

Fiery

A Novel

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Middle Fork Press

Preview Edition

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Middle Fork Press

P-chip

On March 17, 2010, a factory outside Shenzhen shipped its ten-millionth P-chip. The component was smaller than a fingernail, cheaper than a postage stamp, and already inside everything: children's toys, hospital monitors, the flight management boards of regional jets. Power routing. Housekeeping. The work no one thought about.

A billion units within two decades, the analysts said. Conservative estimate.

The P-chip had one flaw. It could be weaponized.

Y2K

December 31st, 1999, Seventeen hours before the Millennium

When do you know you're dying?

He lay on his side, looking sideways up at the Sony Trinitron TV sitting on an unfinished shelf plank spanning two cinder blocks, thinking about that.

There was live coverage of fireworks erupting off the Harbour Bridge in Sydney, welcoming the year 2000. By his estimation, the lights on the bridge should never have come on. There shouldn't have been fireworks. Revelers in front of pubs along The Rocks should have been home searching for flashlights and candles.

He was certain it all would end. From his rented trailer a couple of miles outside Lone Pine on the east side of the Sierras, he believed months of planning would save his best friend and the woman they both cared for.

The bathtub filled with water and the living room stacked with camping gear and canned food were ready for survival — and love — in the new world.

But not him. A voice that drifted toward his ear, then away, then back again told him he was dying. His body felt pinned to the mini-shag carpet by some impossible gravity.

He lay motionless at the foot of the bed. Above him came laughter, small squeals, sharp breaths, the rhythmic squeak of bedsprings and the dull thud of the headboard against the wall.

Then silence — followed by soft panting and a big toe with a Chick Flick Cherry nail dropping into his field of view. It touched his temple, slid to his ear, and circled... and circled... and circled. It felt good. His eyes grew heavy.

The circling stopped. The voice returned — warm, breathy, threaded with weed, sweat, and perfume. “Look, Stevie, it's the Millennium.”

Tears slipped from his closed eyes as the springs above him came alive again. His jaw fell slack, and drool melted into the frayed fibers of the mini-shag carpet.

Plans and Plots

Arlene Fisher waited for NSA director William Pierce on a bench near the Smithsonian American Art Building. If Fisher appeared in your doorway, something irreversible was about to happen.

Pierce sat beside her without greeting. Fisher never needed small talk.

“We’re making progress on the remote power-control tech,” she said. “And the domestic-terrorism narrative is ready to build. We found a small drug outfit in Colorado — OTR, On The Rise. They’re perfect for the storyline. We also have a source at Crescent Electronics that gives us a backdoor into E-Wave’s security servers.”

“What about Taggart?” Pierce asked.

“I have a meeting scheduled. He’ll lend credibility once the events unfold.”

“He’s close to his father. Be careful.”

Fisher’s lips barely moved. “I know. The Vice President’s exposure is limited to what we script.”

Pierce stood. He paused, held her with a long flat stare, then walked away.

Fisher exhaled slowly. She hated that stare. From a man like Pierce, silence was more dangerous than anger.

Three thousand miles west, the chairman was reviewing a business intelligence report. The acquisition target was a Colorado software company that had branched out from game development to aircraft simulators and, more recently, to systems control. Their software was the accelerant that could unlock the power of Crescent Electronics, one of the chairman’s newest holdings and the largest manufacturer of P-chips for aviation.

The Colorado company’s new platform was elegant code. Modular. The kind of thing that attached itself to existing avionics infrastructure and became a hidden conduit before anyone noticed. Married to Crescent processors, it would be a fast pass to opening up new markets.

But there was one problem. The founder didn’t want to sell.

The business intelligence service he'd hired valued the company at \$800 million. As he often did, the chairman used an intermediary company to gauge interest in the acquisition. The answer was a hard no.

AeroSoft. Owner: GW Canyon. The chairman looked at the company's website, a picture of the founder in the cockpit of his Pilatus. He smiled. With the right information, with the right leverage, a no could be turned into a yes. First steps had been taken. He'd sell. They always did.

Prymelift was another company in the chairman's portfolio. Its founder, Winston Pryme, was an owner who said yes and became very wealthy as a result. He might serve as a good example for convincing Canyon.

A video call with Winston Pryme was scheduled for noon. The chairman took it from his study, jacket on, which Pryme would notice and appreciate.

Pryme ran a mid-size aerospace components firm out of Charlotte — good margins, conservative management, the kind of balance sheet that made the chairman's participation feel like validation rather than leverage. They'd done two deals together over the years, played golf at Seminole, attended the same weddings in the way that men at a certain altitude always seemed to. Winston was sharp and genuinely good company. He also understood, without it ever being said, how the arithmetic worked between them.

"How's West Coast living?" Pryme asked.

"Fine, Winston, and Carol and the kids?"

They went through it — Charlotte, a daughter finishing at Vanderbilt, a ski house in Highlands they'd finally sold. The chairman listened well. He always did.

When the conversation found its natural pause, the chairman tilted back slightly. "I wanted to ask about the new higher-torque motors for the E-wave. There's a software company I'm looking at that could get even more efficiency."

Pryme straightened almost imperceptibly. "Anything that improves range and time. Who is it?"

"A little early for names, but they're solid." He let that sit. "I've got the Augusta rental again this year. Magnolia Lane on Thursday, tee time Friday morning. Bring Carol if she wants to make a week of it. The house sleeps twelve."

Pryme smiled the way men smile when they understand the shape of a thing.

“We’d love that. I’ll check with Carol tonight.”

“Good.” The chairman picked up his coffee. “I’ll have someone send logistics.”

He closed the laptop and looked back out at the water.

NEOS. He said it once, quietly, to no one.

Desert Flyover

Allison Tobias looked out the window of the NetJets Cessna Citation. The moving landscape — Pacific, Mojave, Grand Canyon, Lake Powell, Colorado Rockies — was one of the most dramatic flight paths in the country. By now she knew it by heart. The twice-monthly commute to see her boyfriend, GW Canyon, had become routine, and she rarely looked outside anymore. The laptop on the tray table always won. Two and a half hours of clean, uninterrupted work time was a luxury she couldn't waste.

At first, she'd been uncomfortable letting GW arrange and pay for private jet service. The weight of it felt like encoded expectations — loyalty, gratitude, intimacy, maybe even an early form of permanence. It took a few flights before she accepted that GW wasn't signaling ownership. He was being generous, and elegant, and trying to solve the problem of distance in the most straightforward way he knew.

A couple of weeks earlier, just before he walked her from his Range Rover to the plane, he'd asked, "Has it ever crossed your mind to spend more time in Colorado? There's plenty of room in the house to set up a full office for you."

She'd fumbled the answer, trying to sound warm and noncommittal. "What an interesting idea."

She meant it as ambiguity. He heard it as hope.

The truth was she had already leaned in — much further than she'd expected. She'd developed deep feelings for GW, for his high-school-aged son, Davey, and even for GW's father and stepmother. Like her own family, the Canyons radiated a kind of emotional gravity: safe, steady, quietly irresistible.

Both were Colorado natives. Her father had been a professor at the Air Force Academy; his had been a rancher and fishing guide. She held an aerospace degree from CU and a PhD from MIT; he was a Princeton alum. Skiers, hikers, fly fishers. She loved technical rock climbing; he was happy to belay her. Both were engineers, both analytical — yet neither seemed eager to apply the same discipline to the coding of their relationship.

Allison had never been boy-crazy in her teens, though she always enjoyed the company of men. At TwinStar she was one of the few senior women, and — more by choice than HR policy — she avoided dating anyone at work. Her last live-in relationship had ended badly, and the only good thing about it was that she'd been the one to walk away.

Her sister had a couple of kids, and she'd occasionally pictured herself as a mother someday. But whenever she examined the idea closely, her focus shifted back to the career. She wasn't ready to rewrite her life around love — not yet — but she couldn't shake the quiet worry that she might someday look up and find herself lonely and unfulfilled because she'd closed off too many possibilities.

GW Canyon stood on the tarmac outside the Jet Center at Eagle County Airport, hands in the pockets of his jacket, watching a trio of inbound private jets make their descending glide from the east. Low afternoon sun lit a glaze of gold across the valley.

He wasn't nervous. Keyed-in. The kind of alertness he used to feel watching new software go live, tracking for the thing that might go sideways.

He spotted the dot of the silver-and-blue Citation as it made its turn. Right on schedule.

Funny how quickly a routine had formed. Twice a month. Sometimes more. He'd never planned anything like it. He'd certainly never asked another woman to keep crossing states to see him. After Jenny died, he'd assumed that part of his life — partnership, that easy swing between independence and intimacy — had sealed itself off.

But Allison had walked into that vacuum as if it had always been shaped for her.

He admired her drive, her clarity, the way she was always two or three steps ahead of him when they solved problems together. He admired the way she handled herself with Davey — never trying too hard, never angling for approval. And he liked that she didn't need him. Wanting him was enough.

He'd asked her, not long ago, whether she'd ever think about spending more time in Colorado. The question had come out before he'd fully considered its weight.

He wasn't trying to trap her or claim her. He just liked the idea of a shared morning now and then. Coffee on the deck. Her laptop next to his. Something simple.

Her "What an interesting idea" still played in his head. He'd taken it as openness. Maybe too much so.

The truth was he didn't want to push. She was in the middle of the biggest career ascent of her life, and he respected that. He'd stepped back from the relentless grind of being a CEO, but she was in the full burn of achieving it. He didn't want to be another man who pulled at her, who asked her to give something up.

He just didn't want to lose her.

The Citation's wheels touched the runway in a gentle puff of smoke. GW exhaled, slow and steady, and gave himself the small, private permission he'd been rationing out in increments: he was falling in love with her. Really falling. Not the grief-soaked hope of the years after Jenny. Not the light, temporary companionships he'd allowed himself between then and now.

This was different. Clearer. More grounded.

He watched the jet taxi toward him, sunlight flashing off the fuselage.

C-21

A man in a dark cowboy hat with a rattlesnake band, flannel shirt, and expired cowboy boots parked the white F-150 at the far edge of the Costco lot—one of the big, striped spots where landscapers with trailers liked to sit. From here he had an unobstructed line of sight across the highway to the runway at Eagle County Airport.

He lowered the window. Late-afternoon air thinned the smell of cold metal, stale beer, and old plastic inside the cab. On his lap rested a small matte-black box with two buttons and a green LED. A cable ran out the window to the magnetic antenna on the roof. Nothing special. Nothing with a label. Nothing to trace.

Through the windshield, a United 757 dropped into view, nose pitched slightly down as it came in hot. It thundered overhead, lightly rocking the truck to one side. He didn't look up. He'd seen hundreds of landings. He wasn't here for that one.

There—far out over the valley—just a bright pinprick at first. The C-21. Military Learjet derivative. Two crew. Four passengers. He knew the numbers, the weight, the flight plan, the expected descent path. He knew the exact altitude when control-handshake signals opened up.

He rolled the black box between his hands, feeling the vibration of his own pulse through the plastic.

The gear was down now.

He lifted his thumb.

He waited for the jet to cross the chain-link perimeter fence.

And then he pushed the button.

He didn't watch the impact. He didn't need to. The concussion hit a few seconds later—deep, muffled, then a column of fire.

He exhaled once, slow and quiet, and reached for the truck keys.

The NetJets Citation rolled to a stop in front of the Jet Center. When the cabin door dropped, Allison saw GW below—smiling. She felt the familiar lift in her chest.

She stepped down onto the tarmac.

The explosion hit before her second foot touched the ground.

A sharp boom, then a rolling, concussive shove of air across the field. GW flinched hard and instinctively stepped in front of her. She jerked her head toward the sound. A column of flame rose on the far side of the runway—a bright orange jet of fire, then black smoke folding into the sky. Moments later the heat arrived.

“Oh my God,” she breathed.

GW didn’t answer right away. His body had gone rigid, his eyes locked on the twisting debris scattering across the runway.

Not another one, he thought.

Not again.

Allison felt the same jolt of recognition. TwinStar. Sierra West.

“GW,” she said softly. She could feel his pulse in the air between them — tight, almost vibrating.

“I saw it start to roll,” he murmured. “A horizontal twist. Like it got a full deflection all at once. Impossible.” His voice was calm, but something underneath had gone flat.

Emergency trucks barreled past them, sirens screaming. Flames were already shrinking under high-pressure foam, but the black smoke kept building — thick, oily, certain.

“There’s no survival in that,” Allison said, barely audible.

GW nodded once. “No.”

They stood shoulder to shoulder, watching rescue crews swarm the wreckage. Neither moved. Neither spoke. The heat shimmer from the fire carried a familiar smell — the same harsh, metallic scent that had lived in the back of her throat after Sierra West.

Within minutes, a county Ford Police Interceptor rolled through the FBO gate. Sheriff Jeff Lewis stepped out and scanned the runway. “Fuck me,” he said under his breath.

GW saw him and walked over.

“Jesus, GW,” Lewis said. “You get a look at it?”

“Enough,” GW answered. “Uncommanded lateral roll. Full-axis. Like someone grabbed the yoke and yanked.”

Lewis’s eyes narrowed. “Mechanical?”

GW shook his head slowly. “Doesn’t fit. And the timing was... wrong.”

Lewis didn’t reply, but something in his jaw tightened. Allison watched the exchange, reading the unspoken weight in both their faces.

When the brief statements were done, Lewis looked up from his notes. “I may need more from you later.”

“You know where to find me,” GW said.

They turned back toward the Jet Center, walking slower than before.

Inside Costco, the same man from the F-150 pushed a cart casually toward the meat department. He paused at a display for zero-gravity patio chairs, tapping the fabric, testing the frame, then moved on.

A New York strip four-pack, he decided. Thick. Good marbling.

He lifted one into the cart and continued down the aisle without looking back.

The chairman was in his La Jolla home’s study overlooking the Pacific. At his wife Gail’s request, he was folding a twenty into a little jewelry box with a small rhinestone ring. Apparently, there had been significant inflation since his two adult daughters from his first marriage got a dollar from the tooth fairy. He didn’t mind. He loved his daughters as his father had loved his children, as a satisfactory provider. Maybe it was older fatherhood, maybe he wanted his much younger wife to be happy, or maybe it was that their daughter, Amanda, was precociously adorable — all he knew was that he smiled more around her.

He looked up and saw a video of a plane crash in Colorado on the news. The TV was muted, but he watched the images from the crash captured by a couple of cell phone videos playing in a loop. At the next story, he turned back to tying a small red ribbon around the jewelry box.

New Home

The conversation about the crash filled most of the thirty-minute drive back to GW's new house. It lost its grip only when they passed the Bristlecone Club guard gate and climbed the valley toward the ridge. Allison reached over and gave GW's knee a gentle squeeze, breaking the silence.

"How's the house looking?" she asked.

GW's smile came fast and wide. "I think you'll be pleased. The new furniture came up from Denver last week, and we got all the rugs laid down."

Allison studied him for a moment. "You're going to miss the old place, aren't you?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I liked the Lake Creek house a lot. But when someone shows up with an unsolicited offer for a million over market and wants it furnished... well, you've got to be real."

"You'd have been stupid not to take it," she agreed. "I've never even heard of someone buying a place fully furnished."

"With second homes it happens all the time," GW said. "They want turnkey. And honestly, I didn't mind starting fresh. Going modern is a big change."

He paused, almost amused. "But here's the crazy part—the house is back on the market."

"What?" Allison blinked at him.

"The realtor says the husband bought it before showing it to his wife. She hated it. The sign went up two days later."

Allison shook her head. "Wild."

"Oh, that's only half the story," GW said. "They've listed it for a million less than they paid."

"Double wild," she said, exhaling. The absurdity softened the last tension thread from the crash.

They turned up the long, curving driveway. As the Range Rover cleared the final bend, the house appeared—anchored into the slope, all glass and timber angles catching the afternoon light.

“There’s still a little daylight to see the house. We’re expected at the Bryngleson’s at six.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting them,” Allison said. That was mostly true. She tried to keep the note of uncertainty out of her voice. GW’s social circle was a different ecosystem—wealthy, influential, tasteful. She sometimes felt like the person added to balance the seating chart rather than because she naturally belonged.

“I promise you’ll like them,” GW said.

“I already do,” she said, selling the lie gently. “And I still can’t believe Bryg tipped you off about this house. It really was meant to be. Someone was looking out for you.”

The Range Rover eased past a fieldstone pylon sticking up from the snow with the carved address, up a short incline, and then leveled before the front entrance. The new house sprawled in a wide, low footprint. The center core connected two wings that angled inward, enclosing a semicircular patio overlooking a spring-fed trout pond. Sunlight flickered off a red canoe sitting on a small wooden dock over the frozen pond, making it all look warmer than it was.

Maria Salazar—GW’s “house mom”—must have seen them coming on the kitchen monitor, because she had the ten-foot double doors open by the time they reached the top step. She greeted Allison with a warm hug and a soft, affectionate “Welcome home, mija,” that made Allison smile every time.

Inside, Allison slowed.

She recognized none of the furniture.

And all of it at once.

This was the first time she’d seen the house fully assembled. Over the past months, GW had texted her photos of swatches and finishes, asking, “You like this?” or “What do you think of the walnut trim?”—a gentle pattern of checking with her, not for permission but... inclusion.

She had chalked it up to his thoroughness at first. Then to kindness. Now she wasn’t sure. It felt like he’d been giving her a soft, careful invitation into the space without ever naming it.

But as she scanned the sunken living room—modern lines, deep colors, warm woods—it was still undeniably his house. His choices. His taste. His life.

She stepped toward the retractable glass wall and looked out at the patio and pond. Pyrite Peak rose behind them through the snowy pines, catching a sharp slant of late light.

“The canoe’s a nice touch,” she said.

GW slipped an arm around her waist and kissed her temple. “I thought you’d like it.”

From below, a deep bass thrum floated up from the theater room—Jupiter’s Moon again, some planetary catastrophe game shaking the subwoofers.

Allison laughed softly. “Sounds like Davey’s settling in.”

“In every possible way,” GW said, smiling. “I’ll tell him you’re here. He’s looking forward to us all going fishing tomorrow.”

And for a moment—just a moment—she let herself feel the shape of this place. Not as a visitor.

As something that might, eventually, open a door.

—

Over her protestation, Maria carried Allison’s weekend bag to the main bedroom suite, but GW had already anticipated most of her needs. The suite opened in three directions—sleeping area, a massive walk-in closet, and a bathroom the size of a small apartment. Light poured in from clerestory windows, warm and diffused. Floor-to-ceiling windows with electric shades opened to views of the pond and the peaks beyond.

Allison stepped into the closet and stopped.

Her clothes—the ones she’d left at the Lake Creek house—were already hung on padded wooden hangers. Her climbing jackets, work blazers, workout gear. Even the small jewelry box she kept in GW’s old nightstand had been placed neatly on a built-in shelf. In the bathroom, she found her skin-care stuff arranged with thoughtful precision: not staged, just placed where she’d instinctively reach.

She let out a slow breath.

This wasn't careless indulgence. It was intention. GW had tried to make the space usable for her without presuming she belonged here. It was a delicate balance—generous but not demanding—and yet the gesture itself carried its own weight. A kind of gravitational pull that felt both flattering and faintly destabilizing.

She walked deeper into the closet. The sheer scale of the room—twelve-foot ceilings, soft recessed lighting, rows of shelves and drawers—pressed in on her in a quiet, luxurious way. Comfortable... but also a little unreal. A standard suburban bedroom could fit inside it. She glanced in the full-length mirror, catching her own expression: part wonder, part caution.

So this is what rich feels like? It wasn't envy, exactly. More like stepping into a fly stream she couldn't read. The water was right, but she could feel the slipperiness of the rocks under her feet.

She opened a drawer expecting emptiness and found it lined with small organizers—perfect spaces for things she hadn't yet brought. He hadn't filled them. He'd left room.

That small decision tugged at her chest.

She set her palms on the cool quartz of the bathroom counter and met her own eyes in the mirror. She was used to male colleagues being intimidated by her competence. She was used to being the smartest person in a room. But in GW's world—in this world—she sometimes felt like she was borrowing someone else's life. And tonight's dinner with the Brynglesons was another step into that unfamiliar circle.

"These people are just people," she told herself quietly. But the truth was, the very wealthy often behaved like a different species—easier with power, unbothered by stakes that would make ordinary people flinch. She didn't fear them. She just didn't fully trust the terrain.

She selected a dress she knew GW loved—simple, elegant, structured—and laid it on the bench at the foot of the bed. As she slipped her hair back into a clip, she felt another small current, a quiet undertow of possibility and risk.

This house.

These people.

This man.

She loved him. Loved him enough. But there was a part of her—ambitious, cautious, fiercely self-directed—that felt the thin line between stepping into a shared life and being absorbed by it.

A soft knock came at the door. GW's voice carried through, warm and familiar. "You good in there?"

Allison allowed herself a smile. "Yeah. Just about ready."

She took one last look in the mirror — good enough, even with costume jewelry — and headed out to meet him.

Bristlecone Club

The idea started in a Vail restaurant twenty years before GW would buy a house there. Bryg and Lucy Bryngleson sat across from two part-time residents like themselves, watching a fly fisherman work his way up Gore Creek toward the Covered Bridge.

Pushing a small puddle of balsamic and olive oil around his salad plate with a bread crust, Bryg's neighbor said, "Honestly, Bryg, who gets to buy a ski area? I'm a cardiologist, not a developer. But for someone like you — pennies on the dollar, and you'd know what to do with it."

That evening, Bryg pulled out a county map and studied it. The next morning he called their realtor and asked if she could ride with him to see the property. They drove three miles up a paved county road outside Eagle to an entrance barricaded by 2x4s bolted to the top of three 55-gallon drums. The road skirted Dead Mule Creek, a rushing stream cutting through a natural corridor between a low ridge and a forested slope rising above a natural lake. Ski runs had been clear-cut through the trees, forming braided veins rising in several directions.

"It's spectacular," Bryg said. "Who owned this land?"

The realtor had been selling luxury properties in the valley for over twenty years. First came the Utes, then the railroad, then a Greek sheepherding family, and finally a cable TV systems owner who dreamed of a private ski area with a golf course. He'd spent years securing water rights, negotiating a Forest Service land swap, and getting the county to pave the road. One battle after another.

"And then he hit an obstacle," the realtor said.

Bryg looked up. "What was that?"

"Cancer. Lung. He died last year."

"And the family? The heirs?"

"That's the thing. He didn't have any. There's a trust attorney in upstate New York who just wants to dispose of the property and give the proceeds to a local hospital."

Bryg looked at the sales flyer. "And this is the price? Two million?"

"It is."

He turned back toward the meadow and the rising slashes of ski slopes, scanning slowly left to right. “How much to finish this guy’s dream?”

The realtor thought about it. “I’m not a developer, but based on what I’ve seen — \$100 to \$200 million in infrastructure. Water plant, waste treatment, electricity, roads, lift towers, base area. All of that.”

Secure the land. Hire a top civil engineering firm, a golf course designer, a ski company manager, a real estate company with international reach — all doable. Long-term debt could cover most of the infrastructure, and real estate sales would recover investment costs. That brought the gap down to maybe \$50 million. He could backfill that with investors. And if nothing ever happened, he could fall back on a fishing and hunting lodge with a few lots for some nice cabins.

He turned to the realtor. “Let’s write it up. Full price offer.”

The next day, Bryg drove Lucy to the property. He stood back and watched her walk up the two-track road into the meadow toward the base of the ski hill. About halfway, she stopped and slowly — like her husband the day before — surveyed the topography from left to right.

She turned and walked back toward him. “It’ll work,” she said with a smile. “It absolutely will.”

A week later, Bryg had it under contract. His only hesitation was the lack of design and building talent in a small mountain town. He soon found out he didn’t need to worry. Resort counties attracted skilled land planners, architects, contractors, and tradespeople the way factories attract assembly workers. It was an industry unto itself.

There were high upfront costs, and Bryg tapped his network for investors, offering premium lots on the golf course or ski-in/ski-out positions on several runs. During that time, he met Tali Gold.

Work had already begun on the bridges when Bryg was in a canvas-covered Jeep CJ-7 with his land planner, sorting out the best positioning of a residential lot branch, and a faded blue International Scout bounced up the road behind him. Out stepped a young woman in her early twenties — muck boots, jeans, chambray shirt, tangled hair held in place by a Stetson. She brushed the hair from her face as she got closer and Bryg revised his first impression entirely.

“Hey, neighbor,” Tali said with a laugh. “You’re Bryngleson, aren’t you?”

Bryg took her hand and felt the firm grasp. “Yes, I am.” She was close in age to his oldest daughter.

Tali set her feet squarely in front of him, hands on hips. “We’ve got to talk.”

That began a months-long conversation that ended with her making an initial \$20 million equity investment in the project.

Bryg was fascinated by the depth of her access to capital. He learned bits and pieces. She grew up in California. Her father had built a tech empire. Colorado put enough distance between her and her family. Tali’s property adjoined the northwest property line, and Bryg was open to folding it into the development. Tali wanted to keep it separate. For her investment, she wanted full access rights to the resort amenities and security services — terms Bryg easily agreed to.

Within a decade, his dream had taken full shape. Just past the unassuming guardhouse and across the bridge over Dead Mule Creek, the road curved to reveal a stone, timber, and glass multi-level lodge — a pond in front, a high-speed quad lift behind. The restaurant, spa, fitness center, and owners’ lounge were placed at different levels overlooking the base area and the northern tip of the Sawatch Range, Pyrite Peak most prominent. Two floors of rooms rose above the main building. A single-story condominium wing connected to the lodge by a bridge over Dead Mule Creek, and beyond that an arc of townhomes opened to the base of the ski area. South of the lodge, the golf course began in the lower meadow and disappeared into the forest before widening again into an upper meadow for the back nine. In winter it doubled as the cross-country track.

Single-family homes were generously spaced on half-acre to two-acre lots. Architectural diversity was built into the rules from the start — designs had to complement the land and the surrounding homes, which ranged from 5,000 to 15,000 square feet.

Bryg’s next idea was to turn Bristlecone into a smart community — solar and geothermal power generation, fiber throughout for communications, monitoring, and next-generation home automation. Tali agreed to invest another \$20 million toward the upgrades. Bryg willingly accepted her conditions.

By design, the Bristlecone Club was a private town — maintenance, security, and emergency services all internal. Annual ownership costs could reach six figures, generating over \$30 million yearly. Tali took an active hand in operations planning and staff recruitment, from the water plant to the paramedics.

As he always had, Bryg trusted Lucy's instincts about land and location. She trusted his ability to build something from nothing. Tali's capital was the thing that lit the fuse.

Bryg had learned early that when Tali Gold wanted something, the negotiation was mostly theater. He was in charge of the stage. She wrote the scripts.

The Dinner Party

The Brynglesons' home was close enough that, in daylight, it would have been a pleasant ten-minute walk from GW's—an aspen-lined road, a soft uphill, the kind of stroll that made neighbors feel neighborly. Tonight, GW and Allison arrived thirty minutes early for a small pre-gathering the Brynglesons liked to host for new additions to the community.

A glass elevator carried them three floors from the entry portico to the main level. The doors opened onto a room full of warm light and expensive art.

“We’re delighted to have you,” said Lucy Bryngleson, offering her hand to Allison first. Lucy and her husband, Bryg, were in their mid-70s—trim, athletic, stylish without trying too hard. Allison’s engineer’s eye noticed the faint smoothing around Lucy’s eyes and, more immediately, the glint of large diamond earrings paired with a swirl of smaller diamonds on her right hand. Her left carried the original plain gold wedding band—worn and thinned with time.

Lucy’s polish didn’t erase her Iowa roots. She and Bryg had been high-school sweethearts in Muscatine. He’d started as a CPA, she as a public-school teacher. A client convinced Bryg to develop limited-service hotels to replace aging post-war properties. He’d personally carried the note for their first build. They learned the business from the ground up—unclogging toilets, working night shifts, napping in linen closets. They saved ruthlessly and reinvested everything.

Bryg’s plainspoken Midwestern confidence won over lenders and, eventually, REITs. After three decades, Bryngleson Enterprises was valued north of three billion dollars, but the couple still had the unvarnished steadiness of people who had once counted every dime.

The elevator dinged behind them. A sixty-something couple stepped out—Alan and Elise Scadden. Both former BP executives, both early retirees, both now full-time residents of the Bristlecone Club. Alan had taken on the HOA presidency, a detail that made Allison instinctively straighten her posture.

Before pleasantries had fully settled, the elevator opened again.

A woman stepped out as if framed — perfectly proportioned, lithe, in form-fitting jeans and a soft apricot cashmere top that clung with architectural

precision. Her dark red hair was gathered in a loose ponytail, Ray-Bans perched above her brows. Her cheekbones were strong, her brows expressive, and her hazel eyes caught the light with unnerving intelligence. Dark cherry lipstick completed the symmetry.

Allison smiled to cover her astonishment at how beautiful she was.

She paused deliberately — a half-beat — before walking forward with a runway-smooth stride.

“Tali!” Lucy exclaimed, arms open.

She was the kind of woman other women studied, and men tried not to stare at. And she knew it.

Yet her demeanor softened instantly. She offered her hand to Allison first—friendly, warm, grounding—then to GW. When GW took her hand, she held his just a beat longer than custom required, the slightest excess of contact, then released him and turned her attention to the Scaddens.

Lucy drifted toward the kitchen with a tray of glasses, and Allison instinctively followed. Halfway there, Allison offered, “Anything I can help with?”

Lucy spun back toward her with a delighted grin. “Oh, bless you. Most guests pretend kitchens don’t exist.”

The kitchen was large but lived-in, warm from recessed lighting and the faint scent of rosemary chicken. A middle-aged private chef smiled and continued to work. Lucy handed Allison a stack of salad plates and pointed her toward a marble island.

“You seem very grounded,” Lucy said, arranging flatware with the efficiency of someone who had run a household long before she ran anything else. “Bryg and I were saying how down to earth you looked the moment you stepped off that elevator.”

Allison smiled politely. It was the kind of compliment that should feel easy, but instead something tugged at her chest. “I spend my days around male aerospace engineers. Software men are more interesting.”

Lucy didn’t pry, but she heard the hesitation. She glanced sideways, eyes bright. “You two seem good together.”

“We are,” Allison answered quickly—and too automatically. She felt it. “I mean... I think so.” She set the plates down, lining their edges a little too precisely. “It’s just... life is moving fast in two directions. Career. Relationship. I keep trying to do the sensible evaluation.”

“The lists?” Lucy said, knowingly.

Allison blinked. “I didn’t say lists.”

“Honey, every smart woman makes lists,” Lucy said. “It’s the next part that gets tricky.”

Allison waited.

Lucy leaned a shoulder against the refrigerator. “No one tells you that both lists can be right. That’s the part that makes us crazy. But you already know that, don’t you?”

There was no judgment, only solidarity. Allison suddenly felt herself exhale.

“I’m not looking for advice,” Allison said softly.

“Good. I don’t give it,” Lucy replied. “But I do hand out secrets.”

She lowered her voice conspiratorially and opened a drawer to reveal a cake on a sterling silver platter.

“Vegas cake,” she said, half reverent, half amused. “There’s a secret,” she whispered into Allison’s ear.

Allison giggled. “You’re kidding.”

“I most certainly am not.” Lucy straightened. “Joy takes scheming, dear. Never forget that.”

Allison absorbed that. It landed deeper than Lucy knew.

“Now,” Lucy added, patting Allison’s hand, “go see what trouble Bryg is getting into before dinner. Alan’s probably cornered him and he’ll be happy for the rescue.”

Meanwhile, Tali had drifted toward GW with the easy confidence of someone slipping into a familiar orbit.

“Come with me,” she said lightly. “There’s a piece upstairs you need to see.”

GW glanced at Allison in the kitchen—she looked genuinely at ease with Lucy—so he followed.

Tali led him through the gallery-like main floor, moving with an intimacy that shouldn’t belong to a guest. She knew which hallway opened into the library, which

alcove held the bronze sculpture, which lighting panel dimmed what. It wasn't overt. Just... known.

"You seem awfully familiar with this place," GW said casually.

Tali stopped, turned over her shoulder, and let a small, sly smile curve her mouth. "I pay attention."

He followed her into the main bedroom suite, starting to get a feeling they'd met somewhere before. A woman like Tali left a memorable impression. He admired the tall windows. Pale aspen trees in the fading light. A platform bed beneath a bold Matisse.

She nodded at the painting. "That one's special."

"You know Matisse?" GW asked, slightly surprised.

"I know many things," she said with a shrug. "Including your work."

That caught him off guard. "My work?"

"AeroSoft. AeroSim. NEOS." She said the names with precision. "I'm sure you had to swap out the code base in NEOS."

His smile tensed a bit, his voice just a little tighter. "You sound very sure of yourself. How do you know about that? Very few people do."

"I was at the DOD Futures symposium in LA earlier this year," she said. "Do I hear a little Founders Syndrome leading out?"

He wasn't used to being needed. His smile faded.

"Your senior VP, Elaine Ionello — I met her at the reception that evening. We had a nice chat about swapping out the NEOS code base."

"So it was you," GW said warily. "Elaine pushed hard right after that."

Tali grinned.

GW had an uncomfortable tingling feeling in his chest, the kind he got right before losing to a better argument. He looked up at the ceiling, lowered his gaze to Tali, and smiled.

"Elaine, and I guess — you, were right. I have always deferred to the superior species."

For a moment, they held each other's gaze—a brief fusion of intellectual recognition, curiosity, and something just slightly too bright. Not flirtation. Not yet. More like a spark thrown from two mismatched wires brushing by accident.

GW broke eye contact first.

Tali continued walking, gesturing for him to follow down the hallway. "Come on. Lucy hates late guests."

As they moved back toward the kitchen, GW noticed a faint hint of warm musk trailing behind her. Familiar but not placeable. A signature scent meant to linger.

He'd already forgotten the static shock in the bedroom.

For now.

Table Talk

Dinner moved briskly, carried by the easy hum of overlapping conversations and the chef's uncanny talent for transforming Trader Joe's and Costco staples into dishes that felt original. Allison eased into the rhythm of the table, though she kept half an eye on GW. Across from him, Tali seemed to be doing the same — tracking his voice a little more intently whenever he spoke, head angled just slightly, as if tuning a frequency only she could hear.

When the conversation drifted to the crash at the airport, GW answered questions calmly, hands describing the strange twist he'd seen as the jet lost control. Tali's gaze sharpened — she leaned forward a half-inch, head angling toward him.

Then came the dessert. The first forkful drew a chorus of appreciative sounds.

"That," Alan Scadden declared, "is unbelievable."

Lucy lit up. "Vegas cake."

Blank looks circled the table.

"Oh, it's a whole thing," she said, delighted by the mystery. "Bryg and I found a tiny German bakery in Las Vegas years ago. They make only a handful of these cakes — on Tuesdays. And you have to call ahead on a landline. A landline!" She wiggled her fingers in mock horror. "But trust me... worth every mile."

Allison smiled at the secret she now held a deeper piece of: the bakery, the ritual, the joy that required a little scheming.

By the time decaf and a few glasses of port came out, everyone was relaxed — until Alan Scadden pivoted, looking past GW and Allison and straight at Tali.

"So," he said, "what do you think about the pond access?"

The table stilled a fraction.

Tali didn't blink. "Well, Alan... what do you think?"

The lilt was pleasant. The edge beneath it was not.

Alan's voice tightened. "I think the trail should remain public access."

"It's on my property," Tali replied lightly. "And everyone already has access. They just prefer the shortcut."

"It's a well-established social trail," Alan shot back. "Should've been included in the original PUD. It's a quarter-mile around. Five hundred feet if they walk across

yours. I've spoken with the HOA attorney and the county.”

It was the last sentence — the attorney bit — that shifted the air. Allison felt it like a barometric drop before a mountain storm.

Bryg stepped in, tone soothing. “This must feel like walking into a movie halfway through. When I bought Pine Glen to turn it into Bristlecone, Tali already owned the 160 acres next door. Access wasn't an issue back then. Over time, more homes, more folks climbing up to the rock overlook on her side...”

Tali picked up cleanly. “My attorney advised a split-rail fence to preserve my rights. Once people settle into a path, they tend to assume it's theirs.”

“The HOA offered to pay for ‘Private Property — Stay on Trail’ signs,” Alan pressed. “Why can't you be a good neighbor?”

This time Tali's smile shifted — smaller, sharper, her cheek dimples tightening like parentheses around something dangerous. “Because people don't think signs apply to them.”

Alan gripped his fork. His jaw clenched. For a second, Allison thought he might actually stand.

Elise laid a calm hand over her husband's. “Honey,” she murmured, “don't outrun your pacemaker.”

Alan exhaled sharply, deflating. “Sorry. It's just... owners don't see the harm in a shorter path.”

Tali's gaze flicked to Elise — a silent acknowledgment. A gratitude. A warning. Then Lucy, with brilliant timing, gathered plates and asked if anyone wanted more coffee. The tension dissolved. Conversation resumed, gentler now — weather, travel, a bit of HOA gossip that made Allison and GW exchange humored glances. Still, Allison caught it: twice more, Tali's eyes moving toward GW, subtle, assessing. Not predatory. Just studying.

By 9:30, the usual signals began: yawns, rising chairs, and watch checks. Everyone gathered in the entry, where coats, scarves, and polite goodbyes condensed into a polite swarm.

GW caught the moment Tali stepped close to Allison and whispered something that made Allison giggle despite herself.

Then Tali turned to GW. “Lovely to meet you.”

“I wish we’d had more time to talk,” he said, instinctively.

But she was already reaching for Allison again, pulling her into a light hug.

“We should get together,” Tali said warmly.

“Definitely,” Allison replied.

Outside, they watched Tali walk toward her truck — she moved like she owned every surface she stepped on. Then GW and Allison headed to their car.

Afterparty

In the car heading back to the house, GW asked, “So what did Tali say that was so funny?”

Allison laughed. “The Vegas cake. She told me Lucy totally punked us. She even embroidered the story with me in the kitchen beforehand. Apparently they didn’t fly to some artisanal German bakery. She was with her this morning when they bought it at Costco.”

GW shook his head, amused. “Lucy’s a menace.”

They were still chuckling as they pulled into the garage. Inside the house, glasses in the kitchen cabinet were vibrating from the thunderous subwoofer thumping down the hall from Davey’s room. GW checked on him and found him fast asleep, sprawled diagonally across the mattress, the movie still roaring on. He turned it off, pulled a quilt over him, and came back to the kitchen.

Allison poured two glasses of sparkling water. Flying from sea level to seven thousand feet always made her careful. She’d nursed one cocktail through dinner and switched to wine only at dessert.

“He’s out,” GW said.

Allison leaned in to kiss him. “Hard to believe anyone can sleep through that noise.”

“We’re Canyons,” GW said. “It’s our gift.”

“Along with the snoring.”

He grinned.

“So,” GW asked as they settled into the living room, “what’d you think of everyone?”

“I liked Lucy and Bryg a lot. They’re very down-to-earth. For all the art and the architecture, the house felt... loved. The photos, the stories—you can see their whole life on the walls.”

She paused.

GW waited. “And...?”

“The Scaddens were nice enough,” Allison said, “but Alan... he’s not even close to Bryg’s wealth, yet he acts like he has something to prove. They’re clearly well off.

Why the insecurity?"

"I guess some people handle wealth better than others," GW said.

"Well, it makes me uncomfortable," Allison replied. "The cars, the clothes, the houses... It's all too calculated. Tailored to impress. I like nice things too—you do too. Look at all the nice things you have."

GW's brows lifted. "Wow. You're making me feel a little guilty."

She hesitated—choosing direction. "No. I've watched you. You're humble about it."

He softened. "Thanks. I'm always aware wealth talk can make people uncomfortable."

"Do you feel guilty about your success?" she asked.

"No," GW said quietly. "I feel grateful."

She smiled. He meant it. She could see it in the way he said the word.

"But not like Tali Gold," Allison added. "I know her family's backstory. That's trust-fund money."

GW nodded. "That entrance tonight... something else. She's striking. She'd been to a conference I spoke at, but I didn't remember her. She knew about NEOS, though. And she knew what she was talking about."

"She's hard to miss," Allison teased. She reached across the sofa and squeezed his hand. "So what impressed you more—her brains or her boobs?"

GW felt a strange mix of embarrassment and surprise at having withheld the fact that, during his presentation and the DOD conference, he had found it hard to keep his eyes from drifting to Tali Gold in the audience. There was a brief moment of speculation during the bedroom tour, and after she skewered him, her smile remained. He opened his mouth to deflect, but stopped when he saw Allison's expression shift into something quieter, more thoughtful.

"I can still smell her perfume on you," Allison said—not jealous, just observing. "And I'm not imagining the vibe. She was watching you. You weren't aware of it, but women notice. You had her full attention."

Did Allison see it was reciprocal? He worried. He'd glanced at Tali more than once during dinner. One time she caught him, and the brief flick of amusement in her eyes had flustered him in a way he couldn't quite explain.

Allison went on, “Her reaction to Alan when they got into it... it threw me. Everyone else was watching him, but I was watching her. The more tense it got, the calmer she became. Almost like she enjoyed the escalation. Isn’t that odd?”

GW leaned back. “Were we in the same movie?”

Allison laughed. “Probably overthinking it.” But the giggle didn’t fully reach her eyes. She felt something—an undertow—she couldn’t name. Not about GW. Not jealousy. Just a small, unsettled sense that she was out of her depth in this world. The houses. The money. The unspoken rules. The way Tali’s confidence fit the room like haute couture, while Allison still felt like borrowed shoes.

“Oh, Tali invited me to go snowshoeing in a couple of days,” Allison said.

GW had the same feeling he did the first day that Davey made a friend on the first day of school.

She kissed him lightly. “It’s been a full day and a long evening. I’m beat.”

GW nodded, brushing a strand of hair from her cheek. He was disappointed, but he didn’t let her see it.

In the giant bedroom suite, Allison felt the faintest echo of that unease—wealth like a tide pool, beautiful but hiding currents she wasn’t sure she understood.

You have been reading a preview of

Fiery

*Fiery is a standalone novel
and the second charm in the GW Canyon Series.
No prior book required.*

Middle Fork Press

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