They weren't friends. They weren't going to go running along the river trail or along his property line.

"I love to trail run," Riley said. "But not in the late fall and winter months. It's too dark by the time I finish work, and too dark to go before."

"What do you do to keep in shape?" That was a good follow-up question, since he was practicing. Or too personal?

"My job is pretty physical," she said. "But I have an area in my house where I have some weights and resistance bands. I do it more for strength and flexibility so that I don't get injured on the job. Besides, I feel guilty if I just sit and watch TV, so if I'm working out or repairing something or building a light fixture, then I can indulge in two passions."

"What do you watch on TV?" Jackson would give him a gold star for his conversational efforts.

He imagined romances or rom-coms on Netflix. Didn't all women love those? Or maybe she'd be into the home improvement shows, considering her profession.

"News. Politics. A few crime dramas."

He blinked.

"Not what you were expecting, huh?" She laughed. "Not romances." She stuck her tongue out at him and then carefully

folded up the muffin wrapper. “And while Sophia often makes me watch home remodeling shows with her for ideas, they make me mental, because so much of the work is shoddy and wrong and a lot of people are stuck with huge bills repairing everything the crew messed up as they zoomed through, focusing more on storyline and camera angles than the work. Or sometimes the people have to sell their homes due to the jack in their property taxes.”

“Really?”

“Reality television is not reality.” Riley stood. “Now let’s walk. I want to pick your brain.”

“That sounds as appealing as a trip to the dentist.”

“I know, right? A walk with me is like a trip to the dentist.” She spread out her hands and looked up at the space between them like she was reading. “I should post that quote on every dating site. My inbox would flow over like hot lava. Men would be lined up around the block to date me.”

She poured more coffee into her thermos cup and then filled his without asking.

“You’re on a lot of dating sites?” He couldn’t stop the question. It was out before he thought of the consequences of voicing it. He was just so surprised. She seemed so...so... comfortable in her skin and talked to people so easily. And with her job, she would meet a lot of people and likely worked with a lot of men. Getting dates should be easy.

“None.”

But she’d said she was. “You speak in riddles, like the Sphinx.”

“It’s my superpower,” she said earnestly and then intoned, “And you wish to divine the answer so that you, too, may pass.”

Another clue. She had some familiarity with Western mythology.

“Ready.” She turned to him as he wiped down the tasting bar with a clean cloth from a drawer full of them even though



Riley just had. “Let’s talk.” She nearly vibrated with energy, like a rocket on the launch pad, in countdown mode.

“Not my superpower,” he murmured, dropping the cloth in the basket he kept under the bar along with the one Riley had used. But he wasn’t going to allow his natural reticence to define him. Or defeat him. Not anymore.



“THIS VIEW NEVER gets old,” Riley said, arms flung wide as they stood on the top of the ridge at the highest point of the property. They had nearly a three-hundred-degree view of the valley while Mount Ashland loomed behind them, snowy and dominant. “Tell me it never gets old to you,” she whispered, eyes wide because she didn’t want to miss anything.

“The view is why I bought this property,” he said quietly.

“Really?” Riley turned and looked at him.

“The elevation is on the higher side for a vineyard,” he said. “It’s high enough to determine the type of grapes and farming practices, but I guess you could say that about any site,” he said ruefully. “I liked the challenge of being the steward of one of the highest elevation vineyards in the state. The size and location were exactly what I was looking for, but this view...this view,” he repeated quietly.

Riley knew just what he meant.

“It always felt spiritual to me,” she said softly. He looked at her, and she realized she was standing closer to him than she’d intended. As they’d walked his property along the power lines to check that all looked in order, she’d detoured at the ridgeline where she and Leah used to let the horses run.

“I used to ride up here,” she admitted. “This was my favorite place in the world, and when I rode this land, I felt every problem fall away. I would imagine myself a golden eagle perched and ready to take off and fly anywhere I wanted to go.”

She’d also felt like a queen surveying her domain, which was a cringeworthy image now that she was an adult.

“Do you feel like a king up here?” she asked curiously. Master of all he surveyed. She could see him as a royal. Confident. Powerful. Certain of being right.

*Lonely.*

“A king seems an outdated analogy.”

“Then what?” she prodded, encouraged he’d engaged at all with what likely seemed like babbling to him.

He turned back to face the valley. The heavy, gray sky had descended even lower, and a wicked sharp wind kicked up from the mountain. The silence enveloped them like a stiff breeze.

“It’s going to snow,” Riley said happily, arms spread wide, face tilted to the pregnant sky. “At any moment.” Her eyes drifted shut. “In five, four, three, two, one.”

As if at her command, the first few fat snowflakes drifted down and landed on her face. “Yessss,” she breathed out softly.

He still said nothing.

And Riley, her head tilted back, eventually opened her eyes. She could see the snow—thicker now—swirling down, kissing her face. “Hello, you,” she greeted.

“I would have thought you’d find the snow an inconvenience.”

“What? No. Never.” Riley stuck her tongue out to catch a few flakes. “I love the snow. It’s so beautiful coming down. I always felt an affinity with each snowflake—you know, being unique. I definitely identify with that.” She laughed ruefully.

“Why?”

*Seriously?*

“I was teased when I was little—a lot, obviously. But then my mom talked about how each snowflake is unique, which probably sounds corny. It helped because the snowflakes are different, but they all work in concert to create something beautiful and fun to play in.”

“Your mom said that?” He sounded astonished.

“It’s a total mom statement,” Riley laughed. “She was trying to comfort me. I was the only girl. Three brothers.”

“Your life was so different,” he mused.

She wondered what he meant by that—maybe because he had lived abroad. “I always wonder how my life would be different if she hadn’t died when I was ten,” Riley said softly. “I’m happy now. I love my life and my work, but I still miss her.”

Zhang didn’t answer. He didn’t look at her. *Too much info, Flanagan*, but she loved to talk about her mom. Remember her. She wondered what Zhang’s mom was like. She must be so proud of him.

“Why obviously?”

“Ha! Never pictured you trying to be gallant, and you seem too wicked smart to be obtuse.” Riley waved her thick braid at him. “Tall, skinny, and red, with no filter. None. I provided a lot of comical moments, and headaches for my parents at parent teacher conferences, that’s for dang sure.”

Zhang watched her. That was the verb, and Riley felt like a zoo animal. He’d probably never had a moment of doubt as he navigated the world, and if he did, he would assume the error was the user’s. She smiled at her pun. Still, you never knew about people, and in the eight years of owning the property, he hadn’t made any effort to become a part of the town’s fabric in any way, so maybe he did have some challenges.

“I bet you didn’t cause a single problem as a kid,” Riley said, unable to picture Zhang breaking a rule or making a mistake.

“Not a betting man.”

She laughed at how literal he was being. “And you definitely didn’t get teased,” she guessed.

“I didn’t interact with kids,” he said stiffly. “We should head back down to your crew.”

He immediately started walking. Long strides.

*You always gotta push.*

Riley took one last, longing look around—the valley spread out below, her life, her history, so many familiar landmarks. She felt like she was a part of it all, and the man striding so quickly away was a part of none of it. He didn't even seem to fully inhabit his property.

“Yeah, like that's your problem to solve,” she muttered.

Zhang was a puzzle. A fascinating, alienated, tall, inadvertently sexy problem she wanted to solve.

*Like a guy who can buy more than five hundred acres and dabble in a vineyard as a hobby needs any advice from you.*

And yet money didn't fix everything.

Sometimes it made it worse.

Sighing, Riley took out her phone—something she should have done before—and snapped a few pictures. She might never get the chance to come up here again. The snow began to fall more heavily.

Riley ran down toward Zhang, a whisper of an idea forming in her brain. As she got closer, she scooped up a handful of snow, quickly packed it, and nailed him in the chest with it. “Got you,” she laughed.

He looked down at his chest and then back up at her as she still raced toward him.

“Why did you do that?”

“It's fun.” She scooped up another bit of snow and danced away from him like she was a boxer. “Make a snowball.”

“Why do you wish to engage in a game?” he asked drily.

“That right there's your answer.”

“An answer that is no answer.”

“Fun. You own a beautiful property. You're healthy. You make what my friends and so many others consider to be the nectar of the gods, and it's snowing. You need to indulge in some fun.”

“In your opinion.”

“In my esteemed opinion.” She loosed the snowball, and again it splattered against his Patagonia jacket. “See? Fun. Try to catch me.”

“No, thank you.”

Riley huffed and stalked over to him. “You are a hard sell.” She handed him a premade snowball. “It’s hard to believe that you started out designing and selling video games.”

“Ahhhh, you googled me.”

“No,” although she had. “Sophia has nephews. They think you’re a god.” Riley paced away from him and scooped up more snow, careful to check that there were no rocks since it was the beginning of the season. Not a significant snowpack yet, which made her hopeful she and Jake and Davis could dig the trench to bury some of the electrical work. Jake had texted that he’d head out to pick up the equipment; they’d dig this afternoon before more snow arrived. Looked like they were going to race the harbinger of the coming storm.

Riley stood and took a picture just as a snowball nailed her square in her face. She blinked.

“What makes you think I’m not a god?”

Riley spit out a mouthful of snow and laughed.

“You got me good.”

He nodded in acknowledgment and then turned away to stride back to the barn. Riley dropped the snowball and hurried to catch up.

“Seriously, what do you do for fun?” she asked. “Is it computer gaming?”

“I still have a game division,” he said. “But now I have other projects. I have a business partner, Jackson Cooper—he handles sales and marketing and launches with his team. I handle development with mine.”

“And never the two shall meet,” she intoned, easily matching his long-legged stride, which made her grateful for

once for her almost six feet, and for Sophia for getting into trail running.

“We interact every day,” Zhang said.

Riley pressed her lips together to keep from laughing at his literal interpretation. He fascinated her—the way his mind worked. The way he was both arrogantly confident and yet socially unsure. He seemed controlled and self-determined and yet vulnerable. So different from her. She wanted to know what made him tick.

And she loved the way his black eyes were so intense. She felt like she was staring into a night sky full of stars.

“So, you’re going to hire someone to sell your wine then.”

“Pardon?”

“Your wine. If you’re more into development and not a people person—as much,” she qualified, not wanting to insult him, “then you’ll hire a tasting room manager and a sales director depending on how much juice you make, which seems like...” She looked at the three expansive blocks of dormant vines pointing up at the sky and the other blocks that stalked down to other gently sloping hills. “Eventually, a lot if you wanted.”

He didn’t answer.

OK then. Whatever. *Go for broke.*

“This Friday is the first Friday of the month,” she began, and she had to bite back the bark of laughter at the incredulous look he sliced her way.

“It’s an event in town,” she clarified. He knew his days and dates. “The stores stay open late, local vintners or distillers offer tastings in their assigned stores. There’s also food from different vendors and musicians. It’s all year round, but the December First Friday is always a big deal because it kicks off the month of festivities.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“It’s fun. It’s an event. You—”

“Are you asking me out?” he interrupted, and the shock on his face would have been truly insulting had she been.

Riley bit back her reply and dug deep for her technique that had helped her to think before she spoke—sometimes.

“I was thinking that you might like to pour your ice wine and maybe your late harvest Riesling or something else at the event.” Riley uttered the words as dispassionately as she could. “Sophia is on the First Friday board, and while she has a cupcake vendor in the store and an upright bass player rocking some jazz tunes, there is a pop-up store connected to hers that doesn’t have a producer assigned. Shoppers love to taste wine as they shop, and it keeps them browsing in the store longer. You could set up a table there and pour your wines and sell them. It would be a great introduction to the community as the event is popular. It’s only a fifty dollar buy-in that supports the event and raises money for the downtown association.”

She expected him to utter a *no*. Or an *absolutely no*.

The “I’ll think about it” flooded her heart with a warmth she should definitely not be feeling in a snowy field.

## CHAPTER SIX

**R**ILEY WALKED TOWARD River Street, her head tilted back to look at the sky turning to dusk. A final javelin throw of pink pierced the dark and moody gray clouds building over the Southern Coast Range as the sun set. A storm was brewing but hadn't yet arrived in the valley. She sighed happily, barely avoiding taking a sip from one of the large peppermint mocha coffees—she'd bought five of them. One for Sophia, one for each of the two volunteers, one for the teenage bass player who was the entertainment for the night and hoping to earn tips to supplement her freshman year in college. That left one for herself. Today, the First Friday, was Bear Creek's unofficial kick-off to the holiday season, and it was also the first day the Caffeinated Goat offered one of their best-selling holiday beverages.

By now, Bear Creek had usually experienced its first dusting of snow. But overhead, the skies were still clear, giving the Christmas lights wrapped around the historic oaks lining River Street a proper chance to show off.

“Wait for it,” she murmured as she stood at the top of the street where it met the sprawling city park that paralleled the river. Riley looked down the wide street paved with bricks instead of asphalt. The old bricks—many that had been replaced over the years—added charm but also expense. The city managers often discussed paving over the bricks, but then the citizens and businesses and even tourists would rally with funds and loud opinions to keep River Street historic.

The street was closed, allowing only pedestrian traffic during the handful of festivals and events. Every year there would be a proposal to close the street permanently to traffic. Riley saw the value of allowing traffic on the main road of the historic downtown—it made shopping easier, especially for those who had physical impairments, but if traffic were banned, the bricks would be protected and have less wear, pedestrians would be safer, and restaurants and tasting rooms



could spill out into the street during warm weather increasing their seating.

She looked at her watch. Five on the dot. She stepped off the riverfront path and onto River Street just as the lights that volunteers so carefully wrapped and strung over the past couple of weekends blinked on for the very first time.

Riley caught her breath. It was so beautiful. Magical. She still had the same thrill she'd had every year on December's First Friday. The street just looked so pretty and welcoming. And the brightness was a fierce push against the dark of the winter season.

Christmas was one of her favorite times of the year, but she was a little worried about this one. For the first time, she would be alone. And she'd really wanted to debut her Christmas Garden of Lights—even a small version. It would have felt like she was making progress on her career goals and would have been a good addition to her work portfolio.

“Next year,” she promised. And she wasn't alone. She had Sophia and friends and traditions and work.

Her phone rang. It was her dad, FaceTiming. She took the call, smiling. All of them were on the screen, her father, her stepmom, aunt and uncle, each one talking over the other.

It was morning where they were in Melbourne, eating at a beach café. Riley turned around so they could see the lights on River Street.

“You're not working too hard, are you?” her aunt demanded as her father asked if she were helping Sophia in her shop. Riley chatted happily, asking a million questions. It was amazing that her family was coming up on the summer season across the globe, and she didn't even have a passport.

The call ended too quickly, although she needed to keep moving. She watched the screen go blank and glanced back into the dark park—and the hulk of the covered outdoor area that served as the backdrop for the summer outdoor concerts and festivals. This year the town's city planners and city council had finally allowed local merchants, producers, and

artists to create a Christmas Market in the park, happening next weekend. Riley had helped spearhead the effort, attaching her lighting display to the event, but she'd been kicked off the committee by Jeffrey Bane's current squeeze and former homecoming queen.

"Next year," she vowed again before turning away from the darkness. She hurried down the lit street, calling out greetings to people she knew—so many of them.

Her mood lightened even more, but she held up the tray of coffees as her reason for not being able to stop and talk.

She saw quite a few people gathered outside Sophia's shop, commenting on the metal arch Riley had built and then used to display a few of her handmade lights created out of discarded band instruments.

"There you are." Sophia met her at the door of her shop looking effortlessly glamorous in jeans, boots, a shimmery bronze tank top, and a chunky knit cardigan that had been made by a local knitter who was also a best-selling romance author. "As you can see, I've already started shopping." Sophia indicated the sweater.

"You are not supposed to do that." Riley fake scowled. "How am I going to buy you a fabulous present when you always buy things you like?"

"This, I could not resist."

"You don't even try." Riley laughed. "Although you look...amazing as an adjective doesn't do you justice." Riley handed her a coffee. Then she found the two other volunteers—one of her high school mentees who had come with her mother—and gave them each a coffee.

The bass player was already set up and playing a Frank Sinatra classic, and as she grooved with the upright bass that was taller than she was, sang "Fly Me to the Moon." It never ceased to astonish Riley the talent that lived in her town. Lakshmi had been singing and playing at local festivals and wineries since she was in middle school. She was in college now but home for the holidays.

She smiled at Riley. Riley held up the drink. Not missing a beat or a note, Lakshmi's eyes lit up, and she jerked her head toward her amplifier. Riley set the coffee down, noting the waterproof curved liner on top so if there were any spills, her electrical equipment wouldn't suffer.

"Smart girl," Riley said.

"Peppermint mocha?"

"Of course."

"Queen." Lakshmi laughed, still playing but breaking off singing at the end of the first chorus. "Thanks. Any special requests?"

"Adele or Billie Eilish," Riley said after a moment. "I love 'Bad Guy' and 'Therefore I Am.' Oh and 'Come Out and Play.'"

"Jazz standards then," Lakshmi teased.

Riley shrugged and smiled. She could name a lot of jazz standards, but she loved pop and alternative. "Thanks for coming tonight. It's good to see you."

Lakshmi wore a simple black, very short dress and shiny faux snakeskin Doc Marten boots. Sophia must have plopped the knit Santa hat on Lakshmi's sleek dark head, because it was at a rakish angle and the puff ball bobbed along to the beat, bouncing on Lakshmi's shoulders.

Sophia had commissioned them for every one of her volunteers so that they would look thematic and festive.

"Hat." Sophia blocked her way and dangled Riley's in front of her. "Against my better judgment, yours is emerald green because you bitch and moan about red. But I think you look adorable in anything, so put it on. You're in the pop-up tonight."

"I don't really need a cap," Riley said. "You have several other volunteers coming next week to help you in the Christmas market who—"

"Everyone wears one," Sophia intoned.

“Yes, ma’am.” Riley fit the knit cap over her head. The extra-large puff ball dangled almost to her shoulder blades. She wagged her head and laughed. “I like this,” she admitted. “But I thought that I was going to be with you so we could scheme and gossip.”

“Change in plan.” Sophia firmly turned Riley around and gave her a push toward the pop-up.

Riley’s heart seized. There was Zhang, filling a galvanized bucket with a bag of ice. He set the bucket of ice on the large wine barrel that would serve as a table. Riley noted that the barrel had been modified with a door that hid two shelves and latched.

He looked like a young Keanu Reeves in the first *Matrix*.

“You’re definitely in here with him,” Sophia whispered in her ear. “He looks good enough to eat but stern. I don’t want customers chased away. They need a little happy juice so they’ll pull out their wallets.”

“You are devious.”

“It’s called being a businesswoman. Go sprinkle him with your brand of festive so he can sell some wine and you can sell some lights and help launch successful holiday seasons for local artists.”

Riley was more than a little worried about the happy dance her heart was doing. And the warmth heating her chest.

“No pressure,” Riley said, looking regretfully at the last coffee in her hand. She hadn’t heard from Zhang in three days. She and her crew had finished late Thursday night at his property. She hadn’t seen him once after Monday and her clumsy invite to the First Friday. But it had worked.

He finished placing the wine in the bucket and then looked up. Riley felt like his intent gaze flipped a switch inside of her.

“He’s not wearing a hat?” she hissed at Sophia trying to tap down her reaction.

“You go tell him it’s mandatory.”

“You could have texted a warning.”

“I was afraid you’d run.”

Not a chance. But she would have bought another coffee. The peppermint mochas were tradition tonight, and now she was without.

“When have I backed down from a challenge?”

“Never. Ever. And he has *challenge* tattooed all over him.”

Why did Sophia have to mention that? Riley had a thing for tats. Did Zhang have any tattoos? Would it be too flirty to ask?

“Challenge accepted,” she said softly to Sophia and then surged forward, smile on her face. “Zhang. You came. I brought you a coffee. Peppermint mocha. It’s the first day the Caffeinated Goat makes them, and it has whipped cream, sprinkles, and a candy cane. If this can’t launch the merry, you don’t have a pulse.”



SHE HANDED HIM a large coffee and smiled like she was happy to see him.

Why would she be?

But she had told him about the event.

Her smile encompassed her face, and her eyes shone as if lit from within. Electrician was an apt profession for her—the random thought popped in his brain.

He’d waffled about coming. But everything in his body settled and warmed as much as his hands, now holding the unexpected and unasked for peppermint mocha. He loved coffee but avoided flavors. Still, it would be rude to shove the coffee back at her.

“It’s good to see you,” she said softly. “I wasn’t sure you’d come.”

“I did.”

It was the most stupid and obvious conversation, but somehow that didn’t matter, nor did it reflect the tension riding

him the last few days as he wrestled with whether to come or not. Sell his wine or not.

He'd been on the verge of ignoring the invitation. He'd been at his Cupertino office working with Jackson, fine-tuning an investor pitch on a new project. He'd been energized and engaged and yet had missed the vineyard. If he attended the First Friday event, he'd rationalized, he'd be showcasing his wines, which would benefit the winery brand if he used it as a corporate retreat or event space.

His indecision had irritated him.

He hated to fail.

He hated to put himself out there to be judged.

But he also hated being ruled by fear.

And that was what had sent him home and made him contact Sophia Gonzales Friday morning.

He had this drive to create, to accomplish, and as Riley had pointed out, he made wine; wine was meant to be consumed and enjoyed. How would he get it to consumers if he didn't have a tasting room? Or at least place his wine with a distributor. The profit margin on that was in the negatives, and he hadn't climbed to where he was by not watching his bottom line.

But if he had a tasting room, he'd have employees on his property.

And then...

"Where are your glasses?" Riley asked, interrupting the annoying train of thought. "I can help you finish setting up."

"Thank you, but you must have things to do."

"My mission, and I choose to accept it"—she saluted—"is to help out in the pop-up shop. So tonight, like it or not, my job is helping you and the other artists."

"I'm not an artist," he said quickly.

"I know the feeling," she said.

He looked up at the two hanging lights sculpted into intricate balls from wine barrel staves and wrapped with lights. Were those hers? How could she not consider herself an artist?

“Let’s festive up your display,” she said.

Zhang tried not to wince as her gaze intently took in his modified wine barrel and bucket of ice with three ice wines and late harvest Riesling standing straight up like soldiers under review.

He braced and waited for her to say something. He might not know how to festive anything, but he was pretty sure this wasn’t it.

Another smile lit her face. “Take a sip of the coffee. It’s heaven. I’m going in the back to see if Sophia has anything we can steal that can help us out.”

*We? Us*, he pondered. It was presumptuous, and yet he liked it.

*Don’t.*

He tried to keep people at arm’s length for a reason. Too many people he got close to left. He “lacked resilience,” his mother had said over and over and wanted too badly to connect.

Zhang stared at the door Riley had disappeared behind, much like a dog waited for its master.

Disgusted with himself—he shouldn’t have come—he tentatively sipped the coffee that would likely be too sweet and cloying. Except it wasn’t. The warmth and burst of flavors—a rich dark chocolate, coffee, and spicy peppermint along with a layer of whipped cream and then the jaunty candy cane sticking out tasted like he’d always imagined Christmas would taste. He took another sip and closed his eyes to better savor the flavor.

“That’s the spirit,” Riley said. “Was I right? Heaven.”

He opened his eyes, so startled that he almost spit out the coffee. Clinging to his dignity, he swallowed and schooled his

expression back to bored, indifferent, while noting that she held an explosion of holiday colors in her hands.

“I am still alive, so I cannot speak about heaven,” he noted drily. “But the coffee is rather good. Thank you,” he added stiffly, remembering the nicety at the last minute.

“Good,” she scoffed. “If someone says your wine tonight is merely good, I’m going to slap some adjectives down so fast they’ll take another sip and buy a case.” She narrowed her eyes. “Why do you do that?”

“Do what?” he asked cautiously. He didn’t know Riley well, but there was very little he imagined she wasn’t capable of saying.

“Make your face all bland like the Easter Island statues. You were savoring the coffee, which you were finding beyond good by the way, and then when I noticed and wanted to engage with you on your enjoyment experience, you shut down like a flipped light switch.”

She was perceptive. And nosy. And he could imagine what her expression would twist into if he tried to explain. But he didn’t want to.

He was used to silence. He lived in it. Jackson tolerated his silences. Lived with them and hadn’t taken offense, and then they’d both learned to use his aloofness and silence to the company’s negotiating advantage.

Riley cocked her head and regarded him, her expression rather scientific, which alarmed him. Most people looked away quickly. His eye contact was too direct and his face too remote. He’d heard it over and over before along with well-meaning advice. Most people quickly grew uncomfortable, tried to fill the silence. Riley absorbed it, analyzed it.

Then she smiled as if everything were normal.

“I brought the goods,” she said lifting her laden arms out toward him as if they were an offering. “May I approach the idol of Rogue Valley and please him with this offering?” Riley sang and sank down in a low curtsy before him.



He stared at her in confusion—embarrassment heating him inside. People must be staring, but he could not look away.

“What are you doing?” He was finally goaded into speech.

“May I approach?”

“This is ridiculous.”

Riley looked up, and he caught a sliver of green through her lashes that he hadn’t realized were that long and lush. Her full lips curved in a smile he’d describe as impish, only Riley was so tall and athletic that impish didn’t fit.

*Playful.*

Riley rose up, graceful and smiling.

“I love the barrel and the bucket, but I think it needs more holiday splash.”

“The whole store looks splashed in Christmas,” he replied, looking around, but then he realized he wasn’t correct. The store looked rustic and subtly woven with Christmas elements—greenery and pops of red, silver, and gold.

“It’s pretty. Not overwhelming,” he admitted.

“I can work with that,” Riley said, looking at her smartwatch. “We still have a few minutes before what I hope are festive crowds descend.”

Riley arranged the greenery at the top of his wine barrel and then sparingly wrapped the wine barrel in lights. She also took a bottle of each of the wines and placed them at the front of the wine barrel, and she put a wood box under the galvanized bucket, draped a red filmy scarf over the box, and put the bucket back on top.

Then she took a picture.

“I’ll tag you,” she said as she snapped a picture from another angle after she put one of the absurd knit Santa caps on a late harvest Riesling.

“Ummm”—something else he hadn’t done for the winery yet—“no, thank you.”

“Are you kidding me?” The ball of her Santa hat bounced indignantly over one shoulder. “Aren’t you a tech god? Don’t you have a tech empire? You must have minions social media-ing it twenty-four seven.”

He opened his mouth to reply—defensively, which was something he hadn’t done after the first year his mom had taken him back so he could try to keep the peace—but realized Riley was right.

“I haven’t established a social media presence for the winery, yet. Or a website.”

Because he’d have to, wouldn’t he—if he were going to have a winery, not just a cool wine chandelier in his wine cellar? He wasn’t going to make wine and watch it pile up in storage—a future legacy for a child he’d never have. Maybe for Jackson’s children.

“I know you’re a tech genius,” Riley said, dead serious. “But if you want any help, I’ve built the website for Flanagan & Sons a few times, updating it and making it more interactive, and I’ve built and maintained the websites for Lost and Found Objects, Running Fox Bakery, and the Caffeinated Goat, all owned by friends. I’m happy to help you design a website and social media presence for your winery if you are pressed on time or your employees are too busy with other projects to take it on at this point.”

He could do it in his sleep.

He had staff who could do it in an afternoon.

But he’d avoided even thinking about what he was going to do with the wine. He’d been consumed with the process—the science of learning about the clones and grafting, the geology of the site, the planning, the planting, the nurturing, the winemaking chemistry and process. But not launching it into the wider world beyond a few friends and associates he’s known for years—why? Even that was too potentially a personal minefield for him to walk through.

Riley put the finishing touches on the display as a few people drifted into the store. Zhang saw the bass player take

another luxurious sip of the coffee Riley had brought her. She caught him looking, and she held up her cup like they were toasting. “Cheers to sales and tips,” she called, her Santa hat at a jaunty angle and at odds with the rather austere, punkish vibe of the rest of her outfit.

The bass player swung into an Amy Winehouse classic, and Sophia, taking a quick sip of her coffee before putting it down on the checkout counter, hurried forward to greet people. Zhang saw two more women, a mother-daughter team also wearing Santa hats, put down their coffees and move to different areas of the shop, clearly ready to work. He made the sixth person. Unexpected, as he’d paid the fee at the last minute.

Riley had given him her coffee. And she hadn’t fussed at him to wear the hat. Instead, one of his wines was wearing it. And she’d decorated his barrel so that he looked like he belonged—like he knew what he was doing.

“Do you have a pourer’s license?” he remembered to ask. He didn’t want to get shut down before he’d even opened.

“Absolutely,” Riley said. “I’ve poured wine at a few big events in the valley, otherwise I’d never get to enjoy the scenery and music and the whole beautiful vibe.”

“But you said you don’t drink wine.”

“I haven’t acquired the taste for it yet, and I think my brother, Drew, who brews beer, would boot me from his contact list.”

“Yet.” Zhang caught the word and held on. He could work with that as an inkling of an idea formed.

The idea continued to percolate over the next couple of hours as he poured wine for more people than he would have imagined would come out on a cold Friday night in early December. Riley greeted everyone. She bubbled and seemed familiar with all of the different merchandise by different vendors, and after she listened to him talk about his wines a couple of times, she had his spiel down, only she was more enthusiastic.

He soon had a list of contact information for more than fifty people who wanted to be on his winery e-newsletter list that he hadn't even thought about creating. Riley had stressed the topography of the site, the drama of how ice wine was rare and had to be harvested at night when the grapes were frozen. She made it sound like she'd been there, when, long before dawn, it had been him and a sleepy crew his consulting winemaker had contacted at the last minute.

By the end of the night, Riley's storytelling sounded as if it were all true. Hell, he wanted to be a part of his nonexistent wine club. He'd sold out of the six cases he'd ambitiously packed, and Riley had collected addresses for five more wine delivery customers for "them" to drop off tomorrow.

She'd also sold four of her lights, and the other merchandise in the pop-up shop looked picked over despite her continuous rearranging to keep the displays looking fresh.

As the last few customers left, he felt drained. Riley vibrated with energy, and she hadn't had the caffeine jolt of an evening coffee.

The thought of wresting the wine barrel back in his truck and driving the nearly thirty minutes to his property held little appeal. Maybe another coffee was in order. And he owed Riley one since she'd given him hers, although maybe any more coffee and she'd start levitating.

"You did well." Sophia joined them and looked around the pop-up. Riley handed Sophia the iPad and list she'd been keeping of everything sold and the vendor numbers.

"We sold out of wine," Riley bragged.

"We?" Sophia raised her dark, arched brows. "Do you"—she waved her hand at both him and Riley—"want to keep the wine barrel and display here? I can sell some of your wine for the holidays if you'd like. It's like consignment: no money up front, and we split the sales at the end of the shopping season. I can make different wine packages for you if you want to drop off some merchandise."

Riley practically hopped. He was surprised she didn't shout out the *yes* for him.

"Thank you," he said, sounding so formal he wanted to kick himself. "I would like to participate in that agreement if you could email me the details and expectations."

"Riley knows everything you need to know, and I'm sure she'll have plenty of expectations," Sophia said drily.

Riley laughed, and Zhang found himself nearly smiling despite feeling as if a vampire had sucked everything out of him but his bones, and even those felt liquid. Crazy dumb. He could go at it hard on the Peloton for more than an hour and run for miles and miles, but a couple of hours at a party—even a small one—and he felt weak as a newborn kitten.

"And yes to the other offer," Zhang said to Riley. Her eyes widened, and her mouth made an adorable O. She was so alive, such an open book, so soothing, no drama to navigate like he had with his mom and then Brin. Actually, he hadn't navigated—he'd just turned off.

"Really?"

She sounded excited. Had he offered her something beyond helping with his website? He'd actually like to. She would be a solid choice to open his tasting room and manage it and oversee building the sales. But that was unlikely. She had her own business.

"You're smiling," she accused.

"Trick of light."

"Ha ha."

"Don't tell anyone. My rep will be tattered."

"Never," she breathed, her eyes shining as she pretended to zip her lips. Riley looked around the store and then at Sophia in some unspoken communication that only women seemed to know how to instigate and comprehend.

"Do you have time for a quick walk?" Riley asked. "I've promised to help Sophia, but I always need a little quiet time after a sales event to settle and get my head on straight."

“I’m the opposite. People drain me, and I need quiet time to recover, but it’s the same. I take a walk or a run.”

Riley nodded, and for the first time in a long time, Zhang felt like no one was expecting him to explain something he wouldn’t or perhaps couldn’t. Riley understood, and even better, she accepted.

Maybe it was true. Opposites really did attract.

The minute he had the thought, his heart stuttered. No. He wasn’t going there. This was business only. He couldn’t open himself up like that again.

“Whatever you’re thinking, stop,” Riley said, her voice low and sweet. “Let’s just take a walk. I hope the Goat is still open. I generously gave you my coffee tonight, and I don’t want to break tradition by not getting my peppermint mocha on the first day of the season.”

“I already mobile ordered it for you,” he said.

“Not only a god but a benevolent, mind-reading one.” Riley sighed.

The comment was so absurd, yet weirdly charming. He should be insulted and yet he laughed.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*I MADE HIM laugh.*

Riley felt her insides fizz like she'd just taken a deep swallow of a La Croix. She felt triumphant, though the feeling of accomplishment should be saved for more professional challenges. But she'd been trying to crack the ice that was Zhang Shi since she'd first accosted him.

Now they walked together down River Street, her holding the promised peppermint mocha she was trying to not moan over.

What would that take?

Riley snuck a peek as Zhang paced beside her, fitted black pants, camel-colored turtleneck cashmere sweater, and a long, camel-colored wool coat that swirled, punctuating each fluid step. With his chiseled features, stony expression, and thick hair springing back from his face and falling to his shoulders, he could have been a sullen, bad boy model.

He should have looked out of place in the small town, especially as locals didn't dress so stylishly as many had physical jobs—agricultural, first responders, construction, and other trades. Zhang looked expensive. Not one of the guys. Weird. She'd thought men in tech didn't generally scream fashion. Didn't they all wear hoodies and jeans even though they were multimillionaires?

Was he a millionaire?

It made him seem even more outside her realm of experience.

She couldn't imagine Zhang sitting on a yoga ball in a hoodie.

The image was ludicrous.

His whole demeanor screeched elegance and refinement and a don't touch vibe that made her perversely want to touch.

So Riley tried to keep her elbows and hands to herself as she sipped her treat and they walked side by side. It was such a beautiful night. Cold but crystal clear. No wind. She tilted her head back and drank in her fill of stars.

“It would be spectacular on your property tonight,” she mused, letting the night wash over her.

She didn’t miss the quick look he shot her.

Oh. Heat flushed through her. That had sounded like an invitation. Ugh. She bet a lot of women invited themselves places with Zhang, especially if he were a millionaire.

“I was thinking about the stars,” she said quickly, wanting to save a shred of pride. “It’s so remote up there I bet the stars can really show off. Not that Bear Creek has a lot of light pollution, but we are close to Medford. I remember one time I got to go to an overnight summer camp, and one of the counselors told a Native American creation story about god being mad at people, so he slammed a bowl over the world and the raven poked holes in it to provide some light.”

Oh. Fantastic. Now she was really rambling.

“Ummmm, tell me your thoughts on your winery website.” She smiled widely trying desperately to reel her ricocheting thoughts back in.

What was it about this man that made her want him to see her not as an electrician but as a friend, a woman?

Waste of her time.

But Riley—who’d had three loud, opinionated, more-than-a-little-wild brothers and two male cousins attempting to boss her, along with a quieter, pragmatic father who’d hidden his grief in work—had blazed her own path. And she hadn’t often played it safe or expected.

They crossed the empty street and walked into the dark park. The town planned to use old-fashioned gaslights to line the newly constructed walking and biking trail that skirted the river for a couple of miles to the old mill, but the money hadn’t been raised yet.



“The park along the trail toward the covered structure is where I wanted to create my Christmas Light Garden,” she said. The disappointment still hung heavy on her shoulders. She turned toward the dark stretch of trail, almost picturing it.

He regarded her. “Why not do it?”

“I presented my plan to the city council, but the mayor shut me down.” Riley sighed. Zhang didn’t care about this. “That’s the thing about smaller towns. It’s hard to reinvent yourself. People get stuck in the past, who you were instead of who you are. They only see the way it was instead of what it could be.”

“You are trying to reinvent yourself?”

“I am.” She wondered a little at the seriousness of his tone. “My business, especially. My dad and uncle are great electricians, but they want to stay in their comfort zone. I want to expand. Do more commercial work, get into landscape lighting design. I teach a class in the electrician certification program at the community college every semester and I also take classes when I can. That’s how I learned more about landscape light design, but mostly I learn by doing.”

“Like website designs?”

She smiled. “I love learning, teaching myself how to do things.” She needed to pull herself back from her disappointment about the garden. “Let’s walk,” she said. “It’s so pretty during the day, and at night it feels so isolated and mysterious. When I walk along this path at night, I can hear several owls calling out to each other.”

“You walk along the creek at night?”

“When I can. Or early morning. Definitely on the weekends. I love to watch the wildlife. It brings me peace and inspires me for the lighting design scenes I make. I take pictures and videos of animals to try to capture their movements and activities in their habitats.”

“So this light garden is something you’ve thought about for a long time?”

“Yes, but more abstractly. It took me a long time working with different materials and coordinating the light program to make anything that was worth looking at,” she admitted. Her dad had said she was wasting her time and that it would never work. “But this year is the first year of the Christmas market, and it seemed like an ideal opportunity to pitch it only... I’m not giving up though.”

“I didn’t imagine you would.”

Was that a touch of amusement in his voice?

“You were fairly aggressive with your services pitch and the lights.”

Riley laughed. “Scary?”

“Unexpected.”

“I’ll take that,” she mused. It was strange. He seemed more approachable in the dark. Or maybe it was that they had been side by side for First Friday and he was more comfortable.

She was trying to not get too comfortable. She had to fight her urge to take his hand. Zhang Shi definitely didn’t look like a hand holder.

“I know you can probably design your own website in your sleep,” she confessed. “And I’m not a pro, but if you do want to bounce ideas or have me get it jumpstarted or up and running for you, I’d love to help.”

Poor man. She probably overwhelmed him with her rocket mouth.

Riley heard an owl, and they both stopped. She strained in the darkness to see if she could spot an owl in any of the trees across the creek. The owl called again.

“Barn owl,” she whispered. “There’s a screech owl I often hear near here too. Once I saw him fly—silhouetted against the moon. He was huge. I wish I could have gotten that photo, but I was too busy gaping to get my phone out of my pocket. He was so fluid and beautiful.”

“I have owls in the woods above my house. I sit on my porch and listen to them at night.”

She liked that they had something in common. They continued walking along the path.

“I haven’t given the winery much thought,” he said quietly, and it sounded like a confession. “It was more of a—” He broke off.

Riley bit the inside of her lip to keep from interrupting. Maybe he processed differently. Maybe he needed silences, and she had to stop nervously filling them.

“Challenge. A curiosity that became a passion project. I don’t think I had a vision of it as a whole, more like incremental challenges I had to master. Finding a site, soil samples, researching the trellising, learning which grapes would do best with each microclimate of the site.” He looked at her.

“Details. Not big picture,” Riley encouraged and pressed her lips again. She wanted Zhang to speak. She needed to learn more about him—no, more about his winery in order to help him with the marketing—and, she was honest enough to admit, help him settle into the community more. Make contacts in the wine industry and in town. Be a good neighbor.

But Riley worried she was in deeper than that.

He just seemed so isolated up there on that ancient rock land bumping up toward the extinct volcano Mount Ashland.

But he probably loved being alone. He’d bought the property.

“Do you have notes from cloning and planting?” He must. He screamed meticulous.

“Of course.”

“That’s good. Wine drinkers love a good story.”

The look of unfiltered doubt he shot her caused a laugh to burble up, tickling her lips.

“I took pictures as I grafted, planted, of the vines as they grew during different seasons.”

She nodded. That was good. “Do you have drone shots of the vineyard during summer and harvest?” It seemed like something he would have.

“Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll need you to send me some pictures to curate—hopefully showing the stages and progression of your vineyard. I’ll get bottle shots done. I’ll need information from you about the technical aspects about the site, and the specifics about the wine you want in there, the tasting notes. The usual stuff.”

He nodded.

“But like I said, the most important thing that will distinguish you and your vineyard and wines from other winemakers is your story.”

“My story?”

It sounded like she’d asked him to do a stripper dance.

“The vineyard’s story,” she hastened to clarify wrangling her mind back from the gutter. “That will be the fun part. And what you will build with social media presence.”

He looked so skeptical that she smiled. “Not a fan of childhood bedtime stories,” she murmured.

“I never had any.”

Riley tripped. He steadied her, and she resisted—barely—the desire to cling to him for just a moment, to feel his strength and warmth.

*Ugh. So rom-com girly.*

Sophia would be the only one pleased.

“Never?” The question escaped.

“My grandfather used to tell me stories,” Zhang said quietly. “But they were ones he made up, and he’d tell them to me while we worked in his garden.”

Riley waited for more, imaging Zhang as a child, his face curious, open, warmed by the sun, listening in rapt attention to

a tale. But Zhang said nothing else.

Disappointed that the moment was over, Riley said pragmatically, “You can hire someone to do your social media and build your winery’s story if you don’t want to spin a tale.” Although she’d be happy to spin plenty of tales. It was a Flanagan trait.

“If I build a winery.”

“You already did. That horse is out of the gate and down the track.”

“That’s right—you ride.”

“Rode,” Riley said regretfully. “I don’t ride anymore. Well, I could.” She brightened. “I just haven’t made time for it since taking over the day-to-day management of Flanagan & Sons Electric, but you make time for things you love—like your vineyard.”

He was quiet. He must love his vineyard. Wine was not a casual, take it or leave it endeavor, or at least Riley had never met anyone who felt that way. Winey people were all kinds, but they were passionate.

“And your artistic lighting designs.”

“My what?” Riley asked, the image of her and Zhang riding horses over his property abruptly going dark, like he’d pulled the plug.

“The chandeliers and lights you make. Like the three I purchased. The four you sold tonight.”

“Oh. That. Those are just for fun. Stress relief. I collect things and love to tinker. I gave one to Sophia when she opened her shop, and she’s a bully.” She grinned at Zhang, encouraging him to join in her teasing. “She made me put some in the pop-up to sell.”

Her mouth felt dry.

“So it’s a lighting design business,” he said and stopped walking to face her. “You should make a website. Tell your story.”

Riley's mouth dropped open. His expression didn't change, but there was a light that she'd never seen before in his beautiful obsidian eyes.

"Touché," she said softly.

She had just been teased by Zhang Shi. Her heart soared, and it was all she could do to keep clutching her coffee cup so she wouldn't fist-bump the sky.

They started walking again.

"I used to fish here with my brothers and climb trees, get the walnuts when they were ripe. We'd play hide-and-seek in the mill with friends after school on the way home...the long way home." She smiled, remembering.

It was easy to talk to him, to share in the night with the nearly silent, sluggish slip of the water over rocks in the creek and the occasional hoot of a barn owl.

"This trail is new," she said. "It took a lot of community effort and funds to get it built," she said, changing the direction of the conversation. "Do you see that mill over there?" She stopped and pointed to the old mill—a dark hulk at the end of the trail near where the river widened in a slow, lazy turn. "I've always thought that it would be so cool if someone developed the mill—not tear it down and start over but take the history and rebuild the mill, keeping parts of the story and parts of the building or equipment—you know, like incorporate some of the equipment into a bakery or..." She took a quick sip of her coffee, trying to organize her thoughts.

"It could become a hub of the community, connecting the downtown core with the park and then the mill development. I can totally see it—outdoor gooseneck lights along the path to the mill. There could be a boutique hotel there, and a restaurant or a few food trucks, and inside there could be some shops, selling local produce or artisan cheeses from one of the local farms, and wines and local smoked meats and fruit. Tourists could have a picnic by the river and concerts in the summer."

“You describe it so well, I feel like I am looking at it instead of an abandoned ruin,” Zhang said softly as they approached the sprawling dilapidated mill.

“I thought a farmer’s market could be there in the winter,” she said. “We have one in the park in the spring and summer, but in winter it’s too cold.”

She nearly tripped over a log. His hand caught hers. His grip was strong. It felt so right, and Riley wanted to cling. She wanted to burrow into his warmth and stay there.

*You’re lonely because of Christmas coming.*

But Riley was afraid it was the man.

“Oops. That’s my second trip tonight.” She tried to laugh it off. Ugh. She sounded so obvious.

She forced herself to let go of his hand. She’d always had a thing for hands, and Zhang’s were beautiful—large but refined, his fingers tapered, perfect buffed nails with a half-moon. And his much darker skin was a beautiful contrast to her milky-white, glow-in-the-dark complexion.

“Not sure why I’m so clumsy tonight,” she said, wishing she’d shut up but not wanting him to think she’d been making an amateur girly ploy to touch him. She would not be *that* woman. “I tend to get carried away by town history and, well, wanting to make it better.”

“What’s wrong with it now?”

“Nothing, but I feel like the town council is too enthralled to the mayor and to the one really wealthy, large land-owning family around here. They want to keep the town the same, not try to make a few changes that will boost our tourist profile. The family, who buys up a lot of foreclosed properties and hangs onto them, has a lot of support because some locals are afraid their property values will rise too steeply.”

“How is that bad?”

Riley rolled her eyes. “I know, right? But the taxes can be a problem for those on a limited income. And I don’t want a developer to buy the mill or surrounding land and mow it all

down. I just think that, with some care and judicious choices, we can distinguish our town from the other towns in the valley that are mostly agro-based and not get swallowed up by Medford. Like this park, for instance.” Riley warmed up to her theme. “It has a covered bridge. So cool, right? It’s on the National Register of Historic Places. This year, we’ll finally have a small Christmas market in the park. A few merchants set up in the market, and then we have a covered outdoor area to accommodate more vendors, and there’s music, food carts.” She paused dramatically.

He waited. “That sounds like typical small-town holiday activities.”

“Exactly!” Riley fist-bumped him, startling him briefly out of his stoic expression. “It will be wonderful, but only one weekend. With the Christmas Light Garden, families could walk along a path and see a few different scenes of Christmas or wildlife in lights. The light garden would draw people into Bear Creek to eat or shop. It would be an experience, create memories and traditions, and I could change it up each year. Entrepreneurs or service groups could get involved and sell hot cocoa and cookies. Musicians could busk or choirs could sing. It could involve different groups of people and appeal to the town, differentiate us but also be a tourist draw.”

“You have a passion for your town.”

Riley ducked her head and sipped her coffee. She did. The only one in her family. Her brothers and cousins had all wanted a bigger stage on which to live their lives.

“I never had that.”

“A hometown?”

“No. My mom is driven. She is an interim CEO. She specializes in turning companies in crisis around or leading them through the sell off. She’s tough. Fearless. Brilliant. Works all over the world.”

“Oh, so growing up you’ve lived all over the world, and now you want to make a home,” she guessed, feeling for his plight. “Only it’s difficult to settle in and feel a sense of



belonging, because you're straddling two such different worlds."

"You took a psych class at that community college where you teach?" he demanded.

Riley took a step back at the vehemence in his voice.

"I'm sorry." He lightly gripped her upper arms. "I'm sorry. That came out wrong. I do that a lot." He turned away, ran his hand through his thick hair.

She'd struck a nerve, but she hadn't meant to. And he'd struck back, but he hadn't meant to.

"I was prying," she said, trying not to enjoy his touch so much.

Their gazes clashed—his narrowed and glittering obsidian and hers probably searching for answers, as always.

"That's your job," he said softly, his gaze holding hers until Riley felt lit on fire, like she had to crawl out of her skin.

"I'm an electrician."

"You are so much more than that," he breathed, and when his gaze drifted lower to her mouth, Riley's tummy flipped to her throat.

Was he going to kiss her?

Riley didn't dare breathe or blink. She didn't want to miss anything.

She stepped forward, but he released her and stepped back. Riley nearly groaned.

"My wine story." He shoved his gloved hands into the pockets of his coat, turned around, and started walking back toward River Street.

"C'mon," she urged, catching up to him. "I overshared, and this will be practice for spilling your guts for the winery website."

"There will be no gut spilling."

“Not even a little slash and drop of blood between friends?”

He didn't answer. Riley didn't have the urge to try again; she was too caught up in the beauty of his face and mystery of his soul. What made him tick? What did he think about late at night before he fell asleep? What did he long for and fear he'd never get?

Did he know the answers to those questions?

“What's your weekend like?”

Was he asking her out? Excitement and terror duked it out in her brain.

“Ummmmm.”

“I have to fly to my headquarters Monday, so if you want to talk about the wine website, I have some time this weekend, or we can keep it all on email,” he said. “You just seem more like a hands-on, in-person person.”

Duh. The website. Not a date.

“Very hands-on,” she said. “I have a job tomorrow morning. I could come after that if you want, around noon. I can bring sandwiches from The Running Fox bakery.”

“I'll be at the winery. I'll make sandwiches.”

Riley nodded, both pleased and disappointed. It wouldn't give her much time to research different winery sites, but sleep was overrated.

“Where's the finish line of the race?” Riley teased as his long-legged stride ate up the trail back to town.

“It's late. You promised your friend you'd help her tonight,” he reminded.

Ugh. She was so obvious. He knew she wanted to spend more time with him.

*Stick to what you know.*

Lighting up the world one bulb at a time.

As a motto, it wasn't all bad.



“MOONLIT NIGHT, SKY full of stars, chilly, and a long walk—what could be more romantic?” Sophia teased as Riley mopped the floor of Lost and Found Objects.

“We discussed his website,” Riley said, keeping her back toward her friend and scrubbing the battered walnut floor with more enthusiasm than necessary.

“Is that what the kids call it?” Sophia laughed as she folded a few sweaters after checking her inventory list. “You were gone more than thirty minutes, and knowing you, you dragged him down the river path and exhorted the virtues of purchasing the old mill and turning it into a shopping, entertainment district to revitalize and define our town.”

“Am I that predictable?” Riley demanded, whirling around, face flaming.

Sophia’s dark, expressive brows answered that question. “What encouraged me is how you looked at him all night.”

“All night,” Riley scoffed, her heart thudding to her boots. “I helped him sell wine for a few hours, and I sold a lot of other things.” She retrieved the iPad and brought it to the antique desk where Sophia kept her records. She tucked the iPad into its charger and locked up the desk.

“You like him,” Sophia stated as if it were the most obvious fact in the world. “What’s wrong with admitting it? We tell each other everything.”

But Sophia had had far more everythings to share than Riley ever had.

“I texted you the minute Enrique walked away after we bumped into each other the first time we met.”

“You were here the day I met Zhang.”

“Exactly.” Sophia’s eyes glittered with amusement.

“Nothing to see here,” Riley mumbled. “We done?”

“Yes,” Sophia said, her voice warm. “Thank you, Riley, for all your help.”

She'd escaped Sophia's scrutiny.

"When are you going to see Zhang again?" Sophia asked innocently, as they each pulled off their Santa hats. Sophia put hers in a drawer.

"Tomorrow." Riley tried to keep any emotion out of her voice. "For work. I'm going to help him with his website."

"You've got mad skills," Sophia said as she locked up the store and slipped her arm through Riley's. "I love my website and get lots of compliments on how interactive it is, and you made it so easy to navigate, but isn't Zhang like some tech guru genius?"

"Yes," Riley admitted. "I was trying to be friendly by offering. Zhang doesn't seem to see himself as a vintner at all, and I thought I could help him tell his story."

"Really?" Sophia stopped in front of her Jeep. "His story?"

"Yeah," Riley said looking down at her toes. "I mean, his winery story, obviously."

"And is he going to help you write yours?"

"What?" Riley looked up. "I got my story out there."

"Right. Like your website with your lighting designs."

"I've been busy with my dad and uncle taking off on their big vacation of a lifetime with my aunt and stepmom."

It still felt so strange to use that word. Riley was happy her father had found someone he wanted to share his life with, but she couldn't help feeling that first her mom had been replaced and now she had in her dad's life—which was exactly how she'd tried *not* to feel when Sophia and Enrique had become the happiest and most loved-up couple she'd known.

"I talked to them tonight. They all seem so happy." Riley had to force bounce in her voice.

"That's good," Sophia touched her hand, her face sympathetic, seeing through Riley's façade. "What about Zhang? If you like him, let him know. Flirt. Have fun. Let him know you want more than a work relationship."

“How?” Riley demanded. “There’s no way, no way at all he’d be interested in me like that.”

“Why not?” Sophia’s eyes narrowed.

“He’s just not.”

Sophia pulled her into a hard hug. “Girl, I love you. I love you so much, but you don’t see yourself as you really are. You are smart and fun and kind and ambitious and beautiful, but you always go into the best friend, one-of-the-guys mode when you meet a man.”

“No, I don’t. I date.”

“In a group, like when we were teens. You need to put out some signs,” Sophia said, tilting her head. It felt like Sophia was sizing her up for some transformative makeover where she wouldn’t recognize herself.

Is that what she needed? A complete overhaul? That was dispiriting.

“Sometimes dress to show off your figure.”

“I don’t have one.”

“Of course you do. You have a lovely, athletic figure. Total hard body and tall and strong. There are a lot of men who salivate over you, but you don’t give them the vibe that they have a chance. You can be intimidating. Maybe try a different, more form-fitting feminine blouse or...”

“He saw me in that blue dress you forced me to wear to your party and nothing happened.”

“Is that when you were wearing your work boots, hard hat, and tool belt, and he was in the dark?”

Riley laughed and Sophia joined in. Then she hugged Riley again. “Okay, I’ll let it go—this time.” Sophia unlocked her Jeep and climbed in. “But I still think if he dazzles you, you should go for it. What do you have to lose?”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

**W**HAT DID SHE have to lose?

Riley remembered Sophia's teasing words last night as she drove out to Zhang's winery Saturday afternoon. She didn't, for once, turn on the radio. Instead, she breathed deeply as exhaustion and hunger pulled at her. She'd been up late researching local winery websites, which had been more of a rabbit hole than she'd anticipated. Because she wasn't sure what tone Zhang was going for, she'd started getting anxious that she might screw up his brand by assuming something.

Unable to sleep, she'd started tinkering in the garage, working on another light to sell at the Christmas market next weekend. Even though Sophia kept encouraging her to have her own booth and rent the tiny shop next to hers, Riley wasn't ready for that commitment. She felt torn between the job she loved and the hobby that thrilled and challenged her. Being an electrician was in her blood, but Riley was starting to feel like maybe she could be so much more. Would selling only an occasional light at Sophia's make her feel like she was stalling out?

Should she seriously think about the small storefront next to Sophia?

*What if nothing sells?*

She shoved down the doubt, but doubt didn't want to shut up. What did she have to offer Zhang that he couldn't get from another electrician, especially one who dabbled in light and web design?

No. She needed to rock her confidence like Sophia said. She was more than her job.

She'd made Zhang laugh. Once. Almost.

"It's a start," she said, flying down the back roads, her heart already soaring. Even though it was cold and the sky was pregnant with snow, she rolled down the window and stuck one arm out, fingers wide, wanting to embrace the freedom

she always felt in the rolling, heavily treed landscape. Anticipation fired her nerves as she turned onto the gravel road to Zhang's.

“What do I have to lose?” Riley shouted, hair flying as she turned onto Zhang's now familiar unmarked road and downshifted and headed up the first hill toward Fire Ridge.

*A layer of confidence. A piece of pride. Her heart.*

Always a warning voice—she wasn't a brazen, twenty-something woman anymore shoving her shoulders up against the world to make space for herself. She had bruises, a bit of caution. But wasn't that what Sophia had been trying to tell her? If she stopped trying, then what? She'd have nothing. And nothing was cold and lonely. Sophia felt that with Enrique's death, she'd lost the love of her life, but she'd still opened her store as planned. She was still deep in her grieving, but she was living—celebrating her birthday, making plans with friends, organizing her traditional pre-Christmas tamale making party. And one day, she'd be ready to date again, to search for love.

Riley needed to stop hiding in her work. Put herself out there. She didn't even have a loss as an excuse, just a long line of men who'd friend zoned her before she'd realized that maybe she wanted more.

She pulled up to the winery and turned off her truck.

*What do I have to lose?*

Nothing. Zhang was a client. He could stay in the client zone. Or she could put her heart on the line and maybe gain his friendship. Or more.

A ghost of a smile touched her lips.

Riley pocketed the keys and twisted the door handle and screamed.

Zhang stood right by the door, hunched a little, peering in. Snow swirled around him.

Heat flushed through her. No duh! Anyone who lived on gravel roads could hear a car or truck coming long before it

arrived.

“Hi.” She slid out of her truck, dredging up a smile even though she could feel her face flame. “Just taking a moment to get in the right headspace.”

She laughed. It sounded reasonable, and it was totally true, although now that she was here, getting in the right headspace was going to prove next to impossible if she didn’t figure out quickly what space that was.

Zhang looked amazing in a chocolate-brown cashmere sweater and tan Carhartts. He wore a thick, plaid flannel shirt open, sleeves rolled up.

*What is your deal, Flanagan, auditioning for the Education Foundation’s annual fashion show announcer?*

Get it together.

She reached in the back of her cab and grabbed her laptop case.

“You look tired,” he said.

“That’s a lovely hello. And just what every woman wants to hear.”

“I have coffee ready.”

“Better. Lead with that next time.” Riley resummoned her spirit—she hated when that snarky demon was late—and strode into the winery.

“Oh.” She stopped at the door. The pendant vine light she’d made was lit and hung down invitingly over the bar, which had two places for lunch set. It looked like something out of a Martha Stewart photo shoot. The china was a pretty blue and white pattern. The napkins were pressed and rolled into a blue ceramic napkin ring that matched the plates. On the wine bar there was a bowl filled with leafy greens and another with cut fruit.

On a rolling butcher block work island sat a plugged-in coffeemaker still percolating and a panini maker with a variety of ungrilled sandwiches on a plate. Her mouth watered and stomach rumbled embarrassingly loud.



“Definitely lead with this next time instead of ‘you look tired.’”

“I noticed you liked to eat.”

“Smooth talker,” Riley murmured, thinking how many women she knew would wince to hear that observation. Did he ever date? Or was brutal honesty trending and she’d missed the meme?

He ran a hand through his hair, an unusual sign of agitation for him. With some men, they would have done it to preen—look at me, my hair is thick and full of body—or maybe they’d want the object of their desire to notice the broad, hard planes of their developed chest and bicep flex with such a flirty maneuver.

Not Zhang.

He had stillness down to an art, so any sudden movements seemed like impulses he couldn’t rein in quickly enough.

Maybe he really was shy?

It seemed absurd looking at him from the outside—his aristocratic handsomeness, height, hard body, brain, accomplishments. But no one could read minds or hearts or know what experiences shaped anyone until they shared.

“This is great.” Riley dug deep to stay in the present and stop worrying. “Thank you so much. It was late when I got home, and I was so caught up surfing winery websites to get a feel for what’s needed, I never ate, and then I couldn’t sleep, so I worked on a new light and finally fell asleep just a few hours before I needed to get up for work, I didn’t want to be late, so no breakfast.”

TMI. As usual. And she added more.

“And I had two jobs this morning, one of them an emergency involving a naughty parrot, who thankfully is okay.” She closed her mouth so she’d stop talking, but she didn’t. “So I’ve been running off of nerves and coffee if it isn’t completely obvious.”

“Should I brew decaf?”

“Never. No. That’s sacrilege.”

“That bad?”

Riley nodded and felt her shoulders relax a little.

“Terrible,” she teased.

“Full strength it is.”

“And keep it coming.”

His lips tilted up, and Riley took that as a sign that today was going to be a good day.



ZHANG LEANED BACK and watched Riley wash the plates and water glasses in the industrial sink—she’d insisted.

Lunch had been surprisingly easy. She’d talked about growing up in the town and how so many kids left to go to college but ended up coming back to raise their families. They’d start businesses or work in Medford, which, with a population of eighty thousand, had enough jobs for many to build their American dreams.

She was so warm and chatty. He thought she would overwhelm him, but he didn’t have a headache or feel a need to retreat into his office or go on a long run. She made being social easy—not demanding that he carry a full conversational load or being disappointed when he didn’t.

Riley sighed happily as she dried the plates.

“This was better than a restaurant,” she said. “I will never look at grilled cheese sandwiches the same. The four cheeses you chose blended together like an orchestra—a tang, a savory, a hint of sweet, and then a bite of spice.” She put her fingers to her lips and made a kissing sound and an explosion movement with her fingers.

Had Brin ever complimented him like this, so totally engaged?

He didn’t care. Brin was the past. And while Riley wasn’t his future, he felt like she’d banished the ghost of Brin that he

hadn't even known had needed to be exorcised. He had barely thought of her recently—what she would think, what she would say, what she would want. And over the past couple of years as he juggled the vineyard and work, memories of his mom—her demands, criticisms, snapped suggestions as to what he should be doing with his life—had stopped taunting him at unexpected moments.

He'd finally found some peace, and maybe one day soon he'd be able to take one of her phone calls without dread swirling in his stomach.

“Shall we get to work?” Riley asked, rubbing her palms together like she was trying to spark a fire.

Work. Right. The website. Why she was here. Not just for lunch.

Somehow, he'd forgotten, and the lunch had begun to feel more like a date.

A date.

He hadn't dated since...she who shall not be named.

He smiled. Brin would hate being in the same category as Voldemort.

Riley had been talking about winery sites she'd bookmarked. She abruptly stopped talking, and after a beat, Zhang tuned in.

She had her laptop out, but she was staring at him, smiling.

“What?”

“You have such a beautiful smile,” she breathed. “Sorry. It was just unexpected. I've rarely seen you smile. It's like the sun peeking out of a rain cloud on a spring day. I've wanted to make you smile since the first morning we met.”

The image surprised him. He was confident no one had compared him to the sun ever—a rain cloud, definitely.

“When you held my truck hostage?”

She nodded.

“Why?”

“Why hostage?” She grinned as if deliberately misunderstanding. “I wanted to meet you—well, not you, but I saw the logo of your winery, and I’ve wanted to branch into more commercial work when my father and uncle stepped back this fall, and I thought if I could get a gig with your winery, I could build on that.”

“Mission accomplished.”

She hummed the theme from *Mission Impossible* and then returned to the table, booting up her computer that was a new, top model. Good. She didn’t skimp on the crucial basics.

“Why did you want to make me smile?” he pushed as she typed in her password.

He shouldn’t ask. He shouldn’t, but...even he couldn’t explain the impulse that had kicked the words out of his mouth.

She looked over at him, and she was closer than he’d thought she’d be, leaning forward on his barstool as if she were going to confide a secret and there was someone around to overhear, and since he owned nearly six-hundred acres, there was no one but the two of them.

“I...” She paused, clearly searching for the right words. He had no idea what those were, but he wanted them, the real ones. “I...like people, enjoy interacting with them, sharing a conversation and a laugh, and you looked so...so alone.”

He reared back.

“I am alone,” he stated the obvious, “by choice.” It was the truth, but he sounded defensive.

Her green eyes searched his. No, they were more hazel. The color that was like Proteus, constantly changing shades in different light sources.

“I felt...” she said, and then stopped.

“What?” He watched, fascinated, as she swallowed.

She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue.

“Want more sparkling water or coffee before we discuss your site?” she asked as if she were the hostess. She slid off the barstool.

He caught her wrist. He didn't mean to. He just did. Her skin was soft, warm, and her wrist delicate despite her height and the physical nature of her job. He could feel her pulse tap.

“What did you feel?”

She looked down at his fingers loosely shackling her wrist. Was he scaring her? He didn't intend to, and he imagined she didn't scare easily. With her strong jaw, determined stride, and glint in her eyes, Riley seemed like a woman who ate challenges before breakfast. She didn't pull away, but he saw the pulse kick up just below her sharp jawline.

“I felt that the aloneness wasn't by choice,” she whispered.

He heard his heart thump, the blood rush to the count of five seconds, then ten. He heard her quiet breath in. Out. Again.

“Coffee. Thanks.”



RILEY HAD PLENTY to work with. Zhang was as organized as she would have pegged him to be. She, too, was organized and had notes and facts, and, by the time she'd finished her fourth cup of coffee for the day, she'd scrolled through some of the photos and drone footage he'd sent her.

What was still a mystery was Zhang and the brand he wanted to create.

“Surely, your tech company has a brand,” she pressed, looking at him over her computer screen, where he worked on a project of his own. Yes, as expected, he'd sent her information and then gotten busy—very busy—on something else.

“Zhang?”

He looked up, and Riley felt like he pulled all the air out of the space between them.

“I can put this all together at home,” she said, “and send you different drafts, but I thought if I came here, we could talk and I could understand more about your feelings about the winery. Why you started one in the first place. What your hopes and dreams are for it. Why you chose this site and what you think is so special about it.”

He didn't blink.

Nor did his expression change.

But she could *feel* his brain working from across the massive tasting room bar.

It was as daunting as it was exciting.

“You wish to leave?”

*No!*

The hard no of her response startled her. It should also concern her if she had an ounce of self-preservation, which apparently, she did not.

“I want to understand,” she said softly.

“Me?”

The walls went up higher than they had before.

Oh, for a chisel and a sledgehammer. She'd bet a lot of women over the years had gazed longingly at him over a conference room table or a restaurant table, seeking to understand what made him tick and to put a dent in his shiny armor.

She was not going to get in that line.

No point.

“The wine,” she said quietly when her heart finally descended out of her throat enough so that she felt she could speak without squeaking. He should be fined for the reactions he caused to her body. Not. Fair. And she had to get a grip. Now rather than later.

“But I suspect that understanding the wine would give wine lovers some insight into you.”

Something that might have been impatience or resistance crossed his face.

“And that’s a good thing. People who love wine also love the story of it—the site, what makes it special. How the wine is made. How the weather that year impacted the vintage.”

“For not being a wine drinker, you know a lot about wine.”

“I grew up in the valley. Wine was always part of the culture. And my friends love wine, which means I’ve been to a lot of celebrations and concerts, even a Shakespeare in the vineyard each year. A lot of social events take place at some of the biggest vineyards. Hey,” she popped up, “are you planning to do something special with your event space? You could host wine releases, weddings, concerts, corporate parties.”

“In my barn?”

“I’m not sure if it’s a barn without animals,” she teased, unable to imagine him with anything fuzzy, messy, or needy. She had yet to see a dog on the property.

“I have thought about miniature sheep.” That shocked her. “They would keep the undergrowth down in the spring and summer, which is critical to water management. Sheep can be trained to not eat the grapes with a bit of pepper spray on the prunings.”

“Sheep would be a draw for tourists, too, coming up from the Bay Area or down from Portland or Seattle,” Riley added.

“I am not here full-time to take care of the sheep. There are a lot of predators, especially in the higher elevations.”

“You’d need a dog, a border collie, Australian shepard or a Great Pyrenees. There are always ads for farm dogs at the feed store.”

“I don’t live here full-time. A dog needs a human. I still have a company with projects in the Bay Area.”

“You could have a caretaker.”

“I come here to be alone. To think. To breathe. To have quiet.”

“Fire Ridge is your sanctuary.”

He huffed out a breath like she'd poked him and stood at the same time. “Let's take a walk. I think better when I walk.”

He looked down at her footwear. Riley stuck her long legs out and twirled her Redhawk work-booted feet. “Don't leave home without them,” she grinned.

Zhang dragged his jacket from the back of his chair and strode out—her invitation to follow Riley surmised.

He was a little rough around the edges, but that didn't bother her. She'd met a wide variety of people in her years in the valley, from locals who had rarely traveled outside the area to rich, high-tech entrepreneurs who wanted a retreat and everyone in between. Riley shrugged into her coat and tucked her phone in her pocket, the voice memo app cued because she was going to get him to talk.

“We walking to the different blocks?” she called out.

She already knew how many acres he owned—580—how much he had planted—fifteen—and how much was plantable—250 or more.

It boggled her mind to think of that much wine. He'd need his own crew designated to his vineyard, a vineyard manager, a cellar manager, a tasting room manager, a sales manager. And if he really wanted a retreat where he could have quiet and think, a manager to coordinate all of that while Zhang sat somewhere on the property alone in his home.

Did he even have a house on the property?

She had a hard time envisioning him in the hundred-year-old simple farmhouse Leah and her mother had grown up in. Zhang seemed more like he'd rock a sleek, austere glass and steel aesthetic with monochromatic white interiors. Maybe a shout-out to his rural site with a reclaimed beam somewhere.

She blinked away the vision and strode after him, easily catching up. Growing up, being tall had embarrassed her a little, but once she'd started working in her teens, her height had given her an advantage. Harder for men to dismiss her



when she could look them in the eye and even harder when they had to look up at her.

“Are you prepared for what you’ve gotten yourself into?” she asked. Riley had always heard the joke, “How do you make a small fortune in the wine business? Start off with a big one.” Zhang oozed money—Riley had heard stories about young high-tech geniuses making a killing when they sold their start-ups—but if Zhang didn’t get control of his vineyard, it was going to control him.

He continued to walk up the hill away from the winery and the tasting room. Riley kept pace. There were a few inches of snow on the ground, and a huge storm was predicted Sunday. Riley loved storms. They were wild and free. And often provided an unexpected boon in business, although it was rude to root for someone else’s misfortune.

She pulled the gloves out of her pocket. Zhang stopped at the top of the hill and looked out. He wasn’t even breathing hard, but then, neither was she.

*Thank you, Sophia.*

Although they usually didn’t run in December—too cold and too busy.

Zhang faced the sloping hill where three large blocks of vineyards marched down toward the south, but Riley looked up, to the higher elevation blocks, already with a light snowpack, and then up above those where a more forested area started.

Zhang could practically have a tree farm here.

*What are you trying to do, chain him to the property?*

“I bought the property,” Zhang began, and Riley pulled out her phone and pushed record, “because I wanted something for myself that was just mine. A place to be. A place of peace and quiet where I could think and be physical, attached to something that was real and bigger than myself and would outlast me.”

Riley nodded as a sharp wind whistled down from Mount Ashland.

“Did you grow up on a farm?” she asked, remembering that he had mentioned his grandfather.

Still, she couldn't imagine it.

“Briefly,” he said.

He began walking again up toward one of the blocks. Riley followed, phone held out and hoping the wind wasn't too loud to muffle the recording. “The Riesling grapes I use for ice wine are up here. I'm experimenting with different grapes and clones. More of a scientific experiment and challenge than commercially viable, but this year I do have an ice wine again and two late harvest wines,” he said. “After a few years of epic fails.”

She had a hard time believing that.

“Did your family make wine?”

His mouth twisted, and he shook his head as if trying to dislodge something unpleasant.

“No. Not even close. My grandfather raised me for some time,” he said. “He lived and worked in a city but had a plot of land he would go to every weekend and devote himself to it. He was more into creating a garden, a place of peace is how it would translate from Mandarin. He would lose himself in the land and plants. He was never finished. It was the process that brought him the purpose.”

“It's the journey that brings the joy,” Riley said, not really meaning him to hear.

But of course he did. He turned and looked at her sharply and stopped walking.

“Do you believe that?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “I have goals and dreams, but I don't feel like I'll be done if I achieve them. I'll be happy, but I will just start something else. I like to strive and learn new things. Try new things. And if I fail,” she shrugged, her eyes never leaving his face because his stare was that magnetic, and there was no view in the valley, even here on her favorite piece of land offering up her sweeping favorite view, that was more

compelling or beautiful than him, “then I’ve learned something and can try again from a different approach. Hopefully, I don’t do it the same way and choke all over again.”

She laughed.

“I am not amused by failure,” he said, but it didn’t sound like a criticism, more a statement.

“But failure, too, is part of the process.”

“I don’t want to fail with this.” He swept his arm out, his melodic, low voice harsh for a moment, and then he started walking again with determination. “Although I’ve had failures. That’s where the learning is. But I cannot be so sanguine about the possibility. Failure can destroy lives, crush livelihoods. The land deserves better.”

And that right there was probably why Leah had sold to Zhang instead of the Bane Land Holdings.

“Zhang, that’s being a little melodramatic and putting way too much pressure on yourself.”

Were they going to walk to the top of his land? She thought her job kept her fit. Maybe she should have studied viticulture.

“When I started, I was just thinking of the challenge as an academic exercise. What would be required to reshape part of the land into a vineyard? Which trellis system is more effective in this climate and soil? What grape grafts would flourish? How do I best protect the soil? And if someone said I couldn’t grow a certain varietal, then why not? Could I intervene with science to prove nature or the experts wrong?”

Zhang continued to chew up the ground between row after row of vines, with Riley at his heels.

“I always have to push and push.”

He didn’t even seem to be talking to her. “What changed?” she asked, trying to understand what was bothering him.

“You.”

Riley's heart was pounding from the steep altitude climb, and her blood surged. "Me?" She'd been trying so hard to watch her runaway tongue, yet she'd still upset him.

He stopped at the end of a block. The land rose steeply behind him and into the tree line.

"You asked me why."

Riley struggled to swallow—if only she could blame the sprint masquerading as a walk. He looked so stiff, his expression tight.

"Why?" she whispered, her hand on his arm.

"I wanted more than I deserve," he said, bitterly. "I have a thriving company. I don't want to let it go, and yet I felt called to have land. Peace. Grow something as a way to connect with my grandfather."

Riley held her breath, waiting for more. But Zhang was silent, his head bowed as if in prayer.

"Is he...have you...?" Ugh, how to phrase this. "Has he passed?"

"No," he said. "He lives with my mother." His voice rippled with ice. "In her flat in London currently."

"Oh." Was that good? Bad? Riley wasn't sure how to react. "You mentioned...ah..." What had he said last night? She'd been so keyed up—disappointed to walk in the dark park instead of seeing it lit up, but yet thrilled that she was walking with Zhang.

"Roots." He squatted down and ran his hand over the slim vine. "I chose grapes because the long roots dig deep, searching for water and minerals, and thrive in adversity."

Riley wondered if he was talking about himself as much as the roots.

"Roots are what make up most of me," Riley admitted, squatting beside him and running her finger up the dormant vine. "I feel defined by my town and the valley and the family business, but my three brothers never wanted any part of it."

My cousins either. They wanted to move away and make their own marks, but I always wanted to stay. Always.”

Zhang regarded her closely, and she realized how close they were to each other. The fog of their breath mingled. What would it be like to be kissed by him? Or could she be brave enough and kiss him first?

His hand reached out toward her, but he dropped it by his side and stood.

“I envy you,” he said. “I’ve planted roots, but I don’t know how to thrive. I can’t stay. I have one foot here, the other with my company in Cupertino. When I’m here, I’m pulled there, and when I’m there...” His shrug was sexy, but it had a defeated edge.

“You are thinking about your land. Your vines.”

“I wanted to do everything myself. Prove to my grandfather that I was worthy.”

Riley felt like he scraped her heart with his words. What was it like to not have the approval of those who should love you the most? Her family had always had her back. She’d always felt supported and loved. If she had a problem, any of them would drop everything and help.

“Zhang,” she said, feeling helpless and for the first time in a long time, at a loss for words.

Zhang huffed a laugh. “Arrogant, I know. There are not enough hours in a day, plus I cannot abandon my employees.”

“Take it day by day,” she urged, feeling the futility of her attraction wash over her and tumble down the steep slope. He would always live at least half of his life more than three hundred miles away.

She might as well run down the hill, jump up, and flap her way back to her truck. “And when you get your website up and your staff in place at Fire Ridge, perhaps you will be able to more comfortably divide your attention between both of your enterprises.”

Gah! She sounded briskly practical, like her aunt. She wanted to slap herself. She was practically encouraging him to break her heart.

“Let’s head back,” Riley said, torn between wanting to stay up here alone with him and all the natural beauty and wanting to get back to reality as soon as possible. “I would have worn my coat if I’d known we were going to play mountain goat.”

They walked back quickly, Riley alternating between praising herself for being practical and letting go of the dream that they could be more than friends and cursing herself for giving up too easily.

So much for Sophia’s pep talk.

“Thanks for listening,” Zhang said stiffly when they were back in the tasting room. Riley rebooted her computer while he made coffee.

“Anytime,” she said, meaning it.

He leaned back against the wine bar, all long, lean, broody, and restless energy she found far too appealing.

“You said you wanted tasting notes.”

“For the website, yes.” Her heart rate kicked up when he straightened and all but stalked toward her.

“So let’s taste.”

“Me? I’m not a wine expert. I wouldn’t know how to describe your wines.”

“So you say,” he mused, hands on his hips, the power of his attention fully on her so that Riley felt like she was trying to make a prison break and he’d shone the spotlight on her trying to scale a ten-foot wall. She was pinned in place. “But you could act as a novice consumer.”

“Ahhhhh.”

“Riley.” He placed his hands on either side of her. “You told me you liked to learn new things.”

“I do.”

“You can taste my unironic ice wine, the late harvest Riesling, and a few others and tell me what you think.”

“Unironic?”

“My friends in college used to call me Ice. It stuck since quite a few of them are now my employees and colleagues.”

His voice held no expression.

“You need new friends,” she informed him.

“I’ll work on that.”

Riley’s competitive nature rose up, and before she could question her sanity, she dared him. “If I’m trying something new, then you are too.”

One thick, dark brow rose in challenge. “What do you have in mind?”

“I’ll let you know after the wine tasting.” She smiled. “So you don’t decide to poison me and stash my body in the woods when you hear my challenge.”

“A challenge, is it?”

“Definitely.”

His eyes glimmered although he still had his deceptively cool and lazy pose. “You, Riley Flanagan, are on.”

## CHAPTER NINE

“**R**EADY?” RILEY ASKED, fingers poised on her computer.

“You make it sound like a performance.” Zhang paused, hand on the bottle of one of his wines.

Riley liked the long, slender shape of the bottle. It was elegant, and the way he cradled the body was sexy.

“It is, isn’t it?” She dragged her mind out of the gutter. “In tasting rooms, the tasting staff has a script. It’s a show. Entertainment.”

“You want me to entertain you.”

“Not a problem.” Riley just put it out there.

He paused as he deftly twisted in the corkscrew. She was in some trouble deep with this man, but she was more excited than terrified—definite bonus.

Riley pushed record on her phone as he poured a taste into her glass.

“This is a Riesling from the Spirit block.”

“How did you come up with the name for that block?”

Now it was Zhang’s turn to look a little embarrassed. “I don’t remember.”

“Calling you on that.” Riley wagged her finger at him. “You need a better story. I was thinking you’d named your blocks after characters in your first game—you know, a nostalgia hit.”

“I keep my winery separate from my work,” he said abruptly closing any door of exploration.

“Tell me what I should be tasting with the Riesling,” she prompted.

“You tell me what you taste.”

A challenge. She could do that. Badly but still. Riley picked up the glass—it was a different shape than the usual



glasses she'd seen on wine tasting excursions. Smaller. Daintier. Riley was worried she'd snap off the stem.

She swirled it and sniffed.

"That's right," Zhang said softly, his voice warm with approval.

Yikes. If he worked his own tasting room, the wine bar would be three hips deep in women pushing their glasses forward, ears tuned eagerly to his words that would be as precious as the gold liquid he poured into their glasses.

*Aren't you the romantic?*

"What do you scent?"

*Gosh, he's making it sound like we are animals circling each other.*

Riley bit her lip, trying not to laugh at the image, and dutifully sniffed at the wine.

"You need to go deeper."

Why did everything he said sound so sexual? Pressing her legs together on the stool, she swirled her glass aggressively and sniffed deeply.

"Fruit."

The look he gave her nearly made her bust out laughing.

"Are you just pretending this is difficult and painful because you have a very unpleasant challenge planned for me?"

"No, but that is a good idea."

"Can't wait. Stop stalling. Take your shot."

Riley swirled again and sniffed. "Vanilla," she said, "and honey and then some citrus."

"Lovely. Sip."

Riley put her lips to the glass. Was this the moment she took the final step into adulthood? Left her youth and the habits and preferences of her family packed up neatly in her childhood bedroom and lived life completely on her terms?

She tentatively sipped at the wine, desperately wanting to like it so she could say something clever or funny.

The wine in her mouth hit her like a golden taste bomb, more encompassing than she'd ever had in her life. Everything in her mouth danced.

“Wow!”

She drained the glass, her mouth on fire for more.

“It’s sweeter than Coke. Can I have another?” she asked, plunking her glass on the table and pushing it forward.

“If this were a real tasting, I’d be watching you carefully right now,” he said drily.

“Watch away.” Riley inched her glass even closer to his hand holding the bottle. “No one said it was like this.”

One perfect, thick, winged brow arched.

“Why has everyone been holding out on me?” she demanded. “Wine doesn’t taste like this. It’s dry and bitter and makes my mouth feel all cottony.”

“That’s the tannins. You’ve probably only tasted big reds when they’re young—the Cabs, Zins, Malbecs, Temps, and Syrahs.”

She glared. “And Chardonnay.” She stuck out her tongue like she was gagging. “Who knew there was more? And here I’ve been living in this valley my whole life and this...this liquid treasure of apricot and lemon and ginger sweet goodness was just sitting up here, and I didn’t know. This is what I imagine the nectar of the gods tastes like, and if so, why were they so crabby and vindictive and greedy, not sharing with me?”

“The god stories were merely a construct for human emotions and foibles to attempt to make sense of their own conflicting lives.”

“No sense of magic”—Riley shook her head, looking sadly at her still empty glass—“and yet you create this.” She paused. “No. I’m wrong. You are the magic,” she said, her brain kicking into gear along with her mouth.

She had never played any of his computer games, but anyone who could come up with storylines to engage millions over the years had more than their fair share of creativity. What else was he hiding in his locked-up brain and locked-down expression?

“Please, Zhang,” she said, her finger tapping on her glass. “You totally took me by surprise—I mean, the late harvest Riesling did. I wasn’t expecting it to taste so delicious. I’ll sip this time.”

The smile that lit his face and crinkled his eyes and created creases in his cheek made her catch her breath as her tummy did a slow roll. Who knew he had that pleased expression hiding in his arsenal? Wine was not the only thing Riley had been missing out on.

“Riley.” He leaned forward, bringing his face into close focus. His skin was so beautiful. Not a line or pore or blemish in sight.

“Zhang.”

“Two points.”

She held up one finger. He tapped it with his. “You have an excellent palate.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“And two?”

“You can have another taste of the wine. You can have a glass. All you have to do is ask.”

“Please, Zhang. I would like another taste to sip and savor.”



“REMINDE ME WHY I let you talk me into this?” Zhang asked, his voice not even a bit irritated as he lay under a twelve-foot felled fir.

“I offered to help.” Riley loomed over him, peering down, her expression anxious. She looked like a glowing angel floating above him, her hazel eyes a green now to rival the needles on branches that were poking him in places he’d rather not feel at the moment.

“But you had to be all manly.”

The cold snow was beginning to permeate the wicking material of his long-sleeved shirt, zip-front Spyder sweater, and fleece-lined puffer vest.

“I am a man,” he noted, a little offended that she’d thought he was posturing. “I have no other way to act, and I had the better physical position.”

“Clearly not. Can you move?”

Probably. But did he want to? He wasn’t hurt except his dignity. Although even that was only a bit bruised, as Riley didn’t berate him about all his failings and what he’d done wrong. And the view was interesting—all the green branches spread out over him, slivers of a cerulean-blue sky, and Riley, her pale, worried face, spatter of freckles in stark relief. She wasn’t laughing at him. She wasn’t railing at his stupidity. She was worried, and by the adorable crease between her brows, she was figuring out a solution.

He could probably wiggle a groove in the snow and roll out, and he would as soon as he caught his breath that had been shoved from his body abruptly by the trunk of the fir.

Riley disappeared, and he heard some clinking sounds. “Okay.” She was back. “Close your eyes.”

“And miss the view?”

“What view?” She looked behind her. “Sky? Are you sure you’re not hurt, or are you making snow angels down there without me?”

“Something like.” He smiled but got a mouthful of needles.

“I’m going to pull the tree off of you,” Riley said, “so close your eyes. They’re very beautiful, and I don’t want to

hurt you.”

His eyes? They were dark brown. Well, black. Then the first part of her sentence hit. “Lift it off of me? Is this your substitute gym workout for the day?” She could hurt herself.

“Something like that,” she said, and he glimpsed her brilliant smile before he heard another clink, and then the snowmobile engine kick on. Within seconds he was free and could breathe.

Zhang gulped in a breath, popped to his feet, and resisted touching his sternum. He felt more battered than he’d realized. Riley revved the engine of his snowmobile, and then looked back at him, grinning like it was Christmas Day and she’d gotten her biggest wish.

“Any chance you feel a little woozy and I could play superheroine and drive us back?” She revved the engine again.

No. Way. That was his brand-new Arctic Cat.

But she looked so happy and playful. And totally expecting him to say no. Most men would.

She hopped off and quickly resecured the net around the tree.

“Sure,” he said, feeling stupid that the tree had not only fallen out of the rigging he’d set up but also on top of him. At least it hadn’t fallen on Riley.

The shock on her face was comical, and he felt a little better. Look at him, being unexpected. Probably a first, he thought a bit grimly. It had never mattered to him before about being so predictable. He’d reveled in it. Felt safe. Superior. He didn’t want to think about why now he wanted to switch it up.

“Really?” Riley demanded, searching his face.

What did she see there? He’d spent a lifetime trying to not let his feelings loose so they could be used against him.

He quickly examined the way she’d wrapped the tree and attached it to the snowmobile. Efficient. Tight. And she’d done it quickly. Admiration rose but not surprise. He had a feeling Riley could take care of herself and fix any problem.

Even him?

He pushed the unwelcome thought away. He was done being told he needed to be fixed. He was fine alone.

“Show me your worst,” he said, settling himself on the back of the seat.

She looked at him over her shoulder and winked. Winked! Who winked?

“How about my best?” She smiled. “Hang on tight, Zhang.”

Riley revved the engine. “You sure about this?”

He had his hands holding on to the bar in the back. He shifted and wrapped them around her slim waist. Her braided hair spilled from beneath her knit cap and tickled his nose.

“Let it rip,” he said.

Riley shoved the throttle, and they were flying across the hill, wind and her hair in his face, and he could hear Riley shouting “Whoo-hoo! This is awesomesauce with ice cream and caramel!”

He laughed. He’d always loved speed and the freedom of riding fast in the open air. What would she think of his Vyrus 987 C3 4V? That was a sweet ride. Before today, he would have said the best. Who would have thought a snowmobile sweeping across his land, taking the long way home would have given his exclusive bike a run for the money in wow factor?



LATE AFTERNOON SUNDAY, as the sun had started to dip over the coastal range, Zhang backed into Riley’s driveway and opened the gate of his truck. He’d hauled a lot of things in his truck, but he’d never expected to see a Christmas tree.

“You look like you’ve got an alien back there or a load of manure, which maybe with a vineyard you aren’t that unfamiliar with hauling around.” Riley emerged from her front

door carrying, of all things, a plate of cookies. The sweet smell of flour, butter, sugar, and chocolate wafted toward him.

“Those are my choices, alien or manure?” he asked, boggled that her mind had come up with those two things to potentially explain his confusion.

“The image popped in my mind. I just went with it. Try one. New recipe. Chocolate macaroon.” Riley smiled winningly, and he took one even though he didn’t normally like chocolate.

He held it in his hand. The large cookie looked a little rough around the edges, like a melted lunar rock.

“You bake?”

Riley rolled her eyes. “Why is that astonishing?”

“I pictured you wielding other tools. Some of them flaming. You told me you know how to weld. I pictured flames and sparks flying.”

She laughed. “Your description is more accurate of my usual pastimes, but since you’ve made me lunch a couple of times and baked muffins, I thought I should dip my toe into the hostess pool.”

She watched him, her eyes shining like she was daring him to take a bite of the still-warm cookie. “This is pretty decent for me,” she said. “I like the idea of baking, but I get distracted—start too many things. Today I stayed in the kitchen so I wouldn’t burn the cookies to carbon. Enjoy this rare accomplishment.”

Zhang looked back at the tree. “Again something new to both of us—domestic bliss of cookie baking for you and decorating a Christmas tree for me.”

“The gauntlet dropped.” Riley lightly stroked the back of his hand, and even though he wore a work glove, her touch did something weird to his heart. “You’re sure you’re okay with this?” she asked softly. “I thought it would be a fun new activity for you to try. I learned something about wine and had a tasting experience with a pro, and you can experience

decorating a Christmas tree, something you said you'd never done, for an auction."

"With a pro."

"You mock." Riley raised her eyebrows. "But I do know how to rock the Christmas spirit. We just need a theme."

"Christmas."

"Clever. You don't need to eat that," she said. "I made several kinds. I thought I could take them down to Rose House later this morning. It's a day shelter for women, and they serve lunch. I'm sure some people would appreciate my attempts at domesticity."

Was he offending her? He couldn't tell. Normally, he didn't care. But with Riley, he found himself missing her smile—the half one that perpetually hovered at the corners of her lips and then the full-on smile that lit her eyes and scrunched her cheeks.

He bit into the cookie and chewed.

"Grand Marnier?" he asked, surprised.

"Got it in one." Riley did a little dance.

He let the flavors explode in his mouth—the rich chocolate that was dark but not as sweet as he was thinking and then the liqueur.

"It's good. Not pretty, but good."

"There's a compliment hiding in there," Riley said wryly.

"I've heard it's a commonly held belief by men that women adore chocolate and make all sorts of orgasmic noises while consuming it."

"Meaning the women at the shelter will love my cookies?"

"High probability."

"I shall continue my culinary quest then." Riley used the code to open her garage. "Thank you for dropping off the tree. I could have come to pick it up."



He knew that, but he hadn't wanted her to wrestle the large tree alone, even though she had already had to do so yesterday when they'd cut it down and he'd miscalculated. He still couldn't believe he'd made such an error. He'd been enjoying the way Riley's hair caught the light and contrasted against the green of the tree and how much she sparkled, and then the next thing he knew he was under the tree looking up at her very worried face.

"I wanted the drive. It helps me think."

Riley nodded. She went to her garage and pulled out some gloves from a labeled drawer. "Me too." She pulled on the gloves. "I love to crank the radio and drive the back roads and drink in my fill of views."

"You seem like such an extrovert. I imagined you'd always want people around. I can picture you living in a city."

"Unlikely," Riley said. "I am very social. but I also love my alone time, especially in my workshop, although that is a misnomer. I outgrew the garage years ago. I might have to suck it up and rent something much bigger and give my Pippy her space back."

"Pippy?" he queried.

"My truck."

Of course she would name her truck. He looked around her shop. The floor was clean. It was well lit, not with tubes of fluorescent bulbs but with one of Riley's lights. She had built-in shelves with matching labeled tubs on one side and a large tool area and then a built-in cabinet with shelves and drawers. A massive peg board on the backwall held wire structures wrapped in small lights held up by various hooks. Some were small and some large, and he recognized a few shapes: butterflies, an owl, a hawk. He wondered what they were and what they'd look like lit up. Was this what she'd been talking about while they'd walked by the river?

"I like the order," he approved.

Riley laughed. "You're the only one. All my friends think I'm OCD about my work area, but it's my life. I need to know

what I have and where I have it.” She sobered. “Zhang, are you really okay with decorating a Christmas tree? You mentioned you didn’t celebrate Christmas. I don’t want to step on any cultural or religious toes,” she said hesitatingly.

“You’re not,” he said shortly. “Totally amputated.”

“Ummmmm, not sure what to do with that.” She squinted at him.

Damn. She was really getting to him. He normally only spoke this freely around Jackson.

“It’s just that with the wine tasting and the challenge we threw down, I thought this would be a fun first thing for you to do—decorate a tree and then donate it to the Christmas tree auction. The money raised goes to provide Christmas presents, necessities, and meals to needy families in the area.”

She played with the needles of the tree and then sucked in a breath.

“And I thought it would be a way to see you again.”

“You wanted to see me again?”

“Well, yes, of course.” Her gaze was steady.

“Why?”

“Why?” she repeated.

“You said you felt sorry for me.”

“I never said that.”

“Implied.”

She was clearly thinking back—probably hard, as she had so many conversations and comments to sort through.

“Because I said you looked alone?” Her voice was warm and the flush on her creamy cheeks looked more like embarrassment than anger. “I always speak my mind. Sometimes too much,” she admitted, as if that were something to apologize for. “I’m alone too,” she said. “Especially this Christmas with my family scattered or traveling, and I like hanging out with you, Zhang.”

He didn't believe her. No. That wasn't true. He didn't understand her. And he could practically hear the whir of his brain trying to calculate what she really meant. Read between the lines as Brin always insisted he do, when it would be so much easier if everyone just said what they meant. Honesty. Clarity.

He turned to grab the tree. It was still wrapped in the netting Riley had tied around it. She had the tree stand ready. He set it in the stand and held it while she tightened the screws. She stood, and he slowly released his grip. The tree was steady.

"Wednesday," he said curtly, peeling off his gloves and heading back to his truck.

"Zhang, wait." She caught his hand. "Are you upset?"

He did feel out of sorts and wanted escape, but he couldn't explain why. Riley unsettled him as much as she drew him.

"Busy. I'm flying out to my office tomorrow at dawn."

"Do you want a ride to the airport?"

He blinked at her. He'd said dawn, and she'd offered a ride.

"No, thank you."

"You're really okay with decorating a Christmas tree for the auction?" Her eyes were worried.

She still held his hand. This time without gloves. She'd never had the chance to put them on because he'd jabbed the tree in the stand like it was a flag he was planting after conquering a hill.

Her fingers were long and slim. Elegant. Soft. Even though she used her hands for so much. He flipped his hand around so that they were palm to palm. It was the first time he'd touched her with intention. There, just the two of them in the one-bay garage of her Craftsman-style bungalow, holding her hand felt more intimate than so many things he'd done with Brin and other women over the years.

He hadn't celebrated Christmas because his grandfather practiced Buddhism. And his mom didn't believe in such luxuries as celebrating anything. But how to explain his life to a woman like Riley who'd come from a big and close family? It was strange. He felt closer to her than most people whom he'd known longer, and still, even in the same space, they might as well be hundreds of miles away.

“Wednesday evening,” was all he reiterated.

## CHAPTER TEN

“Sooooo,” SOPHIA DRAWLED out Monday night as Riley stopped to see if she wanted to go to dinner. She had nothing fresh or edible in her fridge or pantry, and she was in no mood to shop.

“So what?” Riley watched Sophia move elegantly around her store, sure of herself and her place in the world.

“Have you heard from the Easter Island god?”

“I didn’t really call him that, did I?”

“You did. I call him Mr. Right.”

“He’s Mr. All Wrong.”

“How so?” Sophia arched one brow. Dang, Riley had always wanted to do that. Zhang could do it too. It was an art Sophia had mastered in sixth grade, and it had kept bullies and mean girls firmly in their own orbit. “You like him.”

“He’s a client.”

Sophia huffed out a breath. “I have to put a few things away, so come in. You’re letting all the cold air in.”

“I’m starved.”

“Oh no. You’re not getting off that easily.” Sophia shook a finger at her.

Riley began straightening tables—hopefully, her willingness to help out would divert Sophia’s scrutiny.

No such luck.

“Have you gone on a date yet? A real date?”

Should she count searching for a tree together? Racing flat out across the fields of his land, his arms wrapped around her waist, his chin on her shoulder. It had been one of the finest, most fun moments of her life and the best part? After Zhang had let her drive his souped-up snowmobile, he’d high-fived her at the end—his beautiful eyes sparkling in pleasure or

amusement or something that had made her tummy flip and heart pound. But that wasn't exactly a date.

"He's a client," Riley reiterated, reminding herself more than Sophia. "But if I were to ask him out on a date, what do you think it should be?"

"Make a thermos full of hot cocoa and drive around and look at lights."

Riley snorted. "Is that code for something?"

"Is it? That's what we do every Christmas. Stalk the homes with the good lights so you can take notes."

"It is good that my bestie's cousin is a cop." Riley laughed. "But I do love Christmas lights. The colors, the festiveness. I think about the solstice—the nature significance but also the pagan history, and the lights just seem so hopeful—lighting up the darkness so weary travelers can find their way home." Riley's voice broke.

Sophia stopped folding sweaters and looked at Riley.

"It really bothers you that your family chose to start their extended vacation in December instead of waiting until January, doesn't it, sweetie?"

Riley bit her lip. Sophia made her sound immature and selfish. She was feeling that way. "No," she blew out a breath and leaned against the table with the sweater display, one sweater dangling from her hands. "Yes. I don't want it to. I don't. I want my dad and stepmom to have this trip. I do. They were so excited, and then when my aunt and uncle decided to join them, it seemed perfect."

*For them.*

Riley hated that she was whiny. She was nearly thirty-one. No more Santa down the chimney. "They called me to check in. Twice now, but..."

"But." Sophia patted Riley's shoulder and tugged her ponytail lightly. "There's always a but, isn't there?" Her dark eyes were kind.

“I thought I’d have Christmas at my house. It’s tiny, but I was looking up all these different recipes, and I have the outdoor covered patio and firepit that my brothers helped me build last summer. I thought I’d host my brothers and cousins. You know, like a kids’ Christmas although we’re all adults, and then when I called them, every one of them had already made other plans. I mean, some of them are working but...”

“There’s that pesky *but* again,” Sophia said, pretending not to see that Riley’s burning eyes had welled and a few tears trickled down her cheek, which she swiped at with her thumbs.

“It’s stupid to feel abandoned,” Riley admitted, her voice choked. But none of them, not a one, had checked with her first after the older generation had giddily announced their plans at a late-summer family dinner to christen Riley’s new patio and grill her father and uncle had bought her.

“Feelings are never stupid,” Sophia whispered, pulling her in for a quick, tight hug. That made the tears come faster and made Riley want to cling. “They just are, and you need to let yourself experience them.”

And Sophia, being Sophia, dropped a light kiss on the top of her head like she was the mother and then disappeared in the back and returned with new soy candles in a variety of fragrances that were hand-made in glass-blown bowls by an Ashland artist. Riley used the reprieve to gather her composure.

“I’m supposed to be comforting you,” Riley noted, happy her tears had stopped, and her voice sounded somewhat close to normal, “and yet I feel like you are holding me up so much more.”

“You are supporting me.” Sophia arranged the candles. “You have always supported me. Always, through everything—finding Enrique, losing him, planning out the store, opening it, running it. You are always here for me, Riley, and I am here for you.”

She was going to start bawling, and that just was not okay. Desperate for a distraction, she reached for a tub that held square, black boxes and opened one. Inside lay handmade clay

dragons that had curled tails so they could perch on a purchaser's finger. They had glass eyes and silk bows for wings.

"These are beautiful," Riley breathed.

"Yes, they are. The dragons have expressions. Sometimes I feel like they can speak. And definitely when I am here alone, I feel like they are watching me, encouraging me to let their brethren free."

"That's not spooky at all."

Sophia laughed. "I saw them when I was on a buying trip in Portland, and the dragon reminded me of Enrique—you know, as dragons breathe fire—and I was thinking of *Game of Thrones*. He loved that show. There was a chick with the dragons who protected her and fought with her. I wanted to buy one for myself and ended up ordering twenty-five. I'm thinking of selling them in my booth at the Christmas market. My mom made silk pillow beds for them to curl up on, so when I box them up for customers, the dragons will have their own bed with a tassel, see?" Sophia opened a tote that held the pillows her mom had made.

Riley played with the silk tassel. "Cute. Your mom is so talented and sweet to help out."

"As are you."

Riley had made a stick tree as a display item for Sophia's store and wrapped it with white tape and tiny LED lights. She hadn't known what Sophia wanted to do with it, but she'd made it.

Sophia retrieved the tree from the back. "Let's see how they look."

Riley hung one dragon on the tree and then another.

"It will look perfect in the booth," Riley said. "Where is the Enrique dragon?"

"On his pillow at home on my bed," Sophia said quietly.

"You must think of him every day," Riley said.



“Yes.”

Simple and direct. So Sophia.

“Many times a day.”

“Do you ever wish you’d turned left instead of right so you would never have met him and then lost him and hurt so much?”

Sophia was quiet, arranging soap. Riley unwrapped another dragon from the tissues and perched it on the tree. This one was purple and looked especially regal.

“Never,” Sophia said, and Riley stopped what she was doing.

“I’m sorry. I’m not cheering you up.”

“I don’t need to be cheered,” Sophia said. “I miss Enrique more some days now than I did right after he died. I think it’s finally sinking in that he’s gone forever physically, but he’ll always be in my heart”—she touched her chest—“and my memories. I had him for more than a year. He was mine, and he loved me, and we had this whole future planned, and even though we didn’t get to live it, I still had him in my life. We got to live part of our dream together. Not everyone gets that.”

Tears pricked Riley’s eyes. She’d never come close to having the love Sophia had. And some days she wasn’t sure if she wanted to. Sophia was so brave and strong.

“I loved,” Sophia said, “and I was loved. And my grief is my way of honoring his memory, but my continuing on is also my way of honoring him. He loved me. He wouldn’t want me to suffer endlessly or to always be alone.”

Riley pulled out another dragon. It was black with a black silk bow edged with a hint of silver and the large glass eyes were obsidian and reflected the shop lights. The dragon was larger than many of the others. Regal. More than a little haughty.

Sophia laughed. “See, the dragons have a touch of magic, and they’ve spoken. I think Zhang will have a new Christmas ornament or perhaps a computer buddy.”

“I can’t get him a Christmas gift. He doesn’t celebrate Christmas.”

“Maybe he’ll celebrate his first Christmas with you.”

That was crazy. Cheeky as...as...she couldn’t even think of a simile.

“We’re not dating.”

“Yet.”

Riley stroked her finger down the dragon’s bumpy spine. She was going to buy the dragon and probably scare Zhang to death. Or maybe she would keep it, a gift to herself. A memory of what she might have had if she’d been lucky or brave or....

“Riley.” Sophia stood in front of her smelling like chocolate, peppermint, pine, and gardenias. “Give yourself more credit. Not everyone sees you as one of the guys.”

“I know,” she said defensively.

“You need to know in here.” Sophia tapped Riley’s chest. “I’m sorry your brothers and cousins are being single dudes and not thinking about you, but that’s on them. Not on you. You and I are going to have fun with my family unless you get a better offer. And you are the only one who can make things happen for yourself.”

Riley met Sophia’s blazing gaze and felt it like a blowtorch to her fear. Could she? Would she? Riley held her fist high like a superhero about to fly, the dragon wrapped around her thumb. “Dragon magic.”

“Don’t mock it or you will get burned. Now, let’s get something to eat.”



RILEY AND JAKE and her assistant for the day finished their work early. Usually they would drive together to a job to save on gas, but today the job had been at Zhang’s even though he was still in California. She’d been surprised and pleased to hear from him, although it had been a totally professional call

—nothing about decorating the Christmas tree for the auction being held at the Christmas market.

Romance was definitely not in the air.

*So much for what Sophia thinks.*

Still, Riley had jumped at the chance.

The farmhouse still stood—new green metal roof, repaired porch, new windows and fresh lick of gleaming white paint. But as she'd suspected, Zhang had built a different house for himself a hundred yards or so farther up the hill closer to the trees.

Riley hadn't been hired to work in Zhang's house, so she tried to not glance too often in that direction and wonder what it was like. Austere. Monochromatic at a guess. But he wasn't paying for her to guess. He was updating the electrical in the farmhouse and a greenhouse that was being built. He'd started but wanted her to check his work and finish it off. The work was straightforward. Like anything Zhang did, Riley imagined, he did it well. She and her assistant had found no surprises or anything they needed to tear out and redo.

“He might be fixing to put us out of business, boss,” Jake had said.

“I hope not. I'd be in some trouble, but I think with the winery and whatever he's got going with his tech company, he's pretty busy.”

“I saw him in town at Davies Lumber last week. He said hello. Recognized me. Asked about you.”

“Oh.” Riley was surprised. She'd pictured Zhang as introverted and keeping to himself. She tried to kick away the pleasure she felt that he'd asked about her. This was not freshman year of high school.

“Lot of clients don't give a shout-out, you know? We're the job, not individuals to them, especially the rich ones. They don't really look at us while we're working in their homes so they don't recognize us out and about in the community.”

Riley had heard this complaint. She didn't like it.

“But he was different,” Jake said as he finished checking the voltage of each outlet.

Zhang was different. He was extraordinary.

And now as Riley made one last sweep of the farmhouse to make sure it was clean and ready for the floor refinisher team, she was trying to not think about how unusual and appealing Zhang was.

The farmhouse looked good. She did a final walk-through of the greenhouse she and Jake had wired after the builders had finished it yesterday. Perfect. Hopefully, the upgrades meant that Zhang’s grandfather had agreed to come if not to live, at least for an extended visit. She didn’t like to think of Zhang alone up here, although if he did open a tasting room, he wouldn’t be nearly as isolated as before.

Riley stood on the porch of the house and looked over at the fairly large garage/shop. She wasn’t sure what Zhang was going to use it for, but he’d wanted it rewired. They’d done that, including replacing the large industrial-sized pendant lights with refurbished ones she’d had from another job that were copper and reworked so a more energy efficient bulb could cast a warm orange glow rather than a harsh bright one. She was still itching to replace the lighting in the winery.

She waved as Jake started his truck and swung in a wide circle to pull up to the porch before heading down the gravel road.

“You’re not going to stay too long, are you, boss? Storm’s about to hit. Coming up fast.”

“I’m out in fifteen,” she said. “Zhang...Mr. Shi said I could look through some of the ‘junk,’” she made air quotes, “in the garage to see if I want any of it.”

“Treasure hunt. You want help?”

Jake was a good guy, but he chatted a lot. So did she. It was perfect on a job. He was smart and a lot of fun, and she’d started training him when he was still in high school, but when she was in her “artistic brain” as Sophia and her stepmom

insisting on calling it, she needed quiet so she could hear herself think.

“I’ll only be a little while.” She cast an experienced gaze at the black clouds that had boiled over the costal range earlier and were crawling, heavy with snow, straight toward the valley before moving into Eastern Oregon and beyond.

Another storm was backed up behind it, waiting to unleash a combination of high velocity winds and more snow.

“Looks like a white Christmas market,” she shouted out cheerfully as the first icy breeze hit her.

“Seriously, Riley, let’s get your junk—I mean, treasures—and go. I can help.”

He stopped his truck. She laughed and waved. “Fifteen minutes.”

“That means thirty.” He narrowed his eyes.

“Yes, Mom, it does.”

“Not Dad?”

“My mom wielded the axe and hammer and everything else in our house. Me and my brothers and Dad just did what she said.”

“That explains it.” Jake looked at her, hard. “Seriously. This storm is going to be fast moving and brutal, and then there’s a small window before the next one hits.”

“I’ll text when I get out of here.”

His hard gaze softened, and Riley smiled. Jake was so sweet. He’d just turned twenty-one. He still lived with his single mom and two younger sisters who were in high school, and helped his mom out with the bills and everything else that needed doing around the house. A real good kid, and he was worried about her.

“Promise,” she added.

“Okay then. Get a move on.”

Riley waved and hustled to the shop. She loved the fury Mother Nature could dish out to remind them all who was boss.

“Wow, treasure trove,” Riley whispered as she found an old toolbox filled with well-used, rusted—some broken—tools and a bucketful of old farming implements. Her mind sang with opportunities. Zhang had said she could take anything. She’d already loaded her truck bed with seven more old vines he’d pulled out and placed on a burn pile. She took a picture of the toolbox and the bucket of rusted farm implements.

Zhang seemed so much of a minimalist aesthetically that she would have thought he would have had all this hauled away before he took possession of the property. The fact that there were still finds, years later, was an unexpected bonus. She saw a collection of wire baskets. Those could be fun. She could string them together in a graduated style, and then add a few targeted lights. It could serve as a kitchen or garden decoration light or even as storage.

She took a picture, frowning. She’d been here fifteen minutes, and she’d barely started looking. She didn’t want to get stranded on Zhang’s property for the afternoon. The storm was supposed to dump snow for a few hours and then move on; the bigger storm was supposed to hit sometime around midnight.

Riley hefted the toolbox—even the wood on it was worn down and gorgeous—and the stacked wire baskets. She’d come back for the bucket of farm implements, maybe take one more peek, and then drive home. She loaded her truck and then ran back to the shop just as the first icy needles of the howling snow began to pelt.

The storm sounded furious as it battered the metal roof and sides of the shop. Dang it. She’d pushed her luck. Nothing new there. But Riley had been driving the country roads of the Rogue Valley for well over a decade. She was accustomed to fierce storms. Pippy was classic, but she was a heavy beast and well-maintained. Her truck would handle anything.

She gathered up the bucket of farm implements and spotted an old bicycle, upended against the wall.

“Yes, please,” she said. But that meant one more trip. So be it.

“What are you still doing here?” a dark voice demanded, and Riley, for the first time she could remember since her father and brothers had turned their garage into a neighborhood haunted house when she was six, shrieked.



ZHANG JUMPED, LOOKING around for the danger before he realized that he was it. He'd startled Riley.

“Whoa. Sorry for deafening you. That should probably knock ten percent off my bill.”

His heart still pounded. And by the way her pupils were dilated, her face glowing luminous and white in the light, her pulse frantic in her neck, she hadn't yet recovered from the fright. But she could joke. And not berate him for sneaking up on her, which he hadn't intended. He'd always walked quietly—he learned early not to disturb his mother, ever. Still, he didn't imagine most women would see it that way.

And the total girl-in-a-slasher-movie scream was somehow endearing, although his ears were still ringing.

“I thought you weren't coming back until tomorrow.”

“Wanted to beat the storm.”

She nodded. “We finished the farmhouse job, wired the greenhouse, installed the grow lights, and redid the lighting in here, as you can see”—she swooshed her arm wide—“and added two new fuses and four more outlets.”

“You were supposed to beat the storm home,” he said.

“Oops.” She nibbled on her lower lip. “You've got treasures in here, and I got greedy. Sophia wanted some lights for her booth at the Christmas market this coming weekend, but I haven't had much time or enough materials to work on

anything, and the bike and the tools just kicked up my creative spirit.”

“I’ll help you load these into your truck.”

“Okay, I’ll grab the bike if you don’t mind. I took pictures of everything I’m taking.”

“Take anything in here,” he said dismissively. Then he looked up. “Except my new lights. Love those.”

“Me too!” She lit up like the Christmas tree she’d somehow convinced him to create with her tomorrow—the reason he’d flown home early.

Jackson had been totally bewildered—why did he have to beat a storm? There was nothing at his home. No one waiting. Not even a cat or a fish needing to be fed. Zhang hadn’t told him about the Christmas tree decorating. Jackson would have read way too much into that. In college, he’d invited Zhang home to his parents’ house during holiday breaks, and even now invited him to Christmas dinner, but Zhang preferred to be alone. He didn’t have to guard himself. Pretend to fit in. He wasn’t comfortable. Besides, during the holiday seasons, work let up, employees went home and vacationed, and he could get a lot of thinking and work done.

Christmas had always been his most productive time.

Riley hefted the dirty, rusted bike that probably had decades of dust and who knew how many spiders, and grinned at him.

“This is going to be so cool.”

“Pretty sure you’re the only one who’s thinks that.”

“You just wait, Zhang Shi. I bet you’ll be in a bidding war for this Christmas tree bike.”

She was going to turn the bike into a tree. He looked at the rusted, battered, not old enough to be antique bike critically. But it was Riley. At this point, he was pretty sure she could do anything she wanted.

“Are we betting about betting?”



She cocked her head. “I think so.”

“What’s at stake?” He liked the way she thought. Unexpected. And he liked her honesty. She spoke her mind, and her myriad expressions broadcast her feelings as quickly as she seemed to feel them.

She had no hidden agenda.

They made the short dash to her truck. She tied the bike down and the bucket of tools. Then she jumped out of the truck’s bed and hit the snow, her boots making a deep tread mark that kept her from slipping on the mixture of snow and ice.

Her jacket was already in the truck, hung up on the hook. Even though it was not yet three in the afternoon, it was nearly dark. The wind clawed against their clothing and faces. The trees near his house tossed their branches about like middle school girls tossing their hair and rolling their eyes.

His stomach lurched uncomfortably—both with worry about the thought of her trying to drive nearly half an hour back to her house and with the alternative.

“Follow me.” The wind snatched the words from his mouth.

“What?”

“Follow me!” He pointed to the garage up by his house.

Riley looked at him and then the gravel road that had already disappeared. She looked up at the sky.

He took her elbow and bent toward her. Despite working all day, she smelled fresh like strawberries and coconut. Her soft hair tickled his mouth.

“Sit out the storm at the house.”

“But?” Her eyes clouded with worry.

They were both drenched, but he wore a top-of-the-line coat. And she didn’t. “Please.”

“You don’t mind?”

“I insist.”

Riley jumped into her truck and followed him up to the house. He opened the bay of his garage for his truck and for hers. A four-car garage had seemed like overkill at the time, but he'd wanted to build for the future. And he already had a tractor in one oversize bay along with a snowmobile and a Gator in another.

He turned off his truck and sat for a moment. Why did he feel like he needed to gather strength and enforce his defenses just because Riley was coming into his house?

Jackson was right. He did need to make an effort and socialize more. He'd had it on his list to start practicing, but he'd never fully wanted to until this afternoon.

*Well, here goes something.* Zhang hit the remote, and both doors rolled shut, closing him in with Riley.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“**Y**OU’RE SURE YOU don’t mind, Zhang?” Riley asked for the second or third or fourth time as she settled in front of his gas fire, legs stretched out in his soft sweats, socks, and T-shirt. Whatever his clothing brands, they were sky-high luxurious, and she loved the muted colors, but this would be the one and only time she had a chance to feel this blend of materials against her skin. She didn’t have the bank to spend money on much that wasn’t practical. She had a business to build and employees to pay.

“Better than you bruised and bloody in a ditch.”

“There’s a compliment not many women get to hear on a Tuesday afternoon.”

“I am not suited for compliments,” he said stiffly. “But I didn’t want you to risk injury on the way home.”

“Thank you. That’s better,” she said softly, wondering again if she should tease him. It was tempting. She wanted to create comradery between them, but she didn’t want to push too far if he was intent on remaining her client and she his contracted employee.

Riley liked to imagine that her mother, who had always seemed like the center of the family, the laughter, the light, and the negotiator, would have kind and helpful advice for her. Because she’d died when Riley was so young, Riley had been thrust into solving her own problems and making her own way fairly early on.

“Thank you.”

“You’ve said that.”

She was nervous. She swallowed and smiled. She’d warmed up after her hot shower in the most beautifully gleaming white glass tiled guest shower, and Zhang had left her something of his to wear while he’d put her clothes in his dryer. Now he’d made a creamy latte before he started baking what looked to be muffins.

*Pretty much the perfect man.*

Luckily, she kept that thought to herself. No need to scare him since he was going to be stuck with her for a few hours.

“I keep thinking of that Bob Dylan song about shelter from the storm. I’m just hoping that this one is as fast moving as the meteorologists say so that there is a break before the bigger storm’s arrival.” She didn’t imagine his hospitality would happily extend to having an overnight guest. She already felt like she was pushing both of their comfort zones. She was independent. Not used to relying on anyone, and she definitely never wanted to be a burden.

“Looking at the Doppler, this one hit a little early, but the other is stalled out slightly and slowing down. Good for you getting home in the break after I plow the higher elevation part of the road down to the main road, but bad for us later because the storm is gathering more energy over the ocean.”

She nodded. “Can I help?”

“I thought you don’t like to cook.”

Riley huffed. “I’m not really skilled at it,” she said, cautiously, hating to admit she was lacking in a fundamental. “I can, but it’s no fun to cook for one.”

He nodded and cracked the eggs one-handed into the mix he’d concocted from scratch. He added a few more spices—she wasn’t even sure what they were—before he began whisking them.

“You get used to it.”

Such a simple statement, but so much behind it—at least for Riley, because, yes, one could get used to almost anything but still not find the joy in it. But maybe she was reading too much into Zhang’s words. Maybe it was just Christmas that made her feel lonely. It was dumb. She had a lot to look forward to. Friends and plans. She didn’t want to re-examine her mini-meltdown at Sophia’s shop.

After a moment of hesitation, she left the fire even though he’d suggested that she sit there and walked toward his spacious kitchen. It was how she’d imagined it. A lot of white.

Some grays. But there were splashes of color on the walls—a few large landscape paintings in brilliant oranges and yellows and featuring old barns or old cars. They were beautiful. He also had several olive-shaped pillows tucked onto his couch and an oversize chair. She wasn't sure if it was Zhang's character or an expensive designer's touch.

“What's with the olive pillows?” she asked picking one up and moving it to the other side of the low, white, nubby couch.

“Martinis.” He continued to whisk, his focus absolute.

Maybe she could cook if she paid attention like that. She usually had several things going on at once when she cooked—mopping the floor, laundry, emptying the dishwasher, working on a light, or updating her accounting program.

“Huh?”

“Jackson and I, when we sold our first company and made some serious bank, celebrated with martinis. We went to a famous martini bar in San Francisco and overindulged and got on a martini kick for six months or so. It would be our Friday cocktail hour, only it was usually around midnight before we'd call it a day, so we'd take turns coming up with new martini names and ingredients. Jackson bartended his way through school, so he had experience, but I hate to lose.”

Riley noted the ghost of a smile on Zhang's face. It pleased her that he had a business partner who was a friend as well as a coworker. She'd worried he was too alone.

“So Jackson bought you olive pillows?”

Zhang looked up at her. “He often grumbled about my color scheme. I bought the pillows for me to show him I could. And I bought a set for him.”

“That's so sweet,” she murmured.

“I've been called many things over the years. Never sweet.”

“Really.” Riley sat down on a wrought iron barstool—with, of course, white upholstery. “I would imagine a lot of women swoon over you,” Riley said honestly.

“Not a one.”

“Why?” She palmed her coffee and looked up at him.

He put down the bowl and counted out the paper muffin liners—white—into the muffin pan.

“That’s self-explanatory.”

“No, it’s not,” Riley said.

“I’m driven. Focused on my work. Jackson’s learned to put up with me. We have different roles in the company, so it works.”

“What an odd way to view yourself,” Riley mused, not really thinking he’d hear with his efficiently deft mixing of the muffin ingredients.

“But then I am odd.”

Riley opened her mouth to object. The pained smile looked like it hurt as much as his words.

“Zhang...”

“Odd is the nicest way to put it.”

“Not really.” Riley glared, hands on hips like she was back in elementary school facing down another bully.

“I’ve heard much worse. I’m smart. Ambitious. Arrogant. When I lived with my grandfather, I didn’t interact with other children or many other people. Growing up we moved so much I had no idea how to fit in and didn’t try. I didn’t go to a regular high school, so I didn’t get many chances to interact with my peers until college, and there I was two years younger than everyone. I was always in my head and turned my ideas into a lot of money. I didn’t bother trying to change.”

Riley could picture that, but the way he stated it, so dispassionately, made her insides squeeze and her heart feel like lead.

“It’s hard not to fit in even if you think you don’t want to,” she said.

Zhang didn't respond. He spooned some batter into each of the cups, shredded some Parmigiana cheese, flicked that in with his long, deft fingers and then spooned in more batter. He finished each of the muffins with what looked like purplish crystalized sugar.

"I attended Stanford when I was sixteen. It was one of my first experiences interacting with my so-called peers, and I was rather feral, Jackson claims, so, no. Women didn't think I was cute or sweet. And a triple major in computer science, physics, and computational mathematical sciences didn't give me time to care."

So he was really, really smart, and judging by the house and the fixtures and the appliances, really, really rich. That made him seem further away. Zhang living in the foothills of Mount Ashland and her living on the valley floor seemed like an apt metaphor for their relationship. Their non-relationship.

"Have you spoken to your grandfather about moving to the farmhouse?" She changed the subject to one she hoped was less fraught.

He inclined his head. "Not yet."

What was stopping him? A million questions burned—most she had no business asking as an electrician, but as his friend...did he see her as his friend? Could he, like Sophia said, possibly see her as more someday?

"Why?"

A muscle ticked in his jaw. Fascinating. Zhang so rarely showed emotion, Riley didn't know whether to rejoice or draw back.

"It's been on my list," he admitted. "But I have to discuss it with my...mother."

The way he said *mother* was like he was talking about some scary disease. How awful to not be close with his mom. To not be able to visit with his grandfather when he wished. Riley still missed her mom, though she'd died nearly twenty years ago. If her mom were still alive, Riley imagined she'd talk to her every day.

Zhang was silent, and for the first time, Riley just let the silence be. It was comfortable. She watched him work and wondered how they would decorate the Fire Ridge and the Flanagan & Sons's Christmas trees for the auction.

“My mom is city through and through. Beijing. London. Hong Kong. Paris. She's driven and demands control. I slipped my leash. We rarely speak. She doesn't trust that I will put my grandfather's needs above my own, and I know that she never puts another's needs first. Stalemate.”

“Have you spoken to him about his wishes?” Riley finally asked, her voice small, not sure if she should voice the question but knowing that she had to. Her feelings for Zhang were too big for her to pretend that what upset him didn't matter to her.

“He had a stroke a little over eight years ago. My mother blames me because he was visiting at the time. She says I overtaxed him.”

“That's not...”

“He lost the ability to speak.”

“Oh. Zhang, I'm so sorry.” Riley's hand covered her heart. She ached for him. Ached for his loss just like she still missed her mother.

“He's regained his physical mobility and has a full-time caretaker, but he lives in a steel and glass castle. If he were with me, he'd have more independence. A garden. A purpose. He has every luxury, but nothing he wants.”

“What about email or texting?” she asked.

“My mother is in charge of his correspondence.”

It sounded awful. Almost like abuse. And yet, maybe his mother was so concerned about her father that she wanted to micromanage his care. Feared him traveling.

“The farmhouse remodel came out great,” Riley said. It was in her nature to look at the positives. “Perhaps when your mother sees it and how committed you are to providing your grandfather with a good home even if it's just for a visit...”



Zhang's expression shuttered.

"While the muffins bake, why don't we look at the winery website?" he said flatly. "See what still needs to be done."

As a non sequitur, it was a winner. Riley felt like she had mental whiplash.

"So you're going to open the winery—officially."

"I thought about it this week. You're right. It's time."

"Me?" Riley nearly yelped. She hadn't told him he should open it, had she?

"You pushed, and I needed that. I felt uncomfortable thinking of the changes a winery would create, but the indecision bothered me more. I don't like to start something I won't finish."

That was a motto Riley could get behind. And the determination in his voice and the fire in his expression lit something deep inside her—a spark of something that compelled her forward.

"You should take your own advice then," Riley said, reaching for her computer and booting it up. "Call your mom. Tell her you're bringing your granddad for a visit because you've built him a house and a greenhouse and a garden. Invite her to come along."

She'd really done it now. She could feel the dip in the room's temperature and rise in tension. It was tangible. She squared her shoulders and faced Zhang, challenged him. It was what friends did. Even when it was hard.

"Put it on the top of your list you talk about."



"DISASTER. TOTAL, UNMITIGATED disaster!" Sophia burst into Riley's garage, where Riley had worked most of last night sanding and repairing the bike. She'd gotten on one coat of rustproof paint, and risen early this morning to apply the final coat of glossy red. She'd engineered a tripod stand to hold the bike vertical and had soldered on two of the old wire egg

baskets—one on the bike’s seat and the other on an outside handlebar.

With all of the wind and snow that had dumped, Riley had been happy to stay home this morning and work on constructing the Flanagan & Sons’s Christmas tree for the auction as well as construct a few small light fixtures and sconces to sell at Sophia’s booth at the Christmas Market this coming weekend. She’d been surprised she hadn’t received any emergency electrical calls yet.

With the heater on, the paint should be dry by tonight so she could add her lights. She’d already made the motor that would spin the wheels to create a kaleidoscope of light and color once she had the tires fixed.

“It’s not done yet,” Riley said. “But I think when it is, this cutie Christmas tree is going to fetch top dollar. Let city hall or Zhang even try to come close.”

“You’re not listening to me,” Sophia all but wailed. It was totally unSophia like.

“What’s wrong?” Riley rocked back on her heels and stood, closing the paint bottle as she did so.

Her smile faded as she looked at Sophia. Sophia’s usually long, beautiful hair that she twisted up in intricate braids or elegant twists was in a messy ponytail and full of twigs and fir needles. Her jeans were ripped and muddy, and she wore galoshes instead of her usual cowboy boots or stylish Fry or Ariat brand boots. Even her red cashmere scarf was wrapped around her neck haphazardly.

“What’s wrong?” Riley asked with mounting alarm.

“I can’t believe you haven’t heard. I can’t believe you weren’t there to try to help. This is an unmitigated disaster. The Christmas economy is ruined.”

That sounded melodramatic, and Sophia was not one for major drama. “What are you talking about?” Riley asked, pouring a mug of coffee, adding some creamer, and walking it over to her friend. “Start at the beginning.”

Sophia took a sip of coffee and then a deeper one. She shuddered.

“I didn’t realize how cold I was.”

Riley noticed that several of Sophia’s nails were broken and dirt was under the nail bed. She handed Sophia several wipes she kept handy since she worked in her garage so often and didn’t want to track dirt in her house—a lingering habit from when her mother ruled her roost, brandishing a mop and broom and bar of soap.

“Thanks. I thought Jeff Bane would have texted you.”

“Not unless under penalty of death,” Riley said wryly. “My name and Flanagan & Sons were conveniently left off the roster of downtown merchant members, and suddenly the rules changed so I wasn’t eligible to re-up until January. By the time I realized it, the hassle of the fight just seemed too petty, and the rule change irritated more than just me, so businesses in the downtown core are back in next year.”

She made jazz hands.

Sophia huffed out a breath. “You really should run for mayor.”

Riley laughed. “I keep threatening to with all my spare time. So why is Christmas a no-go this year?”

Sophia set the coffee aside. “I hope I’m overreacting, but I don’t think so. The storm last night uprooted a lot of the old trees.”

“Really?” Riley’s eyes went wide. “I hope Zhang’s house is okay. He built a really cool house up near the tree line, close to the old Tully farmhouse.”

Sophia opened her mouth and then closed it. Then she opened it again, and Riley realized she’d said too much.

“You were in his house.”

“Really, Sophia, you act like a homicide detective trying to pin a gruesome murder on me. I was at his house yesterday—working with Jake while Zhang was in his office in the Bay Area—and the storm came in a bit fast. I’d stopped to pilfer

some antiques from one of the storage garages he got with the sale and never bothered to clean out. He arrived home before the storm and let me stay until it started to wane, and I came home, alone,” she stressed the words, “before the other storm hit.”

She didn’t embellish with any of the details—the hot shower, the change of clothing, the heart-to-heart about his grandfather and then coffee and muffins and finishing up details on his website.

Sophia would jump into matchmaker mode while Riley was still trying to build a friendship.

“The storm didn’t seem so bad. I didn’t lose power or receive any calls, so I didn’t know anything bad had happened.”

“It wasn’t bad. It was a one-hundred-year storm. It was a disaster.” Sophia returned to her opening theme. “The trees damaged the covered area in the park and knocked out part of the covered bridge, and with the water running so high, the city planning department and police are worried about flooding. The Christmas market is going to be canceled if we can’t find a new place to hold it.”



“HI, YOU MADE it,” Riley said. “I wasn’t sure.”

“I said I would come.” Zhang stood on her doorstep looking like he was the marquee model for an outdoor catalog. His hair was perfectly brushed back from his forehead, so tempting to touch that she jammed her fingers in her back pocket.

“I just...” She smiled. She was doing it again. “I’m excited.”

“You enjoy decorating trees that much?”

Yes. But she was more excited to see him. “Come in. How was your day?”

“I had trees I had to clear,” he said. “But only a couple fell. I understand the town didn’t fare as well.”

“No. The park lost a lot. There’s a beetle that’s been decimating the birch trees, and so a lot of them lost branches or they were uprooted and basically acted like they were javelins at a track meet practice.”

“Ouch.”

“Yes, and some firs, hemlock, and pine timbered. The covered area in the park where the Christmas market was to be held is partially crushed in one corner.” Why was she yammering on about something that wasn’t his problem? Nerves. Humiliating, as she used to have nerves of steel until one Zhang Shi was in play.

“C’mon.” She opened the door wider. “I have the tree in a stand in the garage. Did you bring any decorations?”

“Just what you told me—some unused wine bottles and extra corks.”

“Perfect. How’s your arts and crafts gene?”

He looked down at his jeans and then back at her. “I can honestly say I have never done anything crafty.”

“Then it truly is something new.” Riley wasn’t sure if he was punning her or being literal. Heart beating hard with welcome, she stepped back. “Prepare to be wowed.”



HE’D BEEN BERATING himself about coming. He had so much to do and had been in conference calls and Zoom meetings with quite a few members of his team all day. But he’d promised Riley he’d come. He’d been half hoping, half dreading receiving a phone call that the Christmas tree auction was canceled due to the storm, but she hadn’t called to cancel so he’d headed down his mountain, both eager and nervous.

“I somehow pictured the decorations being flashier,” he said.

“They can be.” Riley sat back on her heels and looked at the tree. They had wired in about ten of his late harvest Riesling bottles—his first vintage from a couple of years ago that he’d made no effort to sell—and filled the bottles with silvery twinkle lights. Then Riley had spray-painted quite a few wine corks silver and talked him through how to pin them together to create a star at the top that she threaded with tiny silver filament lights. They had also attached two red crystal wine goblets Riley had found at a barn auction a few years ago, angled up and tilted toward each other like they were toasting. Remote control votives were in the bottom of the glasses, casting a pretty ruby glow.

“Your first tree. Stand next to it,” she said, digging out her phone.

“Why?”

“It’s Fire Ridge’s first entry to the Christmas tree auction and your first Christmas. You can post to your social media accounts and—What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He still looked at the tree.

“You don’t like the idea.”

“I don’t not like the idea.”

Silence. The one thing he didn’t expect from her.

“A Christmas tree,” he murmured. “I thought...”

“What?” She stood and came to him. He crossed his arms, afraid that he might touch her hair or cup her silky, soft cheek. She looked so luminous in the waning light of the sunset that beamed through the open double doors of the garage.

“I thought it was tackier, with popcorn and cranberries and glittery ornaments and tinsel.”

“It can be. A Christmas tree reflects the family or the person. There aren’t any rules.”

“No rules.”

“Not really.”

He'd thought the tree would look dumb. But it looked elegant with the bottles hanging off the tree dripping with lights like diamonds.

"You mentioned that I needed a theme, but I don't have one."

"You do," Riley objected. "Fire Ridge Winery—your first released wine—the late harvest Riesling, empty bottles, corks, wine goblets. Silver reflecting the ice and the red and gold lights reflecting the fire. And if you want, we could weave a few of the pruned branches from your vines through the tree and add some green lights to look like the spring buds or purple clusters of lights to look like grapes."

How did she do that? Incorporate his land, his vines, his wines so easily, as if they too were part of her as they were of him. Even though he'd struggled to explain to Jackson—his closest friend—why having the winery was so important to him. Riley didn't make his winery sound like he was having a midlife crisis. To her, it seemed to make sense. He could never tell his mother. Her scorn would scorch the earth.

What would his grandfather think? Zhang liked to imagine he would understand.

"That's a theme." Riley smirked.

He looked at the tree. "So this is going to be okay?"

"If you like it."

"I do. It's architectural in structure. Simple. Elegant."

"Like the man."

Color climbed up her cheeks. The way she saw him, like nothing was too out of whack and needed to be fixed, still stole his breath.

"What about yours?"

"I'm working on the bike that was in your garage, but I have to wait for the paint to dry."

"I thought trees had ornaments."

“Many do. People collect them or buy certain brands or themes like Santas or cows or airplanes. My parents would let us pick a new ornament each year so that we would have a start for our trees when we were adults.”

“That was a tradition? Do you still buy an ornament each year for yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to put them on your tree this Christmas even though your family is gone?”

“Yes.”

Her phone buzzed again, but she had yet to reach for it.

“It could be work,” he said. “You should take the call.”

“It’s not work.” Riley sighed and looked guilty.

It suddenly struck him that he knew very little about her personal life. “Your boyfriend?”

“What? No. I don’t have one.”

Only she still looked guilty.

“Tell me.”

Riley walked around the garage as if stretching herself, preparing for a run. “The Christmas market might have to be canceled,” she said. “Sophia and I and quite a few others have put a lot of planning into trying to get this off the ground for several years, and we had a lot of resistance initially from the city council.”

“I am sorry. You mentioned it several times, so you must have been looking forward to it. Is the Christmas Tree Lane auction canceled?”

“We can put a Christmas tree auction entry in each shop like we normally do,” Riley said. “But we wanted to have a Christmas Tree Lane at the Christmas Market. We are looking for another site for the market, but we need a covered area. Rain is predicted on Sunday. The market is Friday evening, Saturday, and Sunday.”



He nodded.

“Will your business be hurt?”

“No. I’m trade. I mean, I have my light fixtures, but they’re more for fun, and a challenge. I can hang a few in Sophia’s shop and call it good, and if I don’t sell...” She shrugged. “But a big portion of the artisans do most of their sales at these Christmas markets, and they committed to this weekend in Bear Creek and won’t be able to rent another spot elsewhere at other Christmas markets and festivals.”

She didn’t meet his gaze. Unusual for her. Then he got it. His stomach knotted.

“You want to use my big barn.”

Riley flinched. “Honestly”—she met his steady regard—“I thought of it straight off. It’s a perfect size. There’s parking. It’s beautiful, and it would be a chance for you to showcase your winery. To stick a flag in your brand and say ‘Here I am.’ And the town would owe you.”

“So why didn’t you ask?”

He assumed that’s what her friends or other people on this mysterious committee were texting her about, and yet Riley, who had had no trouble chasing him down, blocking in his truck, and shoving a card in his face, had hesitated, even as she helped him to create his first Christmas tree that he could or could not donate to the auction committee.

“Last week I would have. I would have had a whole oral presentation or PowerPoint to persuade you about how hosting the Christmas market would benefit your winery and the town and why you should do it.”

“But you haven’t.”

Totally unpredictable. Riley loved her town. She was involved. She was always making connections—electrical with her work, but also with people—hooking up his website just because he was too busy and too conflicted and hesitating. Mentoring kids, helping her friend, trying to beautify the park even after she’d been shut down trying to get on the meeting schedule. She thought of others before herself.

“No.” Her phone buzzed with another message. She slid it out of her back pocket and put it face down on the counter. “It’s starting to tickle.”

He barked a laugh. “Can I see the messages that are blowing up your phone?”

“Zhang, you’re private. And I respect that, and I want others to respect that. A lot of times when there is a wealthy person in a community, they are always hit up for this or for that, and I don’t want that for you. You came here to build something for yourself and hopefully for your grandfather, and I thought maybe you just needed a little push to get your business going. But maybe you really do want it to be something for yourself and your friends. I’ve realized through talking to you that being alone doesn’t mean you are lonely.”

He would have said last week that her conclusion was correct, but now he was no longer sure. “But sometimes being alone is because you don’t know how to not be.”

“You confuse me,” she said quietly after the silence had stretched between them.

“You confuse me.”

“I like puzzles,” she whispered.

“Puzzles and problems obsess me. Keep me up at night.”

“Me too.” Riley smiled.

“Show me.” He indicated her phone and waved his fingers.

He scrolled through the messages.

“Quite dire.”

“Let it be said that Sophia is kicking off her thirties with an impressive amount of melodrama that I never would have suspected.”

“She cares about the town,” he murmured. He didn’t know her well, but she had been kind and she was a good friend to Riley, which meant she was a trustworthy, good person. His list from so long ago waved in front of his face: put down

roots. Learn to interact more. Here was another opportunity if he seized it.

“Tell me,” he said, thinking back to the Zoom meeting he’d had with Jackson and his sales department this morning, “if I donated my barn and the surrounding area for this Christmas Market—”

Her head jerked up and her mouth dropped open.

“Could you, in two days, build me a Garden of Lights that would prove to the Bear Creek mayor and city council that your idea is a good one and then add onto it the following week to blow the minds of some high-rolling venture capitalists for a product tease party at the winery the weekend before Christmas?”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“**Y**OU ARE AMAZING.” Sophia hugged Riley Friday afternoon as she continued to drive stakes into the ground to hold up part of the body of her first spirit dragon. She had created four of them, one for each season.

She'd been receiving that sentiment a lot yesterday and today when the Downtown Association and Christmas Market heard the news that Fire Ridge Winery would play host this year. She'd been worried that Zhang hadn't realized the true consequences of his rather startling agreement. Instead of jumping up and hugging him and shouting with joy and relief, Riley had continued to ask him if he was sure, to the point that he'd asked her if she wanted him to say no.

She hadn't known what to say except the truth. “I want you to say yes, but I'm worried you should say no.”

“Do you want to keep me for yourself?” he'd deadpanned with a glint in his eye.

Her inner “Yes!” that she barely suppressed worried her even more.

He definitely wasn't hers.

And people were definitely taking notice of him. So many committee members and vendors had been thanking him and Riley, who had been busy installing decorative lights with her crew and students from the college. Zhang had jumped in to help for a few hours, but when she'd started setting up the spirit dragons along the side and roof of his barn, she'd shooed him away.

“It's a surprise,” she'd told him, playfully.

“I don't like you up on the roof,” he'd shocked her by admitting.

Riley, about to climb up her extension ladder, had laughed. “This is what I do,” she said, and he'd stepped back and watched her climb and clip on to the safety harness.

Riley shook herself out of her thoughts to answer Sophia. “It wasn’t really me. The committee reorganized the map of where everyone goes. The food trucks are outside in a semicircle. I am just adding a little Christmas pizzazz.”

“You are doing a lot more than that,” Sophia said, pointedly looking at the elaborate ice dragon that represented winter, breathing out icicles sprawling up the side of the barn.

Riley tried to keep it casual, but she hadn’t slept in two days since inspiration and desperation struck. “This is part of my Christmas Garden of Lights,” she admitted in a low voice. “Zhang suggested I install it here as sort of a ha-ha to the mayor and a future advertisement to the other city council and planners.”

“That’s the spirit,” Sophia cheered.

“Sh-sh-sh,” Riley admonished. “It’s smaller than I had planned, but I had ten scenes already designed and then I created these mystical beauties.”

She didn’t tell Sophia that she was creating them for Zhang as a shout-out to his heritage. She hoped he’d keep them up at least until the Lunar New Year, even though it wasn’t the year of the dragon. Zhang just seemed more connected in her mind to the nature element of dragons.

“I can’t wait to see them lit up tonight,” Sophia said. “They are definitely going to create a big bang of shock and awe and likely capture one man’s heart.”

Riley’s heart felt too nervous and exposed to discuss it. Better to try to throw Sophia off the scent.

“This is coming together so well. It helps that our town has a lot of spirited volunteers.”

“One of the many things I love about Bear Creek,” Sophia admitted. “Zhang’s idea about shuttles from downtown to the market was brilliant because it was the one drawback about this place. It’s not a stroll from downtown, and it doesn’t have our city Christmas tree.”

Riley laughed and straightened. God, she felt like an old woman all hunched from her hours and hours bent over

creating the dragons. It was totally worth it, but she felt like she'd aged from thirty to ninety in two days—and not even a spry ninety.

“Zhang and I are working on that,” she said. “My crew has strategically wrapped the large barn and smaller one in lights. And after I finish installing this display, Zhang is going to help me string lights through three large oaks between the two barns.”

“You and Zhang,” Sophia sang out. “It seems like his name is every other syllable that comes out of your mouth lately, my secretive, lovestruck friend.”

“Lovestruck?” That got her attention.

“Definitely. I know the signs. You're working hard, totally immersed, but you track where Zhang is in this mayhem. And when I do try to talk to you or text you, Zhang's name comes up in conversation or text. Lovestruck,” Sophia said softly.

Riley opened her mouth to deny it.

“I'm not,” she said automatically.

“Please. We've been friends forever. I know you, so the only thing you need to say is what you are going to do about it, Riley Marie Flanagan.”

Riley opened her mouth, not sure what would come out, but then Zhang arrived with what looked and smelled like a peppermint latte in hand. “You ready for a break? I hired a coffee truck for the crew. What can I get you?” Zhang asked Sophia while Riley tried to keep her heart from happy dancing out of her chest.

“I'm good,” Sophia said demurely. “Thank you. And thank you for all this, Zhang.” She swept her arm out gracefully to include all of the Christmas market preparations.

Riley clutched the coffee and stared up at him. Lovestruck? Was she so obvious? Had he heard?

“Oh, and Riley.” Sophia started to back away.

Riley tore her attention from Zhang, and it took an effort. Sophia couldn't be right, could she?

“Hmmm?” Riley sipped her coffee, distracted, as her friend made a heart shape with her hands and mouthed “lovestruck.”



“IT’S GOING TO get crazy in another half hour,” Riley told him.

“It’s crazy now,” he said. His website was up. He’d finally hired a tasting room manager, Tess Mahon, who’d arrived and set up the wine bar for tonight’s event. Riley had promised to help pour if needed, but Tess, who had finished her degree in sales and marketing focusing on the wine industry and was the cousin of his vineyard manager, seemed to have it all in hand. She’d completed internships working in several countries in a variety of jobs in the wine industry and was happy to be back in the valley near family and friends.

Zhang had a feeling she’d taken the job because he had a massive property with a lot of growth potential, and he had nothing in place. She would be creating the tasting room and wine club experience, planning release parties and building the brand all from scratch. She was greenlit to hire several tasting room staff. She probably liked the fact that while he was highly involved in the winemaking and vineyard management, he didn’t want the face time with the customers. Tess breathed confidence and organization.

“Everyone keeps thanking me,” he said, dragging himself back to the conversation. “But it’s you. You got this all going.”

“It was a committee effort,” Riley claimed, always generous with praise. “And you did offer up this beautiful space, and as a marketing ploy”—she mimed hitting a baseball with a very dramatic swing, he liked that she talked with her whole body. It was like watching a movie—“you hit it out of the park.”

She grabbed his forearms. “I still can’t believe you agreed to this madness,” Riley said. “It must be so strange to see all the people, all the activity. And the Christmas decorations. When I first came here it was so quiet and still, and I made that remark about getting potted live evergreens and stringing

them with lights to make a path and now..." She swept her arm out, encompassing the area.

"That was a ploy to get back on my property." He already missed her touch.

"It was not," she denied, laughing.

"I'm convinced the lights on the trees—see, I can take advice—is what blew the fuse."

"Fuses," Riley said. "It was the food trucks. That's my story."

"I'm not sure if I believe it." He watched a group of teens dressed in red and green get off one of the shuttles, their teacher leading them into the massive barn where most of the vendors were set up. They were only one of several choral groups that would perform over the weekend. There was a string musical group also set up near Christmas Tree Lane. His tree was already in place, but a few more were still being carried in.

"I'd planned one small gathering for colleagues and friends to introduce my wine two weeks ago, and now I have a winery, a tasting room manager, a partner who sees Fire Ridge as a business asset for product launches and retreats, and to top it all off, I have a Christmas market."

It was a lot of words for him. Riley grinned over the brim of her coffee. "Not bad for a man who doesn't celebrate Christmas." She took a sip and then looked more seriously at him. "How are you holding up, Zhang, really?"

He paused, not sure how to explain. This type of thing should have sent him scrambling for the quiet of his house. Or the open road on his bike, blasting past the speed limit. But while he was on edge, it wasn't totally unpleasant. He felt... anticipation for tonight. He was pouring his wine. And looking forward to seeing their Christmas trees with the others. Riley had designed something new for her Christmas Light Garden that she had said was just for him.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd received a surprise.



“Are you checking in with yourself? All systems green,” Riley teased and laid her head on his shoulder. He loved the way her silky hair felt against his cheek and chin.

“Holding on, but not by my fingernails. Let’s see Christmas Tree Lane,” he said. “I want to bid on my tree for the winery in case Tess gets any customers next week before Christmas and so that I have it for the product tease next weekend.”

“Okay.” Riley leaned into him. “We’ve got some time before the crowds come.”

“I want to see your bike tree, which you didn’t let me help with. I’m beginning to think, Riley Flanagan, that you don’t delegate well.”

“That’s not true. I’m letting you help me string the lights through the oak trees.”

“That’s probably for comic value so you can laugh as I have a heart attack over you climbing through the trees like a monkey.”

“I’m careful, Zhang.”

“Good. Stay that way.” His eyes searched hers. “Are you going to tell me your secret project that you keep shooing me away from?” he asked as they walked toward Christmas Tree Lane in the smaller barn.

“No. Not yet.”

Normally, he didn’t like surprises. He liked to be prepared, but from Riley, he thought he’d enjoy anything she dreamed up.

They walked into the winery where Christmas Tree Lane was.

“Oh. It’s so magical,” Riley breathed, her eyes shiny and her cheeks a pale pink. He found himself staring at her mouth as her lips curved into a smile. He was tempted to kiss her, but he kept holding back, unsure of so many things.

Zhang walked more quickly down the path, his strides long, and his boots kicking up the thick layer of sawdust.

“Wow, the committee decorated in here too,” Riley marveled. “Why are we running?”

“Sorry.” He slowed down, feeling a little sheepish.

“I know we need to get back to your tasting bar.” She touched his hand with one finger. “People will be arriving pretty soon.” The shuttles started from the downtown parking lot at five. Jackson had been shocked speechless when he’d told him what he was up to this weekend. It had been the first time ever that Jackson didn’t have a snappy comeback tripping off his tongue.

“I really just want to see your tree,” he admitted.

“What happened to my uber-serious ‘I don’t celebrate Christmas. I don’t want anyone on my mountain,’ Zhang?” she demanded.

“Was I that bad? I was. I’m hyper-focused.”

“No.” Riley stepped into him and laid her mittened finger over his lips. “No. Not bad. Intriguing and,” she smiled, “a challenge. I like challenges. Challenges are my thrive zone.”

“Me too,” he said. “Although not usually with people. Jackson says I’m barely recognizable. Sounded like that that’s a good thing.”

“I thought he was the communicator of the group. He needs to work on his skills.”

Zhang laughed. “I’ll be sure to tell him you said so. Let’s go see our trees.”

This time he managed to slow his walk to a stroll down Christmas Tree Lane. The number of entries surprised him. Bear Creek was a small town that seemed determined to keep its identity separate from the much bigger Medford. He and Riley bumped a few times as they walked. He wasn’t normally so clumsy and neither was she, and then she slipped her hand into his, and even though she was wearing mittens, he could feel her touch to his bones.

It was strange. He normally wasn’t a hand holder. It made him feel constrained. Trapped. When he’d been little, his

mother had held his hand so tightly, not letting him loose to explore or to move. Even though he'd lived with his grandfather from his young years, he still remembered her small but tight grip crushing his, and her glare of disapproval if his fingers wiggled.

But this was...okay. Comfortable. Jackson would laugh at his description.

"These are so clever," he marveled at one tree for a plumbing company that had red, green, and silver PVC piping throughout the tree, which created a marble run.

"I love walking through here. It really inspires me and reminds me how many businesses and people are willing to help out and how creative people are," Riley said, stopping to admire one tree that had homemade ornaments from kids at a preschool and another from a chocolate company that had candy made from colorful soft-sculpt clay tucked inside individual candy boxes that hung by ribbons off the tree branches.

"Good thing those are fake—they wouldn't last the first hour with all the kids running around here."

"Christmas Tree Lane always puts me in the spirit," Riley said softly, the wonder reflected on her face in the golden glow of so many lit-up trees. "And helps me up my game for the next year."

"I can see you're competitive."

"Very. You do realize Christmas Tree Lane ends up with Santa, right?" She laughed. "Have you been naughty or nice?"

Santa? He'd gone his entire life without a Santa encounter. It was absurd to start at thirty-three. What was he supposed to do?

"We can take a selfie." Riley tugged on his hand to get him walking again. "You can tell him what you want for Christmas."

"I don't celebrate it," he reminded, hoping the panic edging his voice didn't show.

“Pretty sure you are celebrating, Zhang,” she said softly and lightly squeezed his hand. “There’s not just one way, and you can take pieces of the holiday that make it special.” She paused and seemed unaccountably nervous, which made him take notice. “Do you celebrate the Lunar New Year? That’s in January, isn’t it?”

“It depends. It’s based on the lunar cycle, so it moves around a little—January or February.” He got quiet. He didn’t celebrate any cultural touchstone events. Not really anymore. He had with his grandfather. And he and his mom had participated in official functions, but once he’d left for college, he’d left his past self, his culture and his family behind.

They rounded a corner and there was his tree—the lit-up bottles and the cork star on top. Beautiful red wineglasses angled toward each other.

*Like me and Riley.*

He shook his head at the errant thought and instead focused on the tree. The design pleased him—elegant and understated.

“It’s beautiful. I love it,” she said.

“You created it,” he said. Riley would say she loved his tree no matter what he’d done.

“I did not. I just made some suggestions and sat back and watched you slay it.”

Each tree had a bidding sheet. His already had several bids.

“Not bad considering that the Christmas Market hasn’t even started yet.”

He picked up the pen, intending to slash a line through and scrawl down the final bid number, but she tugged his hand. “C’mon, you, let people think they have a chance.”

They made another turn and Zhang stopped short.

“Out of the box.”

“You like?”

“I love.”

He stared at the old-fashioned bicycle. He'd been planning to eventually rent a dumpster so he could toss out the bent, rusted bike and everything else in that storage garage. But now Riley had refurbished and converted the bike to a creative and festive tree of lights with two small living, potted evergreens lit with red lights. The bike had been welded to a triangular base holding it upright. Two old wire egg baskets had been soldered to the handlebars and seat and lined with moss and housed the two living trees wrapped in red lights. The bike's wheels had been wrapped with lights and motorized to spin, and the colors kept changing.

“Spectacular.”

“It is my favorite that I've done,” Riley said, “which is ironic because usually I plan them out. This time I was so busy helping Sophia and working—”

“And creating my website and tree and finding an alternative space for the Christmas Market,” he interrupted.

“That I just had to go with desperation mixed with inspiration. I persuaded you to create your first Christmas tree. I could hardly not do one this year.”

His phone buzzed. “I'm expecting a call from Jackson about our meeting with investors next weekend,” he explained, when he normally didn't bother. It had been one of the things that had infuriated Brin—he'd let work calls interrupt them but would never discuss the call.

“No problem,” Riley said. “I'll see you later. I'll check in with Tess and then get started on the lights in the oak trees.”

“I will help you with those,” he said, meaning it. “Zhang,” he said, knowing it was a conference call with his team. “Hold for a sec. Riley.” He lowered the phone. Lit up by the lights of the glittering Christmas trees winding around behind her, she looked like a forest nymph—something he imagined he'd find playing on a mountain in a childhood fairy tale.

“Wait for me before climbing up the tree,” he reiterated. “And I want to see your Christmas garden tonight, and my...

surprise.”

Her smile was more beautiful than the sun. She gave him a thumbs-up and a wave and was gone.

“Zhang,” he said into his phone again only to hear Jackson make a very male noise of appreciation.

“And here I thought it was all the silence that drew you to the sticks,” Jackson teased. “You are outted, dude, and I couldn’t be happier.”

“What do you need on my end?” Zhang brought the conversation immediately back to business, but he couldn’t stifle the pleasure he felt when he thought of Riley and how she had added some sparkle to his days.



SOPHIA WAS SO right. So right.

She was crushing hard. Only her feelings for Zhang were way more intense than the occasional crush she would have briefly on men she met as she went about her day. This was so intense she felt like she was going to burn from the inside out, and she was sure she was staring.

She stood looking at the three oak trees he’d helped her decorate. They had been a good team. Zhang was so methodical with the way he’d woven the lights through the branches. The work had been so much easier with him. No ego. No attempt to mansplain her job to her. He’d listened to her vision and instruction and had just gotten the job done. The oaks looked professionally lit.

They were professionally lit; she gave herself a mental shake. She was a professional, and judging by the feedback she was getting on the Christmas Light Garden—especially her spirit dragons, hummingbirds in a flower garden, and eagles hunting—she was a professional who was definitely impressing.

She’d been working on her light designs for a couple of years, but the four seasons of dragons chasing each other around the barn were all newly inspired. She’d started to learn

more about the Lunar New Year to surprise Zhang and had become fascinated with the dragon mythology of the East.

When combined with the dragon she'd bought at Sophia's store and the fact that Zhang released his first ice wine this year and they'd been caught in the snowstorm and she'd thrown a snowball at him—the winter dragon was definitely her favorite. She'd spent the most time with it, and the beauty mesmerized her. Just like the man.

*Tell him how you feel.*

She could practically hear Sophia's encouragement.

She would, Riley vowed—but not tonight. He was pouring wine along with Tess. And also taking several phone calls, likely work-related, judging by the intensity with which he listened and the terse way it looked like he responded.

She needed to stop staring at him. She'd freak him out. Or maybe she wouldn't. All the uncertainty unsettled her. Should she tell him about her feelings? Or just wait and see if anything happened.

It had been Riley's experience that nothing happened unless she made it happen. She made some minor adjustments to the summer dragon's fire-breathing computer timing and then returned to the white and blue lights of the winter dragon. Zhang finished a call and turned to go back to the winery. There were several groups there, laughing and talking with Tess, who seemed to have it all under control.

Zhang looked around.

*Do it. This is your chance.*

Her voice seized in her throat. The night was so beautiful, clear and cold and starry, and there was a good crowd gathered with another shuttle arriving.

“Zhang,” she called out.

He turned around.

“Riley.” He smiled and closed the distance between them. “I've been on the phone nearly nonstop with Jackson and our event team and some investors. Jackson agrees it's a great idea

to hold a preview up here for the new direction we want to take the company. I FaceTimed him and walked around a bit. He saw the woodland animal scene you created in the stand of oaks. So creative. Jackson loved it.”

“What did you think?” she asked, wishing she didn’t feel like her heart was in her throat.

“I haven’t seen much more than that and the trees we decorated,” he admitted. “I had to head to the office in the winery to hear myself think. Tess has been on her own, but she said you helped out when it got busy.”

“It’s fun,” Riley admitted. “I love talking about Fire Ridge Wines—your wines.” Yikes, she was sounding like a bad actress in a teen drama on the CW channel. “So many people are here from Medford and Ashland and even Grant’s Pass. I hope it’s successful and can become an annual event—at the downtown park,” she hastened to add. “I don’t think we’ll impose on you annually.”

She slipped her hand in his, willing herself to be brave, and felt thrilled when his fingers closed over hers. Maybe it being winter and wearing bright blue and white snowflake mittens to his soft leather gloves made it easier to be brave.

“Can I show you your surprise now?” She felt like she’d just taken out her heart and held it out for him to throw into the night.

“I’d like that.” He fell into step with her as they walked outside.

“Close your eyes,” Riley commanded, feeling a little sick to her stomach.

Zhang did with no fuss, which was pretty remarkable.

Heart pounding with nerves—thank you mittens for hiding sweaty palms—Riley carefully steered him closer because quite a few people were standing there, watching the light show—four dragons made up of lights chasing each other up and over and around the barn.

She’d chosen to start the show with the ice dragon because it was winter and her favorite season of all. But also because



of Zhang's stark, cool, elegant beauty, like a mountain peak peeking through the layers of glacial ice—enduring strength.

“Open.”

Zhang opened his eyes and stared. She couldn't tell what he thought, and she was choking on her nerves. “What...what do you think?” Was he going to be mad that she'd turned off the Christmas lights on the big event space barn and just had the dragons chasing each other to the path that led to the rest of the much smaller, less ambitious Christmas garden? She tugged on his hand, more than a little nervous now. Maybe if he saw the rest of them.

“An ice dragon?” His voice sounded flat. He stepped away from her, shoving his hands in the deep pockets of his long wool coat. His gaze swiveled back to the dragon, watching it blow out ice crystals on the trees, turning them white and then blinking off before it reappeared.

“It's—” she hastened to explain.

“Is that how you see me?”

Riley blinked. “What?” He was so much more.

“Still?”

“No. Yes. I—” Riley broke off and looked at him, feeling mute and miserable.

“An ice dragon curled up alone on my dead volcano.”

His voice had more passion—anger and loathing—than Riley had ever heard before.

“No,” she breathed. “That's not right at all.”

Zhang turned away and stalked off. Riley felt frozen. Her beautiful dragon that had so pleased her now felt like an ice pick in her heart.

But she had to explain. She had to show him the rest. How had she read this whole thing so wrong? Riley ran after him only to pull up short when she saw a petite blond woman, stylish in a bright red coat and over-the-knee boots, step in front of Zhang.

“Zhang,” she said breathlessly, her red lips curved in a smile. “I’ve been looking for you for at least thirty minutes. What is this madhouse? Have you, Mr. I don’t celebrate Christmas or Valentine’s Day or anniversaries or birthdays, completely lost your mind?”

She held on to his shoulders, stood on the tiptoes of her sleek leather over-the-knee black boots with spiked heels, and kissed both of Zhang’s cheeks.

“Brin?” He stared at her seemingly dazed, and Riley felt her heart thud to her work boots. “Why are you here?”

“That’s some greeting.” She tucked her arm through his. “I made a detour to see you. I wanted to talk about something important, but now I feel I need to save you from yourself,” she said drily.

“I don’t need saving.”

“Says you.” She looked up at him, her expression searching. “It’s good to see you, although I’d imagined country living would have bored you to tears by now. Clearly not.”

“What do you want to talk about?” Zhang sounded curt, so much like when she’d first met him, Riley thought, not sure what she should do. Interrupt? Try to explain? Slink away?

“It’s potentially delicate,” Brin said slowly, her voice low, carefully modulated.

“What?”

Brin heaved a sigh and tugged on him again. “Not here out in the cold. Jackson said you finally released a wine. Let’s get a glass and—”

She finally noticed Riley.

The look she angled her way was an enviable blend of perfected scorn and haughty disinterest.

So this was Brin. They looked beautiful together. They had work in common. A history. Riley tried to keep her heart firmly in her chest. Zhang was her client. Maybe they’d

blurred the lines a little, skewing toward friendship, but that could have been all her.

Zhang turned back toward the ice dragon, still opening its black eyes, stretching up, blowing ice, then blinking off and then blinking back on to “run” up the wall of the winery. Riley felt like the dragon was mocking her gesture, her hopes and dreams, freezing them out. Then Zhang looked at her, and Riley felt like his regard was even colder.

“Riley,” was all he said and walked off, Brin trying to keep up, clinging to his arm until he slowed down, helped her through the hard-packed snow.

Riley watched them go, feeling like she’d swallowed a block of ice. She’d thought she was so clever—blending his heritage with what she hoped would be his new home—at least part-time. And trying to add her own personalized vision. But he hadn’t understood. Not. At. All.

And he hadn’t even tried.

And now he’d left with Brin.

“Better now than later,” she tried, but she failed to comfort herself.

“Riley Flanagan, hello, you really created something here.” Jeffrey Bane Sr. walked up to her with his son and Jeffrey Jr.’s newly announced fiancée, who’d maneuvered her off the Bear Creek festival committees.

Could her night get any worse? She was about to find out.

“I know you had a part in the initial plan of the Christmas market, and I was worried about the traffic and trash that would be left behind, but this event does look like it has a lot of community support,” Bane Sr. said pompously.

It was on the tip of her tongue to say if he and his son would ever let the community speak, they’d learn a lot more, but instead her good manners kicked in.

“The last-minute change of venue doesn’t seem to have hurt it,” she said diplomatically, wishing she could just go

home now that all the anticipation of the night had frozen up like the poor light trees breathed on by her stupid ice dragon.

“We’ve just walked through your Christmas Garden. Jennifer on the city council said that you were hoping to create an annual one along the river trail and the park to celebrate the holiday, the town’s history, and surrounding nature.” He looked at his son. “We look forward to your pitch in January’s work meeting, don’t we, Junior?”

Jeffrey looked like he’d swallowed a bird.

“Yes,” he choked out. “If you can get your bid and plan together in a timely manner. A little organization goes a long way,” he said mendaciously.

“As does an open mind,” she replied. Her pitch had been completed months ago, and now she had live examples of her work. At least something had gone right tonight, though her heart felt crushed by Zhang’s unexpected reaction. She’d really hurt him, and that felt worse than anything had for a long time.

“Happy holidays and merry Christmas to you all,” she said, digging deep for politeness and professionalism. “And congratulations on your engagement, Jeff.”

The Banes strolled off. Riley didn’t feel up to entering the event space. She had no desire to see Brin cuddled up with Zhang drinking wine and discussing whatever it was she’d come more than three hundred miles to say. And for once Riley didn’t want to get any sympathy or comfort from Sophia. Everyone was busy. This was their weekend. She just had to big girl it up.

Riley pulled out her phone and put it on night mode and started to take pictures for her website update she was going to start tonight. Then she was going to start sketching out new designs for next year.

*When one door closes, another opens.*

It was something her mother used to say. Riley usually believed that. Despite losing her mother early to an

unexpected illness and bad surgical outcome, she'd always been pretty optimistic and determined.

Tonight though, it was harder to keep the faith and cheer than usual.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“**W**HAT IS IT you have to say?” Zhang asked after pouring Brin a glass of his Tempranillo. She hated white wine, likely because she perceived it as less elegant or expensive as the big reds.

“Do you have to be so abrupt? It’s been two years.” Brin settled back into the cushions of his couch and crossed her legs. Her wrap black dress parted, giving him a long look at her toned thighs encased in sheer black stockings.

“It’s been two years.” He averted his gaze.

“Not so long to forget,” she said softly, sipping the wine.

“Long enough.”

“You still talk like you are in a Harold Pinter play.”

“Do I?”

“Why are you here in the middle of nowhere? Your business is in Cupertino. Your colleagues are in Cupertino. Your condo is in Cupertino. I am in Cupertino.”

“We broke up.”

“Yes.” Brin sighed. “But we were good together.”

“Were we?” Zhang wanted to pace. No. He wanted to put her back in her rental SUV and send her on her way. He had no need to rehash the past.

“You can’t say that you don’t think about us.” Brin leaned forward so that he could see the gentle swell of her breasts as the wrap dress draped open a little.

“I don’t think about us,” he admitted. “I did. But now I don’t.”

Except when Riley had said or done or reacted in some unexpected way so totally different from Brin, and his relief at being out of a relationship with Brin had only increased.

But that was not what Brin wanted to hear.

“I think about you,” she said.

“Why?”

“Zhang,” she sighed, her voice critical.

He much preferred the way Riley said his name, like a song, not a curse. But how had Riley got him so wrong? An ice dragon. Was he still icy? He felt so different now than when he'd first bought the land and had started making plans. Brin had thought his idea of living in the country even for a weekend at a time was stupid.

“Why are you here, really, Brin?”

“Harrison has asked me to marry him.”

“Congratulations.”

“Really. You're okay with that?”

“It's not my decision. We broke up. You left.”

She laughed and stood. She walked around his living room, her gaze a combination of critical and curious. “I was upset,” she said, standing in front of one of his paintings and sipping her wine. “You always put work in front of me. In front of us, and I was trying to get your attention.”

“Throwing one of my Z.Z. Wei paintings out my penthouse window got my attention.”

“Not my most mature moment.” Brin touched the painting's frame. “You rescued it. The painting survived, but our relationship didn't.”

No question in there so he didn't answer. His mind continued to mull over the ice dragon. Riley was so warm. Genuine. Kind. She wouldn't have deliberately dug at him, not like Brin had more than a few times. Or his mother constantly. What had Riley been trying to say? She was an artist. She could use figurative language, which he wouldn't understand.

Had he missed something?

“I guess I'm here because we never said goodbye.” Brin turned away from the painting. “Not fully.”

Two years of not working together or seeing each other seemed like enough of a goodbye for anyone.

“When Harrison asked me to marry him, I wanted to be sure before I said yes. I’ve got business in Portland and Seattle, so I thought I’d stop by to see you.”

Zhang stirred uncomfortably. What? Did she think she’d show up and he’d fall on his knees and beg her to stay? Wildly unlikely. Brin was smart and ambitious and pragmatic. Not her style.

“There’s something else,” she said coolly, walking back toward him and sitting down. “I wanted to give you a heads-up. I’ve been hired on as a chief consultant with String Theory.”

“Congratulations. They are lucky to have you.” Brin was a brilliant business strategist. She worked long hours and was competitive and ruthless. The fact that she complained he worked too hard was richly ironic. Their intense work schedules were probably the only reason they’d lasted as long as they had.

“Good, I’m glad you see it my way.” She drained her wine and stood. He walked her to the door. She smiled and ran her finger along his jaw. “I wanted to gauge your reaction,” she admitted. “Still waters run deep and all that. Since we will likely be working together going forward with your new product division and Harrison’s proposal, I wanted to make sure there were no hard feelings.”

“None.”

“Good. I’ll see you next weekend, Zhang.”

Once again Brin walked out the door and drove out of his life, only this time, his sigh of relief was audible, and he didn’t have to run down twenty flights of stairs to see if his favorite painting could be salvaged.

Zhang returned to the Christmas Market and checked in with Tess. She’d sold a lot of wine and had been happy that Riley had ordered wine totes—they were labeled with Bear



Creek Christmas Market, not Fire Ridge, but he liked them and instructed Tess to order personalized totes for the winery.

He offered to give Tess a break, but she refused. Riley had brought her a hot cocoa about fifteen minutes ago when the market business started to taper off. Zhang wasn't sure what to say to Riley. Did he owe her an apology for getting pissed—not hurt—and tossing her surprise back in her face? And then Brin had shown up, throwing him way off his game.

He headed out to look at the ice dragon again, determined to be dispassionate now that he knew what to expect. Maybe he could understand what she'd been trying to tell him before he approached her again.

Zhang stood a distance from the winery and immediately realized what he had initially missed. She'd asked if he'd celebrated the Lunar New Year. She'd taken a popular icon in Chinese culture and created four dragons, each representing a season. He walked around the building, pausing at each flashing display of the dragon and its weather pattern shooting from its mouth.

Beautiful. Clever.

If she'd had more time, he bet that she would have had the dragons in their own seasonal backdrop. He was going to talk to the town council or planning commission or the mayor or whatever idiot had nixed her idea. And he was going to pay her to complete the dragon scene or what she could before next weekend's product tease party.

He took several pictures of the display and returned to the Christmas Market that, with only forty-five minutes left, was less packed so it was easier to see the merchandise. Looking for Riley, he walked by Sophia's booth and saw a soldered, rusted metal tree with eye-catching colorful dragons hanging by their tails or curled up. Lights were embedded in the metal trunk and branches, and Zhang smiled. He was beginning to recognize Riley's work.

The dragons looked like they were sculpted out of some kind of children's clay that had hardened somehow—probably in the oven. The swirling colors and attention to detail were

amazing, as were the two handblown glass eyes that gleamed with different colors.

The dragons looked alive. And not particularly impressed with him.

*Can't blame them.*

But seeing the dragons after Riley's light display and noting all the different colors, he couldn't quite walk away.

A dark lime-green dragon with bright red floral wings caught his eye. It could practically be her. Green for her eyes when the sun was shining and for the spring season and the red bow could be her vivid hair. Even the stance was so Riley—upright on the back legs, front legs spread wide like the dragon was conducting an orchestra or embracing life.

“I'll take this one.” He plucked the green dragon off the tree.

Who said he didn't celebrate holidays?



A WEEK LATER and another Friday night, only this time, Riley felt like dropping into bed. She was even too tired to eat, and when was the last time that had happened? But she should scrounge around her fridge and find something. First a shower. She'd been working flat out in her workshop, and also up at Zhang's event space adding to her light design.

He'd texted her last Friday, thanking her for the four seasons of dragons and asking if he could commission her to create more scenery to complement each of the dragons. The price he'd named had been ridiculously high, and even if she hadn't already had sketches and ideas percolating, she would have made the impossible possible for that price.

Riley had enjoyed the challenge. Zhang had been at his office in California, and each day that had passed had made her more and more anxious. Sure, he'd texted the night of the Christmas Market thanking her for the dragon display, which had filled her with relief and a happiness that was disconcerting in its power, but he hadn't called or texted about

anything personal, and it was getting harder and harder to not worry about that.

His product tease party was tonight, and she wondered what he thought of her additions to the light garden and also the surprise permanent display she'd created inside his winery. She'd hoped to see him Friday afternoon while she and her crew and some of her community college students finished up even as the caterers, DJ, and party planners had been setting up around them.

But no Zhang. And no message.

"He's busy," she'd said to try to bolster her mood, but those reassurances had long ago worn thin.

Riley showered and pulled on some sweats. Not glamorous, but she was clean, less achy but awake enough to want to address her hunger.

What was Zhang eating tonight?

She needed to stop thinking about him. He might be back together with Brin. Or not. He'd given her no indication he was looking for more from her other than a work-related relationship. She needed to accept that. She needed to focus on her life and business. Zhang had provided a tremendous work opportunity, a portfolio boost to her resumé, and a large infusion of cash to her company bank account. She needed to be content.

But for once, business didn't trump her personal feelings. She'd felt they had a connection for something more. Much more. How could she have been so wrong? Riley wandered into her kitchen to forage, trying to remember the last time she'd hit the store.

Her phone beeped with a message. She tried to stifle the ping of hope. It was likely Sophia wanting to go out. It was the last weekend before Christmas Eve and both of them had been working flat out.

*The dragons look fierce. I wish you were here to enjoy them with me.*

Zhang. Her heart did a happy hop. She was no longer tired. He was back. Home. And maybe too shy to ask her to come over.

But wasn't the party totally work-related? Or maybe tonight was the party and tomorrow was the work event.

Her mind ping-ponged. He wanted to see her. He was shy. He was nice. She had no answers, but he'd reached out.

Stop. She all but put her hand out like she was a school crossing guard. She was doing exactly what Sophia said she did—denigrating herself, not believing that a man would find her attractive, datable, not relegate her to the friend zone.

“I'm going to do this.”

She marched to her room, grabbed a pair of flared, black slacks and a metallic silver tank top. She had a black cashmere wrap sweater that she'd splurged on when she and her aunt and stepmom had gone to San Francisco for a weekend last year.

She would head to Zhang's. Say hello and see where the night went. Riley even slicked on some lip gloss and spritzed some sparkles in her hair. Win or lose but at least she wasn't a coward, and she'd have something to brag about next week at the tamale-making party at Sophia's. It was an annual event and a great way to celebrate Sophia's cultural traditions and catch up on gossip. This year Riley would have something to share.

Or commiserate about.

Riley tucked the boxed dragon into her purse. She'd made a few specialized modifications on the dragon, to personalize it for Zhang and Fire Ridge Winery, and she'd decorated the box and added a silver bow.

She squared her shoulders and ignored the voice of caution trying to reassert itself.

Go big or go home. Her brothers used to shout that at each other—usually when they were about to do something stupid, but Riley had been playing it safe with her heart for too long.



“I AM ALL in on this winery now.” Jackson held up a glass of 2017 Tempranillo, Zhang’s first red. Tess has explored the cellar and declared that he was hiding treasure. With his curious consent, she’d invited a handful of tasting room managers in the area as well as some friends in the industry and opened bottles and asked for their opinions on his wine library.

“It’s how we get the word out,” she’d told him, accepting his eccentricities, much like Riley had, and gently nudging him out of his comfort zone.

It was clear she thought he was hiding from the industry and the world. And he had been. Riley had shown him that. She’d shown him so much. He looked at his phone. She hadn’t answered. Dumb to think she’d wait around for a text from him. There’d been so many times this past week he wanted to call or text but hadn’t known what to say. He wasn’t good like that, and he’d made the excuse that he was too busy and Riley, adding to the light garden, was likely too busy too.

Clearly, he’d made the right call. Riley must have worked flat out to build the light garden to this extent. The Ice Dragon emerged from a mountain. The Spring Dragon sprang out of a bouquet of flowers. The Summer Dragon swam up out of a river, and the Fall Dragon dove into a field of pumpkins. The displays lit up the night.

“Zhang, I’m serious.” Jackson brought him back to the night and the pre-event party about to commence. “I’m thinking of buying some property near here. Hook me up.”

He laughed. “You’d last one night.”

“You spend weeks up here sometimes. And now that things are heating up back at the office, you’re still here half the week. I could learn to hang here. We could work here. I could be a part-time vintner. Or a land baron.”

“It’s a lot of work.”

“For a lot of pleasure.” He held up the wine again and took a deep breath. “Listen”—he leaned forward in his chair, the gas fire illuminating his face—“you okay that Brin is going to be the main liaison with String Theory? You’re going to have to deal with her, perhaps a lot.”

“She’s smart,” Zhang said, bored with the topic. “She knows what she’s doing. She’ll be an asset for them and for us.”

“Yeah, but she’s your ex.”

Zhang shrugged. He tucked his phone in his pocket, trying not to be disappointed that Riley hadn’t texted back. “She stopped by last weekend on her way to a project in Seattle. We understand each other.”

The DJ kicked on some techno mixes, covering up Jackson’s follow-up questions. The music was loud enough to indicate party, but not eardrum-busting, especially outside. It was important to get the balance right. Tonight was about mingling, relaxing. Tomorrow, the meetings were more structured, resulting in what Jackson and his event coordinator Alexi Cumberland called Happy Deal-Closing Hour.

“That’s all I need to know.” Jackson stood. “She’s going to be here tonight.”

Now that Zhang knew to expect her, he wasn’t worried. He followed Jackson. Learning to mingle more was on his list as was practicing the art of small talk, no longer always retreating. It wasn’t fair to Jackson to leave all of sales management to him. He and Jackson bounced development ideas all the time. He needed to come out of his office more, out of his head.

Brin joined him as he walked through the tunnel of tall electric vines that led from the parking lot to the barn.

“This is lit.” She laughed at her pun. She gave him a quick hug.

He nodded. “I asked Riley to create something epic and enveloping.”

“She did. It’s like a green womb. It’s even pulsing to the beat of the music. Smart. Color of money, and we are going to make a lot. You’ve hit another home run, Zhang. I’m glad we got caught up last week so going forward there won’t be any awkwardness.” There was no question in her voice.

Zhang didn’t feel particularly caught up. They may have been a couple for several years, but the two years apart had left no lingering feelings. Not having awkwardness or resentment between them would benefit their business going forward.

Zhang nodded. “Are you looking for anything particular in the presentation tomorrow?” he asked. “String Theory leaning in or out?”

“Trying to get an inside track?” Brin laughed. “I’ll save my questions for after the presentation, but considering your track record, Zhang, they’d be dumb to not be all in, and I’ll likely tell them so.”

Zhang nodded, distracted by headlights coming up the road.

Everyone had already arrived and been checked in. This was a high-tech presentation. He’d hired a security team. Tess knew the winery was closed this weekend, and he’d had the electronic gate at the bottom closed when the last guest had arrived. Tess wasn’t coming back until Tuesday.

The red and white classic truck parked, and a pair of long legs encased in swirling black pants that looked almost like a skirt appeared below the door, and then the door slammed.

Zhang stared. Riley. It was like his wish to see her had magically manifested her, and he drank her in. She looked like some kind of mermaid. Even her hair shimmered.

“How does that thing even run?” Brin mused, bringing Zhang back to the here and now.

“Riley, what’s wrong? Did you forget something?” He started forward, aware that Brin kept pace with him.

Riley’s hair flowed over her shoulders and down her back like a fiery cloud spewed from a dominant volcano ready to

show off. Her lips glistened, and her skin glowed alien green in the lights.

She smiled.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, bewildered.

She paused mid-step. “I got your text.”

“Oh.”

This was a disaster. His mistake. And how did he explain without embarrassing her or revealing how badly he’d screwed up? Jackson would have known what to say. Riley’s gaze bounced between him and Brin and the guests sitting around the firepit and the light show.

He wanted to hug her. Say he’d missed her. But they hadn’t reached that stage yet, and as she stood there looking lost and vulnerable, he realized he very much wanted to be there with her. Now.

“The lights are sick. I think you’ve got a whole new clientele base far outside Bear Creek.” He focused on the practical.

Riley’s head jerked in a convulsive nod.

“You look great,” he stumbled on the words and then found an escape hatch as he felt Brin’s curious gaze burning up his back. “Heading out to a party at Sophia’s?”

Her beautiful hazel eyes flared.

“Yes,” she said quietly, then her shoulders went back, and her chin lifted. “I just wanted to do a last-minute check that everything is working,” Riley said, her voice gaining strength. “And it is.”

“It’s spectacular,” he said. “More than I imagined you could pull off in such a short time, and I know you work miracles.”

Too effusive? Desperate? Words he wanted to say and couldn’t stuck in his throat.

“Great.”



“Zhang,” Jackson shouted out and with some help rolled the second barn door fully open so that more sights and sounds of the party spilled into the night. “You need to get in here. I’m not the only one making a speech. You promised.”

“Let’s go.” Brin tugged lightly on the back of his jacket.

“Riley.” Zhang stepped forward, not sure what he wanted to say and out of time to say it.

“Good luck,” Riley said, taking a quick step back and then another, like he was contagious. “See you around. Happy holidays. Oh, I almost forgot.” She swished her hair over her shoulder and returned to her truck, her walk fluid and her long limbs graceful. Her dark cardigan slipped off one shoulder, exposing her creamy, lightly freckled skin.

Riley reached into her truck. She paused, then stiffened and turned around, holding out a small, black box with metallic silver and gold curlicue designs.

“Thank you for your business,” she said formally. “This is a small gift as a token of my appreciation of your trust in me to complete the job you hired me to do.” The stilted speech hit him dead-center, harder than the tree had in the woods.

She pressed the box into his hands. “Enjoy your evening.”

And before he could process the present and the fact that she was leaving, Riley was in her truck and heading back down the hill away from him.

“What’s in the box?” Brin asked curiously.

“I’ll look later,” Zhang said, feeling like his insides were turning to ice. Riley had been right about creating the ice dragon.

“She was so strange showing up like that at a corporate party and then bringing a gift. Small towns,” Brin said. “The light show is unusual though. Aren’t you curious what she gave you?”

“Yes,” Zhang said, watching the red and white taillights descend the hill and feeling like he wanted to grab his truck and follow her and explain.

But what could he say? And when? So many people were counting on his next product. He and Jackson and the team had the party tonight and the presentation tease tomorrow. And then next week he was at the office and booked until Christmas Eve. His life was not just his to live.

Later that night, he stood alone in his bedroom and pulled the bow off the box.

A black and silver dragon was posed up on its hind legs, front arms up and out as if embracing the world or preparing to do battle. The silvery and gold glass eyes glittered, and the silver and black bow wings were massive. He picked up the dragon and tiny white lights winked up the dragon's spine. A small heart-shaped light on the dragon's chest lit up.

Zhang held the dragon in his palm. Even with all his brains, ambition, and money, he got the most important things in life so very wrong, and Riley got them very, very right.

He, too, had bought her a dragon—a spring-themed dragon. In just a couple of weeks, he and Riley were more in sync than he and Brin had been after five years of working together and three of being a “couple.”

He reached for his phone, thinking to call Riley, try to explain.

But actions spoke louder than words. And Riley deserved a lot more than any clumsy, hollow words he could offer up.

He could talk to someone. It was morning in London. He called his mother—not on his list of changes he'd planned to make, but she should have been.



“ARE YOU SURE you're alright?” Sophia asked, not for the first time the morning of the tamale-making party.

“I am,” Riley said, her heart clenching with the effort to pretend. “Or I will be.” She'd tried to avoid this conversation. This was Sophia's busiest time of the year, and Riley was supposed to be her support system, not clinging to her, sobbing

because she'd totally misread Zhang's intentions and possible feelings.

She needed to avoid crystal balls and wishes and focus on facts.

"I won't lie. I cried on the way home," she admitted. A big revelation, because she'd grown up with three brothers and two cousins. Tears would have screamed that she needed to be culled from the herd in the ultra-competitive, loud, joking, loving world she'd grown up in.

"But I'm glad that I played it cool." Sort of. "And gave him the present like it was no big deal." And didn't cry until she was down the mountain. Almost.

Riley had finished making the traditional eggnog and now she was pouring it into the ornate glass bottles through a funnel and then stoppering them up. She was glad she had something to do so that she wouldn't have to look at Sophia while she recounted her story in more detail now that they were all together at Sophia's house for the pre-Christmas Eve ritual.

"It just sucks," Sophia said. "I don't think we read his attraction wrong. I don't." Sophia sautéed the veggies that would go into the vegetarian tamales while Hannah was handling the carnitas.

"I do," Riley said firmly. She was tired of hope. After the first two days with no text from Zhang, she'd started avoiding her phone. The payment had hit her account with no comment. "It was just business."

"Going out there and playing it cool even though you'd misread the situation took ovaries," their friend Jas from the Caffeinated Goat said as she wrote up the gift tags for the eggnog.

"Yay, ovaries!" Hannah shouted out.

"I'm embarrassed," Riley admitted. "And I assumed way too much, but still." She jammed in the last cork and tied on the gift tag. She sniffed the fragrant onions, various peppers, butternut squash, zucchini, and corn mixture that Sophia

stirred one last time appreciatively. “I feel like I tried, like I left my heart on the table, and I don’t regret trying.”

She’d designed a friggin’ light scene for him. And built a permanent vineyard of lights in his tasting room for free. And modified the clay dragon so that it too lit up. She’d all but handed him her heart.

And received nothing in return.

“I asked you if you wish you’d never met Enrique so you didn’t have to live with so much pain,” Riley said in a low voice as Jas, Hannah, and Suzannah headed off to pour a second spiked Mexican ponche.

“Yes.” Sophia turned off the stove and slid her arm around Riley’s shoulders.

“I wasn’t really sure I understood your answer at first, but now I do. I’m happy I met Zhang. Happy I got to know him. And happy I fell in love even if he didn’t feel the same. I feel different.” She touched her chest. “Less afraid to put myself out there.”

“Then that’s a win.” Sophia pressed her forehead against Riley’s.

Riley hugged her back. It didn’t feel like a win. But someday she knew it would.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

**R**ILEY WAS NORMALLY up before dawn. Her job started early, but if she was going to get any exercise in during the week, that was her time.

Christmas Eve morning definitely counted as a holiday, but she had a plan—an embrace the holiday alone plan—guaranteed to chase any hint of loneliness away. She'd talked again with her family yesterday, and each of her brothers last night. Today was for her. Even though she was alone, she'd still decorated the inside of her bungalow with swaths of evergreens and lights and baskets of cinnamon pinecones. She'd bought the holiday blend of coffee beans from the Caffeinated Goat, and the coffee was on automatic brew. Already the house smelled of evergreens, cinnamon, and coffee.

Riley dressed in thick leggings, a sports bra and tank, and athletic pullover shirt. The only question she had was vest or no vest before she went for a run, because her day was planned—planned to chase away even a second of feeling sorry for herself. Because she wasn't.

She was young. Strong. Smart. She had her own business—even though her father and uncle were going to want to come back and “play,” a few days a week. Let them. She was going to build up new clients and find landscape lighting design opportunities. She'd signed up for an online course starting in January, and a company in Medford had said that she could intern with them once a week if she wanted. And next Christmas, she was going to create her Christmas Garden of Lights in the downtown park. After that, she'd be hip deep in clients, even if it was just a Christmas house and business decorating boom.

Life was good.

The future was bright.

She tied on her athletic shoes. Her house might be small, and it had definitely been a fixer-upper that almost every Flanagan had helped her with, but it had a wonderful location—a quiet, older neighborhood, a half-acre plot near the creek that she could eventually find the time to do something to, and easy walking or running distance to town.

“Let’s get my Christmas Eve day started.” She pulled her hair up into a high ponytail—she loved to feel it swish against her back as she ran.

She had a full day planned—run, coffee by her firepit looking out at the creek, making muffins—yes, Zhang with his multitude of muffins had inspired her to try her hand at baking until she got it right. Then she was going to deliver tamales to the families of her three mentees and come home and listen to music while she decorated the small live tree she’d bought. It was going to be a perfect day alone.

“Let’s do this,” she murmured like her high school basketball coach. “Let’s get it done,” she answered like she and her teammates always had.

She left her bedroom and walked to her front door, but as she turned the knob, something in her yard lit up. Riley yipped. Paused. And then peered through the large front window that her dad and brothers had installed for her after knocking out and rebuilding the front wall of the bungalow.

What?

She opened her front door.

Her bicycle tree stood in her front yard, lights on the wheels spinning madly as if the bike was racing to Christmas Town. Zhang, in the act of staking in the bike’s mount, straightened. She stared at the bike and then at him. He’d bought her tree? She’d known he’d bought his because she’d seen it when she’d created the lighted vineyard scene inside his tasting room. She’d left the Christmas Market early after seeing Zhang with Brin and had never bothered to learn who’d bought her tree and for how much.

She opened the door, bewildered and sort of pissed.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, not exactly at her friendliest. She’d talked herself out of not feeling hurt for the past chunk of days, but here he was. And her heart ached.

“Ummmm, making amends. This is step one.”

His list. Riley held on to her hurt and anger. She was not going to be casually ignored by him when he was busy and then played with when he wasn’t.

“Step one would have been sending a clear ‘thank you and see you sometime next week’ text the night of your party,” she informed him.

“About that,” Zhang said, looking so austerely beautiful that she wanted to hit him. It was barely dawn. She hadn’t slept well for days.

“Step two after the vague text would have been an apology. In person would have been lovely, but a text would have done in a pinch.”

“I’ll remember for next time.”

“Next time?” She gaped at him. “Are you planning to upset me often?”

“Upsetting you is not on my agenda, but it’s highly likely I will screw up.”

Riley took a step outside. Dang, it was cold. Definitely vest for the run.

“Step three,”—she added because she was on a roll, and he looked so good she was afraid she’d forgive him and get in a mess with him all over again. She’d always thought of herself as resilient, but Zhang had really stomped on her heart—“is to not ghost me for a week after being a part of making me look like a fool and not thanking me for the vineyard scene and the dragons.”

He faced her, squared off like an old growth redwood facing a hungry fire.

“Anything else on your list?” He stood like he was waiting for her to roll out a scroll and start reading, but with her heart thumping like crazy, she could barely hear herself think.

“That’s it for now.”

He nodded. “May I come in and proceed with my apology?”

“I’m going for a run.”

“Good. I brought running clothes in case.”

“In case of what?” The spinning lights on the wheels of the bike were massively distracting. What had she been thinking motorizing them? Zhang had probably made the only bid, and it had been a pity one.

“In case you invited me in and agreed to spend Christmas Eve with me. Unless you have plans.” He walked toward her with each word. He stopped right in front of her, and she could smell his fresh pine and sandalwood clean smell.

“I have a lot of plans,” she said softly.

He stood so close now she could almost touch him.

“I made them so I wouldn’t have time to feel alone or sad, even though Sophia said that sometimes you have to experience the sadness, let it wash over you as a testimony to your strong feelings about the person or things you are missing.”

“I don’t want you to ever feel alone or sad,” Zhang said.

“It happens.”

Zhang nodded. “Too often, but I am hoping that it will happen less if you give me a chance.”

“A chance?”

“A chance to be your friend.” His fingers brushed hers. “And so much more.”

Riley searched his expression. So much tension. Anxiety. He was looking at her as hard as she was looking at him.

“You were right. I’m tired of being alone too,” he confessed.

Riley reached for his hand, and their fingers intertwined, and even though this was new, he felt familiar, part of her.



“Is there room in your day for some of your plans to include me once I complete my apology?”

“Plenty of room,” Riley said, intrigued as to what his apology would entail and also wondering if she still needed it. “But don’t you want to know what’s on my list first before you commit?” She couldn’t help teasing him.

With his other hand, he reached up and cupped her face.

“I’m up for anything with you,” he said.



THEY RAN ALONG the river, Zhang feeling like he was flying because Riley ran by his side, ponytail bouncing, her smile as bright as he’d ever seen. As they passed by the old mill, Zhang slowed down, an idea forming. He stopped.

“Cool, isn’t it?”

“How bad is it?”

“A lot of it is salvageable,” Riley said. “They’ve fenced it off and have security so no one moves in or starts stripping it.”

“Is it safe?”

“Depending on what you want to do, why?”

Zhang clambered over the fence, a triumphant smile on his face when he dropped down on the other side.

Riley’s mouth opened in shock. “And you were worried about me on my ladder,” she murmured.

“I’ll just be a moment,” he said, pulling out his phone.

He’d barely headed toward the complex when he heard Riley climbing, and when he turned to look, she jumped over the top.

“I’ll have to add monkey to your skill set.”

They walked around the complex, curious but careful, and Zhang took pictures. Riley’s eyes shone bright.

“It’s so cool, isn’t it? So much could be done with this.”

Zhang was texting.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“A lot.” He sent Jackson about ten pictures and then showed Riley his last short text.

*How serious are you about making a corporate investment in our future?*

“Zhang?”

“This would be an investment but also give us a showpiece place to launch our products, persuade VCs, have corporate retreats without everyone climbing all over Fire Ridge. And with a hotel, and couple of restaurants and shops it would work well for people to stay here.”

“This is very expensive,” she said. “And it needs a lot of upgrades.”

He nodded.

Jackson texted back immediately.

*Hella yeah!!!!*

“I am going to have a lot of power needs,” he said gravely. “Do you know a good electrician?”



“Is THIS A typical Christmas Eve?” he asked curiously later in the day, still buzzing about the morning with Riley and Jackson’s enthusiasm about the potential investment. They already had a tour booked with the broker, a contractor, and Riley the day after Christmas.

Riley looked up at him as she placed the Christmas-themed muffin cups in a shiny muffin tin.

“No,” she said. “Not at all. But I could make today a habit. It’s been spectacular so far.”

Because they were together?

“I am enjoying myself.”

She poured more coffee in his cup, and her smile dazzled him.

“Me too.”

“What would you normally do?”

“I’d probably be over at my aunt and uncle’s house or my dad and stepmom’s, depending on who’s hosting Christmas, helping out with anything or running errands. But Zhang, I don’t need normal. We can create our own traditions.”

“You sure?”

“Positive.” She covered his hands with hers. “Today you set up an unconventional Christmas tree for me.”

“Created by you.”

“And then we went for a run, and you made plans to buy an old mill complex employing me and dozens of locals for years and then we collected the discarded stumps from the park cleanup to make a fairy circle in my yard and yours as part of a Zen garden for your grandfather.”

“Also your idea.”

“Stick around,” she urged. “I have a lot.”

He went to her then, took her into his arms like he’d wanted to for a while. “I’m counting on that,” he said softly. She fit perfectly, and the way she looked at him, her gaze so soft and warm and intent. He wanted to kiss her. Declare his intentions that he was not a casual man, but still there were things he needed to say.

“Most everyone has wanted to change me.”

“I don’t.”

“I work a lot. I get caught up in my ideas. I enjoy quiet and being alone,” he confessed. “I can go long stretches of time without speaking.”

Instead of arguing or sharing, Riley listened.

“And while I’m enjoying living on Fire Ridge—the land and the views and the solitude feed me—I’m still going to have to commute a day or two to my office in Cupertino most weeks.”

Riley nodded. “I fell in love with you, Zhang. You”—she pressed her palm over his chest—“not an imaginary person you’d become if I could get my hands on you”—she squashed her hands together—“like you’re a lump of clay.”

He stared at her, not sure he was processing her words correctly.

“You love me?”

Riley stood in front of him now, shoulders back, head straight, one palm over his sternum. Her eyes shone. “Yes. I kept denying it. I didn’t want to give voice to my feelings because I didn’t think you could ever love me back. I’ve always been the good friend, not the lover, but Sophia told me that it was because I kept putting myself in the friend zone. I didn’t act on it because I was afraid of being rejected.”

“That seems wise.”

Riley laughed. “It’s not. It’s good to take risks of the heart.”

He covered her hand with his.

“We’re going to mess up, Zhang. It’s part of the human experience,” she said. “And we are going to have to own it and apologize and listen when one of us screws up. We will also have to communicate. Let each other know what we want and feel.”

“I can do that,” Zhang said. “I haven’t in the past. I let my mom control me until I could escape. I was in a relationship with Brin but let her do all the work, and when I wasn’t happy, I shut down. I don’t want to do that anymore. I want to live a different life, but I know it’s going to take work for both of us. You may have to lift a few rocks on occasion to pull me out of my cave.”

She laughed and flexed her bicep. “Good thing I’m strong.”

“Good thing you’re you.”

He could look into her green and brown and gray eyes for the rest of his life. They never looked the same. They changed

in the light and with what she wore and with the emotions and the moods storming through her.

“It will sound overly dramatic, but I feel you have brought me to life in a more expansive way,” he said softly. “I thought about what you said about calling my mother, and I did. She and my grandfather are coming for a visit late spring.”

“That’s fantastic,” Riley breathed.

“Yes. You forced me to have the courage to reach out, and I hope to forgive. I can’t wait for him to meet you.”

The sparkle in her eyes was impossible to misunderstand, and he breathed a heartfelt sigh of relief.

“This is when we kiss,” she whispered.

Zhang laughed. She touched his mouth. “I hope I can always make you smile and laugh a little each day.”

He kissed her, decisively. He meant it to be one kiss. A statement. But Riley was so warmly responsive that he lost himself in the moment. He had no idea how much time had passed, but her cheeks were flushed and her eyes shiny and her lips swollen when they pressed their foreheads together, panting a little.

“Better than I ever dreamed,” she said.

He pulled her into a tight hug, not wanting to let go, not wanting this moment to end, and wanting to say something that would keep her by his side, keep her wanting to give him not just a chance but more if he needed them.

“I know we need to make the muffins and deliver them and the tamales to your mentees today, and later we were going to put ornaments on your tree.”

“My childhood ornaments.” Riley speared her fingers through his hair and sighed. “And I’m up for that, but really, Zhang, I want to focus on us enjoying the day. It’s ours, and we can create our own traditions together.”

His heart leapt. He’d like that. “I got you something. Well, a couple of somethings, but I want to give you something now.

I was going to wait until you invited me to decorate your tree, but...I can't wait any longer."

She kissed him again, and he lost himself in the distraction.

"Okay." This time she pulled away. "You get me the something, and I'll put the muffins in the oven, or we'll be competing with Santa to deliver them late tonight."

"Set the timer."

Riley laughed and put the first tin of muffins in the oven, and he retrieved the box from his overcoat pocket. His heart pounded, hoping she'd understand, hoping she'd really forgiven him for overreacting about the ice dragon and confusing her about the party invitation with his poorly worded text.

"You've given me so much," he said reverently. "Not just the dragon and vineyard art, but you've given me you, and you've given me, me. The me I want to be."

Was he even making sense?

"The night of the Christmas Market when I misunderstood your message about the ice dragon, I was hurt. I'd told myself that I would never let anyone hurt me again, but you did, and it jolted me to life because I knew that I wouldn't hurt so much if I didn't feel so strongly about you. Then I saw something that seemed so symbolic of you and how I felt, and then a week later and the party—" He broke off. "Open. You'll understand better than I can explain."

Riley undid the red bow carefully and lifted the lid. Her breath caught.

"Zhang," she whispered carefully, lifting the dark and light green dragon out of the box. She held the dragon to her cheek, and for the first time, he saw the sparkle of what might be tears forming in her beautiful, expressive eyes. "You bought this before you knew I'd bought you the dragon."

"We were in sync even when we weren't admitting it to ourselves," he said.

“You brought me spring in winter,” Riley said, totally getting it. “And we have our first two ornaments together. You brought yours, didn’t you?”

He took his dragon out of his coat pocket, and it curled around his finger.

Riley gently tapped their dragons together. “Spirit dragons,” she breathed reverently. “When I was researching the Lunar New Year, I got so caught up in the mythology of Eastern dragons. So different from the stories in the West, and then when I saw the dragons that the artist was putting on display, it just seemed like a screaming sign. I was so scared and yet so hopeful.”

“You have the heart of a dragon,” he said. “Fierce, loyal, protective.”

“I like that I made the first move,” she said proudly, perching her dragon high on the small live tree she’d purchased.

“I’ve got plenty of moves planned, so don’t get too smug.” He nestled his dragon next to hers.

“That’s right.” Riley smiled. “You have your list. I was hoping you’d show me your next move or your next item. Maybe we can make a competition out of it,” she teased.

“Not exactly a competition”—he pulled her into his arms —“because we both win.”

THE END

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*December 1st*

SHEPARD LAKE SAT on a granite boulder, cradled his guitar close to his chest, and idly strummed. A small leather-bound journal lay open, blank-faced but for the date. Waiting for something that may never again come. He closed his eyes, shutting out what was considered to be one of the most spectacular views in the eastern part of the United States. Dumb move—like so much of his life, he'd come to realize since he'd stepped away from his career and dedicated this past year to so-called self-discovery.

He'd come for the view. He'd come to find his music again.

He'd given himself a year.

But after two months volunteering on an animal preserve in Kenya and nearly a year rebuilding damaged homes and businesses with a nonprofit in New Orleans and later Puerto Rico, he still didn't feel any closer to finding his music. And as far as the man he wanted to be, who knew? If he didn't have his music, he had no idea who he was.

He'd deliberately not touched his guitar while he'd volunteered and hadn't even tried to play until two months ago. He hadn't picked up a pen to write a song in over a year. Hadn't sung a note in longer. He didn't even hum in the shower anymore. He no longer dreamed in music.

Silence.

He'd hoped the silence would heal him.

He'd imagined the birds' songs would inspire him.

So for the past three-plus months he'd hiked along the Appalachian Trail heading toward Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Returning to his roots so to speak, even though he no longer had family anywhere near Tennessee. A trip of discovery. Only he still didn't know who he was or what he wanted to do next.

No. Not entirely true.

He wanted himself back.

Whoever he'd been, or would have been if his mother had never posted so many videos on YouTube of him when he'd barely been a teen that had improbably shot him into the stratosphere, spun him around challenging gravity until gravity won, spit him out, and crashed him back to earth.

Broke.

Alone.

Mocked.

Pitied.

Another child star burned out, lost, supernovaed into oblivion.

And, in a way he couldn't quite explain to himself, relieved.

Ten years of a wild, crazy, breathless, confusing, and soul-battering ride on a train where others were driving. Ten years of tearing off pieces of himself publicly and privately until he wasn't sure what was left. Ten years of trying to please so many people who could never be fully pleased. Ten years of cranking out hits, each one expected to drop bigger and better, than the last.

Ten years until he couldn't take one more second in his skin or his head, and he'd walked out of a recording session that no longer had resembled what he'd written or wanted to create.

He'd needed to be alone.

To think.

To breathe.

Because thinking for himself had been so actively discouraged, and he'd stopped trying—comforting himself that at least the music was his. Only that lie had no longer worked. And then there was the betrayal on so many fronts. But what was worse was how humiliatingly dumb and trusting he'd been—how easy he'd made it for his mother and his team to throw him under the proverbial bus, run over him and drive off to the next party.

Shepard abruptly stood. He'd promised himself he wouldn't dwell or get bitter. He wouldn't be like his mom. Only after nearly two years of being away from the business and being alone, he still sometimes stumbled.

Shepard wanted peace. He wanted to feel useful. He wanted to respect himself. But some days it was hard.

And the music—even after months of walking alone in nature, opening his heart up metaphorically to the universe—still wouldn't come.

After a month of hiking, he'd picked up his guitar at the end of every day. Old songs came easily but nothing new, and now that November had closed, he had to make a few choices.

It was getting cold, and he'd hit the Smoky Mountains National Park. The hike through the park generally took a week, and Tennessee had been his vague goal.

Today just before the dawn had streaked purple and orange across the sky, he'd packed up his gear and hiked to the peak of Clingmans Dome, the highest mountain in Tennessee, but so what? Not like he had a social media account anymore.

And his “friends” had run at the first hint of his descent and rumored bankruptcy.

The smile that curved his lips felt a little odd and painful. He might as well admit it: without music, he sucked at self-reflection.

He shouldered his pack and guitar again. On the hike up, he'd decided to leave the trail and walk toward Gatlinburg. He needed supplies. And a shower. And a few nights in a real bed.

And who knew, perhaps seeing the town where it had all started for him as a kid would jog something loose.

As he walked down the narrow summit trail, another idea occurred to him. Sweet Tea was near Gatlinburg. He'd heard that country music star Sutter Knight had married and returned to her hometown. If he could screw up his courage, perhaps he'd detour to Sweet Tea to see Sutter. Maybe she'd have some advice. Sutter was a true artist—wrote her own lyrics and arrangements and took charge in the recording studio.

She'd kept the control he'd let bleed away.

Sutter had shared busking corners with him. She'd also shared food from a bakery where she worked, tips, advice, and gigs when she could. They'd even worked on a few songs together while waiting for performances. Not many eighteen- and then nineteen-year-old girls would have been so sweet and generous to another teen, who'd been four years younger. She'd been more maternal than his mom, now that he had perspective.

Making up his mind, Shepard veered off the small trail he'd been on to join the large trail that led to a parking lot where locals and tourists parked so they could walk the trail toward the peak. He felt a frisson of anxiety. He wasn't ready to face possible recognition yet, but neither did he plan to spend his life hiding in the woods and becoming more feral.

He saw and heard the girl at the same time. Fast, light footsteps, and a gorgeous, melodic, rich voice rolled across the silent morning, competing with the birdsong he'd been enjoying during his hike. Her voice stopped him in his tracks. And the song...he'd never heard it before, but the melody flowed like water over the stones in a creek bed. She was pitch-perfect.

His mouth dropped open, and he stood like an ancient maple in the middle of the trail, struck dumb by her tone and the melody and the way her voice cut through the last mists of the mountain morning and javelined into his cold, lonely, anxious heart.

She ran straight toward him, and just as he registered that she wore earbuds and was astonishingly beautiful in a young and natural way, she looked up. Clear, Carolina-blue eyes met his and flared with alarm.

She shrieked, stumbled, and lost her balance. Even as he reached out to try to steady her on this narrow and rocky part of the path, she slipped through his fingers like a breath and tumbled head over heels down the brushy side of the trail.

Fear seized him at the same time as guilt for startling her. And admiration for how fast she must have been running to have fallen so far. And then disappointment that the beauty of the song had been severed short.

*Help her, idiot.*



TYLER KNIGHT BLINKED up at the sullen, gray sky.

“Could I be any more of a clumsy dork?” she muttered just as the most beautiful man in the world crouched down beside her.

“I am so sorry for startling you,” he said. His gravelly voice was even sexier than the high cheekbones that thrust sharply above his not so neatly trimmed beard. And his hair was thick, golden brown and waved away from his face like a lion’s mane. Then there were his eyes. Worried and the color of whiskey and warm as if there were a flame flickering in the depths.

*Stop staring.*

Tyler sat up, hoping the movement would A: snap her out of her trance and B: prove that she was not seriously injured, because she was at least three miles from the Jeep.

“I wasn’t paying attention,” she said and flushed because she’d thought there wouldn’t be people on the trail this early. She’d been singing one of her songs she’d been working on for weeks now, and she hadn’t planned on anyone ever hearing it.

*Of course the hottest man in Tennessee sees me in my clumsy and sweaty glory and bellowing out “Wind Me Up” like a pissed-off goose.*

“Are you hurt?”

“No,” Tyler said automatically, although her ankle was already starting to throb and her knee stung, but she wouldn’t be hurt. She couldn’t be.

“I don’t have time to be hurt,” she said quickly.

“Unfortunately—” he smiled as if to belie the fact of his statement “—life doesn’t cooperate like that.”

Tyler sucked in a breath but still felt a little dizzy. Even his smile was beautiful, although tentative, almost as if he were a little shy or uncertain. Shy she could relate to. And uncertainty she had nailed, but this man? No way.

He looked familiar. She couldn’t quite shake the feeling she’d seen him before, but where? School? She’d left Sweet Tea after fourth grade.

“Do you want help up?”

“No, I’m...umm.” She met his whiskey gaze and forgot how to speak. “Embarrassed.”

She felt the color flood her face. That had not been what she was going to say. “Fine. I’m fine.” She braced herself, straightened her legs, and immediately winced.

A not-so-nice word that her former roommate and business partner in Kinder Knight Singing—Maya Singh—would often say after the classes with their young students were finished for the day floated through her mind.

She grit her teeth.

“Actually, maybe a boost?” she asked.

“I have a first aid kit on me,” he said, his beautiful gaze on her bloodied knee that poked through her now-ruined pair of running leggings.

Lululemon. A gift. Her favorite she couldn’t afford to replace.

“I’ll clean up when I get home. I have a Jeep down in the parking lot.”

More than three miles away.

And her ankle was no longer throbbing but yelling.

“It’s no trouble,” he said, softly. “But I can give the kit to you and give you some space if I’m making you uncomfortable.” He spread his arms out a little, stood, and then walked a few steps back as if she were a wild animal he didn’t want to spook.

She should be at least a little nervous. But his familiarity and general calm, quiet demeanor soothed her.

“Here.” He’d taken a first aid kit out of his backpack and handed it to her.

“Thank you.” It was hard to open, and she realized that she was shivering. She’d dressed fine for an early morning trail run—leggings and a long-sleeve, high-performance, moisture-wicking shirt—but the adrenaline from the run was ebbing and her sweat was cooling, and this high up in the mountains, the late fall temperature was chilly.

He opened the kit, handed her an antibacterial wipe, and then shrugged out of the thick, olive-colored athletic pullover he wore.

“Wear this, and I’ll walk you down to your Jeep. Sorry about the smell.” He smiled, definitely self-deprecating. “I’ve been hiking for a while, but I did do laundry earlier this week and just put this on this morning. Likely the cleanest of the lot.” He kicked at his backpack with a dusty hiking boot and handed her his shirt.

Tyler noticed three things at once. The guitar case propped against his backpack with faded cursive letters spelling out Winter Heart. Her favorite album ever. Two dimples flashed and then disappeared back into his thick beard. And when he’d shrugged out of his pullover, his shirt had tugged up and she’d seen an inked scroll of music on his right arm that disappeared when he tugged the sleeves of his white T-shirt back into place.

*OMG. Shepard Lake is back in Tennessee.*



SHE HAD COURAGE, he'd give her that.

Shepard paced behind her and to the side when the path allowed, wishing there was more he could do. Her limping was more pronounced, and her face looked pale, with a sheen of sweat.

He cursed himself again for contributing to her tumble.

She could have been seriously hurt if she'd fallen and rolled on a different part of the trail.

“Are you sure you don't want some help? I could carry you.”

“No,” she said quickly. “I'd break your back or something worse.”

“Women.” He huffed a breath, not sure if he should be more insulted or amused. He'd never been a gym rat, but he was a runner, and the months of rebuilding damaged homes and businesses and then hiking with his guitar and heavy pack had him in the best shape of his life. Ironic considering his career was tattered.

“What's that supposed to mean?” She peered back at him, her spectacular blue eyes wide.

“They're always freaked out about their weight, thinking they are too heavy or too something they don't like.”

“In LA it's like that,” she said slowly, as if thinking. “A lot of my friends in school were always trying faddy diets and trendy exercises like barre class, CrossFit, spin class, and of course Pilates and yoga.”

His heart sank. LA. Los Angeles. Poison for him now. He couldn't return. He didn't want to get caught up in that lethal combination of fast-paced and fake everything again. It had been a deadly cocktail of a train wreck mixed with a plane crash, shaken and poured over jagged rocks.



He didn't know where he wanted to live, but it wasn't there.

"You've got a bit of a drawl," he noted, finding it charming and soothing.

She laughed. "My family left Tennessee and moved to LA when I was a kid," she said. "My accent comes and goes. My four sisters all have it too."

"Five daughters?" He stopped walking. "Dang your dad had game."

"He was determined to get a son. Never did, but we all got boy names and lived our lives mostly outside—swimming, hiking, biking, surfing, and, of course, martial arts." She laughed. "I'm the youngest but not the shortest."

Her smile was infectious. It lit up her whole face, and he caught his breath, feeling like the sun had come out behind all the steel gray of the sky.

"My mom was a model when she met my dad, so we're all Amazons except Sutter, but only in my family can five six be considered the shrimp."

"Sutter," he repeated the name, feeling a little dazzled by the coincidence. Maybe by immersing himself in his country roots, he'd be able to rediscover his music and his voice. Perhaps the universe was finally answering his call for help. "Your sister?"

"Yeah. She lives pretty local now with her husband. She's expecting twins, which is one of the reasons I've moved back home." Her smile dimmed. "For a while or maybe not."

"Rebooting your life is hard," he muttered in a massive understatement.

She nodded and winced as she stumbled a little over a large stone embedded in the trail.

"Are you sure...?"

"You are not carrying me, your backpack, and your guitar. I'll just admit I'm suitably impressed by your manners, chivalrous offer, and manliness, and we'll call it good."

“Yes, ma’am.”

She laughed and began walking again, her limp more pronounced and her expression tight. “That’s right. We didn’t introduce ourselves.”

His stomach plummeted. He didn’t want to lie to her. Use the name Luke or Lukas, his first name that he’d used while traveling. He’d been called Shepard—his middle name—since he’d started playing on street corners as a kid. But he didn’t want to be him either. He hadn’t wanted to be Shepard Lake for a long while now.

“I’m Tyler,” she said. “Not ma’am, and you can be Liam until the parking lot.”

“Why Liam?”

“You look like Liam Hemsworth only with better hair.”

That was a new one. Maybe the beard? Similar coloring and jawline?

If he were going to pretend to be a famous, handsome leading man, why not go for broke?

“Not Chris?”

“There can be only one Thor,” she intoned. “The consequence of which no one gets to be Chris but Chris.”

She winced and made a sound, and her ankle buckled a little as she hopped over a boulder.

“Tyler, let me help,” he said, celebrity and fake names forgotten. He took her arm. “Lean on me.”

“I don’t want to be a burden,” she whispered and stared down hard at the trail as if it had answers she desperately needed.

He had the feeling she was talking about more than just a mild ankle twist and needing help back to her Jeep.

The sheen of tears he caught when she risked a glance up at him sent him into full white knight mode. Who knew he had that setting?

How the paparazzi would sneer.

The unexpected impulse settled him a little. Maybe he hadn't given away or lost everything that had once made him who he was.

"Let's get you down the trail if you're sure you don't want me to call emergency services."

"Definitely not." She shuddered and took a step, this time holding on to him. "My sister and brother-in-law are relying on me to help them out this holiday season with one of our town's Christmas traditions. I need to be fine. I am fine."

As if to demonstrate this, she picked up her pace, her pretty, heart-shaped face and bee-stung lips set in lines of fierce determination. Even her hands were balled into fists. He'd never met a woman so guileless and seemingly indifferent to her appearance. She didn't seem to be trying to impress him, and she was not flirting.

*Refreshing.*

*Or maybe because I've been hiking and camping and roughing it for a few months, she's not interested.*

He laughed at himself, and it felt good.

"What's so funny?" she asked as they rounded a corner.

"Me." He looked back at her, smiling for the first time probably in months. "I'm ridiculous." The smile felt good, like the weak, almost winter sun promising to emerge through the unrelentingly dark gray sky that teased snow. "Which is better than brooding or bearish."

"Bear," she whispered, wide-eyed.

"I was exaggerating. I'm not that bad," but the fear on her face made him spin around. He swept her behind him, shrugged out of his pack, and brandished his guitar in case the bear rushed.

"What are you doing?" she hissed. "That's a guitar with a lot of music history. It's not a Louisville Slugger. Don't you have bear spray?"

“In my pack,” he said backing up the trail and keeping her behind him. Of course, he’d tossed his pack away. Brilliant. Heroic.

She deftly pulled a canister out of the small pack she wore at her waist, stepped to his side, and aimed it toward the bear, who was rummaging through dense foliage, likely looking for a few last meals before hibernating.

She’d gone running with bear spray? Now he felt even more useless.

“Yeah, that’s probably a better choice,” he muttered as he repositioned himself in front of Tyler, picked up his pack, knowing exactly which outside container he’d stashed two cans for just such an emergency. He pulled one out as they continued to back away.

The bear—not a cub, but definitely a juvenile—looked up at them and then returned to its foraging.

“You certainly jog prepared,” he whispered.

“I was more worried about creepy men,” she admitted.

“Relieved to learn I’m not creepy after months of hiking.”

“Not yet.” Tyler smiled cheekily. “I always run with Mace. And I’ve had a lot of self-defense classes and am a black belt in aikido. My dad insisted all five of us badass up.”

“Good for him. Um...” He was glad she didn’t seem to be aware of who he was, or who she would think he was due to the online reputation his mother and her current boyfriend had been building over the past couple of years, or else he’d be getting a face full of Mace.

“Worried now?” She smiled.

“I think you should come with a warning label,” he said casually.

They both sighed as the bear ambled off into the deeper brush.

“Let’s get you safely to your Jeep,” he said. “After you tuck that pepper spray away.” He held his hands out wide. “I

was never a Boy Scout, but I know how to behave myself—” contrary to all the grasping for more fame rumors “—so you don’t need to be pointing anything in my direction.”

“Maybe you’ll need it.” She smiled before tucking her arm through his. “You did kind of freeze back there and panic.”

“There was no panicking. None.”

He found himself relaxing a little, his heart no longer galloping. And she was teasing him like he was a normal person. He barely remembered when he’d been normal.

“Looked like panic. Smelled like panic. I’m calling it like I’ve seen it for twenty-six years: panic. Besides—” she arched one pale brow impudently “—you might need me to protect you from other early morning critters.”

“A bear is not a critter,” he objected. “And I did stand in front of you,” he defended himself. “That should earn me a few points.”

“Points? Is this a game?” She grinned although he could see the effort she was making to mask her pain. “Then me keeping the Mace out should earn me points as I can protect you from bears, critters, and other ambitiously early runners who throw themselves in your path.”

“Pretty sure I’m safe,” he commented, embarrassed that he hadn’t bathed in a while as the quick splashes in icy streams likely didn’t count. And when was the last time he’d shaved? He hated his facial hair. It helped to hide his identity perhaps, but it itched. The longing for a shower and shave and a hot meal was becoming an obsession rather than a nuisance.

If the trolls on social media could read his mind, they’d hammer another dent in the reputation he’d not done enough to deserve but had definitely not done enough to avoid. Here he was, fantasizing about a shower alone—not with a model or another pop star—and sleeping in a comfortable bed, also alone.

“I’ve been on the trail for a few months. Getting ready to call it quits for winter,” he told her, surprising himself a little.

He'd craved solitude for so long. Had embraced it. Now he couldn't shut up.

"Where you headed?" Tyler asked, and he tried not to notice how her face was pale and her mouth pinched with pain.

He really wanted to pick her up and carry her, but it would likely freak her out.

"You don't need to pretend that it doesn't hurt."

"You could pretend not to notice."

"I'm sick of pretending." He astonished himself again.  
"Completely done with it."

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## About the Author



Sinclair Sawhney is a former journalist and middle school teacher who holds a BA in Political Science and K-8 teaching certificate from the University of California, Irvine and a MS in Education with an emphasis in teaching writing from the University of Washington. She has worked as Senior Editor with Tule Publishing for over seven years.

Writing as Sinclair Jayne she's published fifteen short contemporary romances with Tule Publishing with another four books being released in 2021. Married for over twenty-four years, she has two children, and when she isn't writing or editing, she and her husband, Deepak, are hosting wine tastings of their pinot noir and pinot noir rose at their vineyard Roshni, which is a Hindi word for light-filled, located in Oregon's Willamette Valley. Shaandaar!

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