



Stuck between a rock-solid man and a hard place...

Xtreme Adventures, Book 2

Melanie Dixon's body may have recovered from a horrific climbing accident, but her nerve is long gone. So is the natural enthusiasm for life she took for granted. Tired of being scared, beyond ready to conquer her fears, she pulls up stakes and moves to her brother's new hometown to start over. Her first step is the most terrifying—to tackle the wall at the local climbing center.

Derrick James is mesmerized by Melanie's dark beauty, and equally impressed with her climbing abilities and determination. Watching her retune rusty skills spurs a desire to partner with her—on *and* off the ropes. Melanie's a compelling mix of wit, sensuality and vulnerability, and it's his delicious task to convince her the scars on her body are no match for the heat rising between them.

Then a man from Melanie's past shows up, pushing their relationship to the edge. Nathan King wants photographs for a "where are they now" series, but his side agenda is more personal in nature. A proposal that brings her out of her sensual shell and onto a precarious sexual ledge. Where trust is crucial...and too easily shattered.

Warning: This book may cause heart-pounding, body-shaking adrenaline attacks—and that's before they leave the climbing gym. Contains blindfolds, ropes and a healthy dose of voyeurism. Go on—you know you like to watch.

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Rising, Freestyle

Vivian Arend

Dedication

Darling daughter—you're still too young to read this book, but I appreciate you so much. You encourage me to reach for new heights both on and off the wall. I can't believe we managed to sweet-talk the pizza delivery guy into doing the "Drop of Doom".

Chapter One

Beta: Climbing slang that means to gather information about a route.

“Go on, you can do it.”

Melanie remained immobile, gaze glued to where her fingers wrapped around the holds on the climbing wall. The dark Adonis holding her safety rope had been nothing but positive and upbeat with her since she'd signed up for the private climbing lessons. Even without looking she could picture him, his wide smile bright against his tanned skin. Dark hair slightly messed, chocolate-brown eyes that made her think all kinds of naughty things.

“The next hold in the route is that blue one, off to the right. Match your feet, transfer your weight and you'll be there in no time.”

As she moved to follow his instructions, she wondered for the millionth time if he was staring at her butt simply to help her find the best route, or if he was staring at her butt for more nefarious reasons.

She could only dream it was the second.

Derrick James was exactly the kind of guy she admired. Tall, dark and good with ropes. Now if she could get up the nerve to make a move on him other than when they were checking each other's harnesses for secure straps.

Concentrate. She needed to focus on the wall, not the dry spell in her sex life. Even if dry was the wrong word to depict something comparable to the Sahara during a drought.

A few adjustments later she'd made it to the hold he'd described.

“Awesome job. You want to go higher?” he asked.

Oh man. There were many things she wanted. She wanted to drag her fingers through his long hair and pull his head to hers for a kiss that would make her toes curl. If he happened to use his strong fingers on her back for a massage that somehow turned into a more erotic playtime, that would be fine as well. Maybe letting her crawl over him as they writhed together in wild, passionate lovemaking that would leave her gasping for breath and sexually sated. All of those were on the instant “hell, yeah” list.

Going past the fifteen-foot mark on the vertical climbing wall? That one wasn't nearly as easy a decision.

Melanie stared upward. The holds were simple on this section of the wall, the route easy to follow. Old training patterns kicked in and she automatically shifted her weight as she saw the correct sequence to reach for next. She could do this.

Until she turned and looked down. The floor wavered beneath her, fading farther and nearer like some freaky optical illusion. She clung to her handholds as her tongue stuck to the dry roof of her mouth. Fear laced through her, a shot of adrenaline making her limbs shake and all the blood rush from her head.

"I got you." The harness around her hips snugged upward as Derrick took in the slack of the rope and secured her in place. "That's as high as you're going right now, Melanie. Just take a deep breath. You're okay."

The bulging muscles of his arms as he held the belay ropes blurred into the background as she stared into his eyes. Her heart pounded, there was a ringing in her ears and she needed to pee. It took too much effort to squeeze out the words, and she sounded like a two-year-old. "Don't drop me."

"I've got you," he repeated. His expression was no longer the sexy one that got her blood pumping. There was deep concern, and suddenly the corner of his mouth was the most important thing for her to concentrate on. Because if she looked at his mouth, and thought about kissing that spot, then she didn't need to think about the fact she hung in the air above a hard floor. Didn't have to think about how much it would hurt if she fell again. "I need you to look at the wall, Melanie. Just turn and look at the wall so I can lower you. You understand? I'm not going to drop you. You're safe, but I need you in position to get you down."

"Scared." Throat tight. Breathing tough.

"I know, but I promise you're safe. I'm not going to drop you, and you know it. Want me to lift you a tiny bit? Prove that you're secure?"

She nodded rapidly. He leaned back and pulled easily, no more than a couple of inches. It was enough to make her body rise and take the weight off her shaking legs. Mel snapped her head back to face the wall. It took conscious effort to loosen her death grip and press her hips away from the wall. Letting go of the handholds made her heart leap to her throat, but she didn't change elevation. Derrick held her in one spot, rock solid and firm. Quickly, she wrapped one hand around the rope at her chest level, the other thrust toward the wall for protection. She moistened her lips so she could speak.

"Lower." The climbing command stuck in her throat, but she got it out.

"Lowering. Good girl." His deep voice enveloped her and she let the warmth act as a protective barrier.

Her descent was so smooth and slow she had time to walk her way down the wall like a little child inching down a sidewalk following a snail. She hung in a modified sitting position as she relied on him to control her motion. He did an amazing job—even the stop at the bottom came smoothly, no sudden jerk to startle her already overwrought nerves.

Why in the world had she thought facing her fears and learning to climb again was a good idea?

Her butt landed on the crash mat with a delicately soft touch, and she breathed a sigh of relief, laid back and closed her eyes. Only fifteen feet and she'd had a freaking acrophobia attack. After three weeks of hard work, that was all she'd accomplished? How was she supposed to get back to living a full and exciting life when she couldn't even get past the baby marker?

Beside her shoulder, the mat dipped, and she wearily popped one eye open to spot Derrick seated on her left. "I know you probably don't think so, but you did great."

Bullshit. "Define great." That sexy smile of his was back, and at least now she could blame the way her heart beat out of control on something other than her annoying new fear of heights.

"You didn't expect to be able to hit the ceiling so soon, did you? Go back to free climbing and lead climbing as if nothing happened? You had a major fall and it's going to take time to get over—"

"Shut up." Mel snapped to a sitting position to glare at him across a more even playing field. Damn, that was inexcusably rude, but she didn't care. The intensity of anger that hit came as a surprise, yet it was a welcome relief to counteract the paralyzing fear that controlled her life. She tilted her chin and met his gaze again. "Don't tell me it's going to take time. It's been three years, and I'm still so chicken I'm afraid to walk across the street without looking both ways twelve times."

Confusion flashed over his face. "What does that have to do with climbing? Or your accident? The ropes failed. It was a freak situation and never should have happened, but you've recovered and—"

Melanie slammed a hand onto the mat next to her. "Recovering. I'm not nearly as strong as I was. Before the accident, I was always traveling and exploring the wilderness. Set new routes for others at outdoor sites in the summer. I used to climb all day and dance all night. And it's all gone, okay? The exploring, the friends. The dancing and enjoying being with other people. I've been living like a hermit. Shit, I haven't had sex in three fucking years. So when the hell am I going to get over being afraid?"

Oh my God. She hadn't said that. She scrambled to her feet and turned her back on him, fumbling to undo the figure-eight knot holding the rope twined through her safety harness.

Strong arms surrounded her, his hands blocking her attempts at the knot and holding them still. He was a wall of muscle behind her, hot and firm, making all her earlier thoughts return. Sweaty, needy, entangled bodies and...she wasn't going to be distracted from the fact she was pissed off. She struggled and his grip tightened as he backed up a pace, moving away from the wall.

"Melanie, it's okay." He didn't release her, but his clasp changed, one hand locking her immobile, the other caressing her gently. Prying her hands from the rope until he could slip his fingers over hers, his fingertips teasing the webbing between each digit. The motion was intimate and soothing even as it sent a tingle up her arm.

She closed her eyes, the heat in her face slipping to her chest and farther inside—a rush of warmth that tightened her throat and made it tough to breathe.

He nuzzled at her nape, the warm air of his breathing a caress down her neck. “Melanie?”

Right there in front of her was the wall that had defeated her again. She tilted her head to stare at it, fear making her legs quiver the higher her gaze rose. Only this time Derrick was solid at her back, his warmth a cocoon of safety.

Longing to move forward hit like a thunderclap. Longing for the touch of a man—this man—intertwined with her desires. She’d been afraid for so long.

Melanie twisted in his arms to stare into his eyes—dark midnight pools that were filled with something more than concern. Derrick brushed a knuckle against her temple, smoothing back a loose hair. All the time his gaze fixed on hers.

Then he leaned closer, slowly. Giving time for escape, for retreat, before his lips made contact.

Whisper soft. Not hesitant, but careful.

Too careful. Melanie leaned in harder, accepting his offering. Derrick responded, becoming more forceful and direct. Heat built between them as he ravished her mouth and her mood flipped again. All her stored-up frustrations burst out into glorious lust and she opened her lips willingly. Somehow she found her fingers tangled in his hair like she’d dreamed of earlier. He showed his approval by clutching her hips to him, his arousal evident even through the mass of webbing in the harnesses lashed around their hips. The safety rope wove between their bodies; the hard surface another contrast against the delicate brush of his fingers as he trailed them up her arms.

He kissed her, his tongue teasing along her teeth, tickling her lips, plunging deep. Their breaths mingled as they separated for a second to gasp for air then dove back for more. The tight knot of fear in her belly slipped into an aching need a handspan lower, centered between her legs.

Maybe she should have freaked out sooner. Maybe coming to the climbing wall and forcing herself to get back into a harness was the best thing she could have done.

Maybe she should just concentrate on the man she wanted to climb up and swing from the rafters with. Her swelling desire shoved the lingering stench of her anxiety into the corner as she let the thrill of arousal take her away.

Derrick figured he’d be kicking his own ass once this was over, but for now he reveled in the woman melting in his arms. For the past three weeks he’d been as patient and gentle as a saint. He’d ignored the urge to make a move, sensing her nervousness, thinking it was about her getting back into the swing of climbing again. He’d forced himself to stay aloof and make the situation as peaceful and serene as possible, all the while longing to find out what Melanie Dixon tasted like.

Even the fact she was related to a good friend wasn’t enough to stop him from expressing interest in the dark-haired beauty. Kane’s little sister was grown up enough to know her own mind, and what she’d said she needed was to regain her courage in the climbing arena.

If she had given him even an inkling of what she'd just shared, he would have been all over her weeks ago. Now he was finally getting the chance.

Screw the consequences. She needed this—maybe even more than he did. And he needed it bad.

God, she could kiss. She held his head in traction between her palms, lips tight to his. Every breath he dragged in tasted like her, with that damn tongue exploring and rampaging through his mouth. He cupped her butt and dragged her higher to line them up better, thrusting his own tongue along hers, pulsing it like he wanted to pulse into her body. Her moan of approval rippled along his spine, and he went from hard to utterly rigid. The confining straps of the harness holding his khakis in place pressed on him violently enough to cut off circulation.

Derrick took another step back. There was a sudden jerk as the rope between them snagged and he tripped. Melanie let out a little scream. He rolled instantly to his back to catch her, swearing at his own stupidity in giving her any reason to not trust him. *Great, asshole. Drop the woman who's afraid of falling.*

Nothing happened. He lay flat on his back, but instead of the sudden contact of her body slamming against his, he heard a peal of laughter echo off the high walls of the climbing gym.

"Damn it, Derrick, get me out of this mess."

Her voice came from directly above him, and he looked up to see her face hovering over his. It took a second to follow the lines and figure out what had happened. The loose end of the rope was tangled around his torso, pinned in place by his body weight. The middle of the length rose to the ceiling, looped through the support hooks as it should and returned down to where Melanie's harness was secured into the other end.

She hung suspended a foot over him, facedown, with the rope caught over one shoulder. Her feet were planted on the wall, holding her in place. She looked as if she were laying flat on her tummy on an invisible diving board.

He stared into her face, checking for any signs of fear, but all he saw was amusement. "Are you okay?"

She snickered. "I'm fine, but a little stuck. Could you please get me down?"

The situation was too tempting to resist. He gripped the rope to keep her in place, then swung himself into a direct line. When he released the rope, letting it slide through his hand an inch at a time, it lowered her all right.

Directly on top of his waiting body.

It felt so damn good, the increasing weight of her settling on him. The warmth of her thighs met his legs, her breasts crushed against his chest. Her gaze bore into him, and he wondered if he'd overstepped his boundaries for the second time.

"Did you plan this all along?" she asked.

He shook his head, trying to ignore the violent urge to rub their groins together to satisfy the hunger burning inside. He couldn't do that, not unless she showed some indication she was agreeable.

Tying up a woman to get into her pants—it wouldn't be the first time, but he only did that with willing partners.

"Couldn't have planned it in a million years," he confessed.

Her eyes darkened as her gaze darted over his face, landing on his lips with a hungry stare. "Damn, I'd hoped it was on purpose."

Hallelujah. He let go of the rope and rolled her, diving back into the kiss. Only this time the feel of her under him made him crazy. She opened her legs and his hips settled in tighter, except for the layers of harnesses between them. Like some kind of modern chastity belt, the wide webbing snagged together as he rocked his hips, stopping him from rubbing his erection against her mound. He growled out his frustration.

She grabbed one of his hands and tugged it to her breast.

Okay, he could be pacified for a moment or two.

They slowed the frantic kisses as his need to taste her skin grew beyond restraint. While he licked and nipped his way along her jawline, her fingers skipped over his back, tugging his shirt upward until she reached bare skin. Her short nails weren't enough to scratch, but her strong fingertips dug in and pulled a groan from him.

He wanted to be naked with her. He wanted to strip off the long-sleeved shirt and sports bra she always wore, and suck on her firm nipples until she screamed. Then he'd—

A buzzer went off and they both tensed. They glanced toward the clock on the wall and Melanie let out a huge sigh. "Opening time."

The after-school crowd was waiting for him to open the door to the climbing gym. *Screw it.* They could all wait for a few minutes.

It took an extraordinary amount of time to untangle themselves and find their feet. Derrick held her close for longer than he needed to, pretending it was to make sure she had her balance. He just didn't want to let her go.

The damn buzzer went off again, this time accompanied by banging fists on the doorframe.

"Your students are eager to get started." Melanie stared away from him, all her concentration centered on untangling the knot tethering her to the rope.

He wasn't going to leave it this way. A wild tumble on the climbing mats and nothing more? "Would you like to go for dinner with me?"

Her head snapped up, a small smile appearing. "Tonight?"

Derrick nodded as he headed for the door. "I can get away around six thirty. Seven if you're okay waiting that long."

Melanie paused and he held his breath. "I'd like that. You want me to come here?"

Excitement raced through him to rival any teenage boy planning a first date. “That would be great.”

“Okay.”

They were grinning at each other like fools, he was sure of it, but he really didn’t give a shit. Not about the continued protesting at the door behind him, or the faces peering in. Not about his lack of finesse. She turned and headed for the change room, and he watched her ass with a growing conviction that fate had intervened today and that tonight was going to be the start of a fine relationship.

Melanie wanted to relearn how to live? He could help her with a lesson or two, and if somewhere along the way they happened to get involved in some heart-pounding, body-aching sex?

He was good with that as well.

Chapter Two

Rope Gun: Slang title for the climber who does all the leading.

Melanie pivoted in front of the mirror, frowning in dissatisfaction. She smoothed her hands down the second T-shirt she'd layered on. Unless a person knew exactly where to look, no signs of her accident showed. Of course, that equaled no skin visible anywhere, which meant she wasn't very sexy, and therein lay her dilemma.

There had to be some kind of rulebook she'd neglected to read that could guide her through this situation, but the feverish heat pulsing through her veins and the ache between her legs continued to distract her. A girly-girl she wasn't, but surely even she could manage to pull together one outfit that was a little less "here I am, I'm covered" and a little more "here I am, want to uncover me?"

She changed clothing five times before she forced herself to stop.

In a few short minutes, Derrick James had turned her on and left her revving on high. Although she was embarrassed at her emotional outburst, it hadn't seemed to bother him. On the contrary, he must have had getting close to her on his mind before that moment. Guys got turned on fast—she knew that from too many years of close contact in confining quarters when her co-ed team had traveled to competitions. But Derrick? He had struck her as far more mature than the trigger-happy youths on her climbing team.

And the way he'd kissed her? Okay, the idea of being in someone's bed hadn't been on her agenda for a long time for a lot of reasons. After her last horrifying experience, she was not only afraid of his reaction, but her own. She didn't want it to all be a bunch of motion with no grand finale. The fear she wouldn't be able to relax enough to enjoy sex haunted her, and she wasn't the type to fake an orgasm for anyone, especially herself.

After the lust-inspiring grope they'd shared, she wasn't that concerned Derrick wouldn't be able to get a response out of her.

But would he be able to handle what her body looked like under her clothing? And was she really ready to let anyone see the scars? The lingering pulse of interest said she might be willing to find out.

She walked back to the climbing center, the air warm enough she didn't need a jacket with the long-sleeved shirt she wore like protective armor. Hiding from the stares of other people on the street had become second nature to her by now—and took far less energy.

Five minutes later the pounding pulse of a rock beat shook her before she even laid a hand on the door. She slipped inside and leaned on the wall, taking a slow look around to see who was climbing on Thursday night.

Families, youths and couples all filled the place with noise and laughter. Derrick had done a great job making the center somewhere for more than the elite to gather. She smiled as a dad belayed his son up the closest wall, the little guy maybe five years old and clinging like a gecko as he chatted excitedly.

Except when the kid breezed past the marker line where she'd frozen, Melanie turned away in disgust. Yeah, whatever. Next time she'd force herself to go higher. There had to be an end to fear at some point, right?

She spotted Derrick roped into a harness, lead belaying one of the stronger climbers. The biceps in his arms showed nicely as he fed out the rope a portion at a time, watching his partner closely. Adam swarmed up the wall, smooth and rhythmic in his motions. She was far enough to the side Derrick must have seen her, at least in his peripheral vision, but he did no more than wave a finger, his gaze fixed on the climber.

Adam reached to clip his rope into the hook of the next carabiner on the overhanging wall and missed. Melanie's stomach tightened in a rush as the young man fell. A split second later she fought for breath—the rope Derrick held that attached to Adam's harness had jerked him to a safe stop well above the ground. Good-natured laughter rang through the room as Adam was lowered the remaining distance, shaking his head sheepishly.

Derrick clapped hands with him and pointed at the holds, probably suggesting something different to try the next time. Adam nodded and the two unroped and separated. Derrick headed directly for her.

"You okay?" The concern on his face was touching and annoying at the same time. God, even watching another person fall made her stomach roll.

"Just a little shaky. Think I need some food."

He undid the straps securing his waist belt. She tried not to stare in fascination at his hands working directly over his groin. Part of her wanted to reach out and volunteer to help him, any way she could. When she dragged her gaze higher, he tossed her one of his spine-melting smiles, his own interest shining in his eyes as he looked her over.

"I need to wash the chalk off my hands and put my belt away, then we can head out."

It wasn't that much later they were on the sidewalk, forced into close side-by-side proximity as newcomers brushed past them to enter the facility.

"You sure you can get away?" Melanie asked. "It looks busy tonight."

"I'm fine. There's enough staff on, and I usually take off Thursdays and work the late shift Friday and Saturday."

"That must interfere with your social life." *Oh, that was smooth, Mel.* Not. Way to sound as if she was digging for information. Which she totally was, but still. She didn't think he had a regular girlfriend, not

with the way he'd kissed her. He had asked her out, but before she dove into anything, she'd like to know a little more about the big picture. Their private lives were not a subject they'd discussed over the past weeks.

"I get plenty of time for friends. The gym is closed at nine those days, and five on Sundays, so it's not like I'm there until two a.m. or anything." They dodged a group of skateboarders hanging out in a circle on the corner of the street. Derrick pulled her closer to his side as a few of the gang turned and eyed her.

The touch of his fingers as he kept hold of her trickled tiny rays of heat up her arm and into her body, and she suddenly wished she'd been brave enough to simply wear a tank top so he'd be touching her skin.

Hmm, skin on skin. Another item to add to the collection of things she'd like to try again. Soon.

They were in the restaurant in two minutes flat—one of the joys of small-town living. Derrick pulled out a chair for her on the deck built along the main street. In the winter, Main Street was an eclectic shopping vista, with cozy coffee shops to hide from the weather. In the spring and summer, the town turned the downtown lane into the center of attention, with multiple outdoor sitting areas and the ever-present buskers providing street music for tossed coins.

"How are you enjoying living here?" Derrick leaned back in his chair. He was seated beside her, his right arm close to hers as he placed the menu back on the table. The hair on his arm brushed the back of her hand and her nipples tightened.

She was a sexual time bomb waiting to be triggered. She blew out a breath, ruffling her bangs, then smiled at him. "It's been great. My brother told me this was a fun town to visit, but a little crazy to live in. He's right."

"You see a lot of Kane?"

She shook her head. "I had dinner with him and his roommates when I first moved, but he's been gone pretty much ever since. He's got a full schedule of wilderness trips booked until the end of summer."

They chatted for a little longer until their order was taken. Light conversation about what she'd done in school, about him and the house he was renovating even farther up the steep slope of the mountain than where she lived. All the while she admired him—his dark hair with the slightest bit of unruly curl at the ends hung loose, brushing his shoulders. He had the darkest irises, somewhere between brown and black, and a jaw that made her want to turn down dinner and just nibble on him for a while.

A climber's body—lean muscle, not bulky—every movement he made coordinated and smooth. He wore a T-shirt that clung to his biceps, fit snug to his chest. Heck, it was tight enough when he shifted position she swore she could make out the ridges of his six-pack. She knew he had one—she'd rounded the corner the second week at the gym when he'd stripped off his shirt and pumped out a set of chin-ups to the rising cheers of his climbing mates. She'd had to wipe away her drool.

Their food arrived and they both reached for the salt at the same time, bumping hands. He laughed and gestured for her to take it first, his strong fingers with neatly trimmed nails catching her eye as he picked up his burger and bit into it heartily.

Melanie attacked her own multilayered wrap, juice from the spicy barbeque sauce escaping to trickle down her chin as the flavours burst over her tongue. He caught a drip from the corner of her mouth and that electric pulse returned. Harder. Hotter. Their conversation faded away to nothing as the sexual tension at the table rose tenfold. Every bite, every swallow. Flames licked her skin, and there wasn't enough of a breeze in the air to cool her off. She grabbed her water glass and purposely looked in the opposite direction, needing a second to regain control.

"What would you like to do after dinner?" Derrick rubbed the back of his knuckles against the thin fabric of her shirtsleeve provoking an instant rush of desire. "There's a movie we could catch, or we could go for a walk along the lakeside."

There were a whole lot of unspoken questions in his tone.

What *was* her agenda for the night? Going to a movie was safe, in a way. At the most they'd be able to do a little necking like teenagers, but they wouldn't get to talk. And while more kissing with Derrick was on her list, if they were going to take the interlude they'd started any further, they definitely needed to talk. "I'd like to walk, if you don't mind."

Thirty minutes later they slowly strolled the boardwalk curving the perimeter of the park. On their left, the lake spread out, lazy ripples undulating on the surface as the occasional kayaker floated past. Melanie reached for his hand and snuck her fingers into his, and he smiled, squeezing lightly and letting her set the pace.

Enough of keeping secrets. If she was going to do anything more than kiss him, she had to tell him. Part of facing the future, right?

"You know my brother pretty well?"

He nodded, his thumb brushing the back of her knuckles with a light, teasing touch. "We've worked together over the years. When Kane's arranged wilderness excursions with rock-climbing components, I've come along and coordinated. I do occasionally hang out with him, Jack and Dara for kicks. Great guy, lots of fun."

"Did he ever tell you about my accident?"

Derrick pointed off the main path to a bench facing the water. "He'd said you were a top-ranked climber, but you'd had a fall. Never mentioned much more. That was also about all you told me when you came in and asked for private lessons."

Melanie shifted uneasily, ignoring the open spot next to him on the bench. She'd prefer to be on her feet for this one. "I guess I don't want a lot of sympathy, but..."

She sighed. Damn fall. Of all the stupid things to be worried about right now.

“What’s wrong, Melanie? How can I help?” He reached forward and grabbed her hands and tugged her toward him. His knees were spread wide and she stepped into the protective circle of his body. The warmth from his torso and the sincerity in his eyes helped a lot. “I’m interested in you. Not just as a client.”

He slipped his hands around her hips and suddenly fingers touched bare skin where her shirt had ridden up in the back.

“Wait...” She pulled back and his face fell.

“Sorry. I thought you—”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just...” Damn. She dragged her hand through her hair. *Pull in your courage. It shouldn’t be this tough.*

He tugged on her arm again. She plopped onto his knee and clutched his shoulders for balance. Slowly, as if expecting her to run away again, he leaned his head toward her and their mouths connected.

Melanie dove in wholeheartedly, letting the arousal that had simmered all afternoon come to a full boil. Yeah, she still needed to tell him about her scars, but just in case she scared him off, she was going to store away one last session for future fantasy material.

As her willing lips meshed with his, the strumming in his body kicked up a notch. Thank God, it wasn’t that she didn’t want him. Derrick adjusted her on his lap so he could lean back and let her full weight rest against his aching groin. She had to be the most emotionally volatile woman he’d met in a long time. Frightening thought in some ways, but he liked his woman to have both the fire to stand up to him, and the mental strength to submit. It was never the cool and in-control ones he enjoyed the most. Whatever psychological turmoil had Melanie in its grip, he was more than content to see where this thing between them led.

She wiggled, her lips leaving his to dip into the scoop of his neck as she squeezed tight against him. Her small breasts rubbed his chest, her tight nipples visible as he glanced down at her dark, long-sleeved T-shirt. He ran his hands up her back, careful to stay over top of the fabric, and swore lightly when he realized she wasn’t wearing a bra.

The heat in his body kicked even higher. Three weeks of watching and wanting to touch her. Yeah, he was ready for this to go a whole lot further than simply kissing.

They had enough privacy here to get into a moderate public display without getting arrested. There were only the joggers at his back who could spot them, and they always seemed intent on the end of the trail. He clasped her hips and lifted her across him. She helped by raising her knee, coming down to straddle his thighs. Off in the distance, a cheer rose from the parents watching their children at the soccer fields.

She scraped her fingernails down his shoulders as her tongue continued to dip into his mouth. He captured her taste, the warmth of her wet lips, and another pulse of desire raced through him. This much

contact wasn't nearly enough. He lowered his hands back to her hips to grind her over him, connecting the ridge of his bulging erection with her crotch. She moaned in approval.

Derrick tore his mouth from hers and dropped his head to her shoulder, stilling their frantic gyrations and dragging in a breath to control himself. "I want you. Let me take you home."

She stiffened, but her fingers continued their teasing touch at the base of his skull. "I want that too, but..."

He cupped the back of her head and held her tight. Maybe it would be easier if she didn't meet his eyes. Maybe it was the wrong time of the month, as if that wasn't the most awkward question ever. "But what? Not a good time right now?"

Melanie out-and-out laughed, leaning back to display a smirk. "Oh God, sorry for making you ask. No, it's nothing like that, but I am...embarrassed." Her words tumbled out in a rush as if she had to say it quickly, or not at all. "I've got scars from the accident. I wasn't sure what you'd think of them."

All the tension that had built in him as he'd considered the dire reasons she could have for putting him off slipped away in a smooth eddy of relief. "I've got a few scars of my own. Thirty years of rock climbing and outdoor adventures invites wear and tear on the body. I don't think there will be a problem."

"Yeah, well...that's what someone else told me too. Only it was a problem."

Shit. As soon as she uttered the words she'd gone as rigid in his arms as a tightly coiled spring. Suddenly he understood. "Is that why it's been so long since you've had sex? You think guys don't appreciate what you look like? Or did some ass insult you and you never tried again?"

She hung her head. "Walked out on me in disgust."

Rage flashed inside, along with a deep need to take apart the guy one piece at a time.

"He was an idiot." He cupped her chin and waited until she looked him fully in the eye. "I swear there's nothing about your body that can make me not want you. You've been driving me crazy since the minute you walked through the door of my club."

She raised a brow. "Even though I've worn nothing but long pants and full sleeves since day one?"

Derrick smoothed a hand down her cheek, reveling in the heat she exuded. "It's not just about the way you look. Your stubborn determination to learn to climb again is more of a turn-on to me than seeing you in a skimpy pair of underwear with flawless skin. The way you move makes me hard. I smell your skin, and I'm ready to beg you to touch me."

"God, you're good."

He trailed his fingertips down the front of her shirt, scraping a nail over her nipple and smiling as it popped up to poke the fabric. "It's the truth. You tell me—any of your injuries affect what we can and can't do when we get naked?"

Her nipple fascinated him, and he continued to play with it, teasing lightly in circles, pressing the tight nub with his fingers. It took a minute for him to register she hadn't responded. He glanced up to see her pull her mouth shut and a red flush staining her cheeks.

"When we get naked, there is nothing we can't do."

He let his satisfaction show. "Then there's nothing to worry about. Will you come home with me? So we can do the naked thing?"

Melanie straightened her back, but her smile was nothing but naughty. "Oh, yeah. If you're sure, I'd like that very much."

It normally took him fifteen minutes to walk home from the park. With all their pauses to kiss each other, they didn't make it to the gate of his backyard for thirty. Once he yanked the stubborn thing open, she was back in his arms and he had her pressed against the solid wood, their mouths together again as he gave in to the need to massage her breasts through her shirt.

The compact mounds just filled his hands, her nipples spearing into his palms. A growl escaped, tearing from his lips as his desire broke free. He bent over and nipped at the hard peak through the thin material and she moaned. Moisture from his mouth soaked her shirt, and he sucked right through the fabric, making her squirm. It wasn't enough, not nearly. It took all his will power to draw away, staring at the wet circle left behind. "I want to taste you, everywhere."

His voice had dropped a level, dark and lust-filled. Behind his jeans, his cock pressed the fabric to its limits, his balls tight to his body as she writhed against him.

"Not outside. Please?"

Of course not. Not considering she was concerned about showing herself in the first place. The thought of seeing her totally nude in the sunlight did crazy things to his groin though, and there was no way he could walk right now. He propped his hands on either side of her head and gave her one last needy kiss before pulling back.

"Inside."

He unburied his keys from his pocket and dangled them in front of her. Melanie grinned mischievously, snatched them from his fingers and ducked under his arm. She ran down the back path and halfway up the stairs to the deck before he could follow. He chased her with an exaggerated roar. She fumbled at the lock before popping it open and slipping inside with him right on her heels.

The back door opened onto the kitchen, but she darted through into the next room, dodged around the couch and coffee table and scrambled for the stairs. He slowed, letting her remain ahead of him.

She paused at the top of the landing and leaned over the railing to beam at him. "Shall I make myself at home?"

His cheeks ached from grinning so much. "Please do. Anywhere you want to go is fine with me."

Melanie disappeared around the corner, and he stomped his way after her, deliberately loud as he took each step, loving how her responding laugh echoed off the walls. He slowed as he reached the door of his bedroom. Every nerve in his body wanted to grab her and bury himself deep, but his brain was getting the biggest kick out of the whole chase scene.

He hadn't had a lover he could play with in a long time.

She waited on the far side of his mattress, the curtain half-drawn behind her. Backlit, her hair tumbled around her, a halo of shimmering highlights. "Am I being too forward?"

"You ended up right where I wanted you." Time to start the naked business. If she was uncomfortable, he'd do what he could to help her. He reached for the bottom of his shirt and stripped it from his body. Admiration painted her face as her gaze dropped over him, lingering on his abdomen and the front of his jeans. Staring at her as he continued, he popped open the top button. She bit her lower lip, her hips wiggling from side to side, her arms wrapped tight around her.

The width of the bed separated them. He unzipped his jeans, pushed them from his hips and stepped free. He knew his cock strained against the front of his boxer briefs. Hell, he'd probably already left a wet spot on the fabric after all their fooling around. Melanie once again seemed to square her shoulders. She grabbed the bottom of her shirt and shimmied it upward, slowly exposing her smooth belly with a flash of a jewel at her navel. The outline of a rib, then those perfect little breasts were bare to him, and his mouth watered. He wanted to cover the dark circles with his lips and suck them until she moaned in ecstasy.

"God, you're beautiful."

The words burst free—unplanned, unrehearsed—and she choked out a cry. It was somewhere between laughter and pain, and as he searched her face for the reason, she pivoted, twisting to expose the left side of her torso.

Ribbons of stark white showed against her skin, plastering her arm and shoulder, her breast. Her rib cage was covered, and the scars marked her all the way down to disappear under the edge of her soft cotton pants. The lower they dropped, the more extensive the damage, the single lines meshing into crosshatches and batches of uneven dips and valleys where the skin and muscle had been torn away prior to healing.

"Shit—that must have hurt." He sat on the bed, patting the place beside him then reaching a hand to her. She joined him hesitantly, crawling over to bury her face in his neck, her body shaking against his.

"Sorry, I thought I could do this. I thought I was strong enough, but I'm still freaking out." Her voice was a whisper, and he carefully wrapped his arms around her and held her close.

"Shh, it's okay. Tell me what happened."

"I slid. Thirty feet free fall down the wall, most of it jagged granite. The rocks were sharp enough they cut my clothing away, and shredded my harness. By the time I landed, I had broken four ribs and my left leg, dislocated my shoulder and had lacerations from wrist to ankle. A concussion that put me out for a

couple of days. The rescue crew was amazed I hadn't broken my neck. They figured my flexibility and muscle strength saved me."

"You survived because you're strong."

Melanie shrugged, her ear resting on his chest. "My life changed."

He smoothed her back with tiny circles, caught in an erotic torture as her bare breasts rubbed his chest. Damned if he'd move ahead until she was ready, but shit, he hadn't lied. Just the smell of her skin made him hard, and now holding her half-naked body in his arms? Screw the scars, he wanted her badly.

So tell her.

"I understand why you're afraid, but..." Maybe actions would speak louder than words. He caught her hand and pulled it between their bodies, pressing her palm against his cock where it rose between them. "Does it seem as if I'm turned off at the thought of being with you?"

Melanie laughed again, this time a short gasp. She'd been on the verge of tears, and that was not where he wanted this to go. He would wait as patiently as possible. Of course, while he waited, he could make it clear he had no objections to her body whatsoever. He lay back on the bed and took her with him, draping her over his chest and continuing to stroke her warm skin. She squirmed and her gorgeous tits pressed tight to him again. His cock jerked against his briefs. Her temple was within reach, so he kissed it. Then with a little roll they were side by side and her lips were once again accessible.

Kissing her breathless seemed the best way to get her mind off what wasn't an issue. Not tonight. Not with him. And kissing his way down her body to her breasts was the next natural progression. He held her gently, thumb and forefingers creating a half cup to press the mound of her breast upward. A slow lick over one tip, the hard point wonderful against his tongue. When she moaned, he tore his gaze upward to make sure she was still on board. Melanie struggled up on her elbows, shaking her head slightly.

"What?" He moved his other hand to play with her nipple.

"It really doesn't bother you?"

"Kissing you?"

She rolled her eyes. "Now you're being deliberately obtuse. My scars."

"They don't bother me." All he wanted was to touch her. To get back to what they were doing. He wasn't ignoring her pain, or the damage the accident had done to her mind and soul, but wanted to show her the fears about her body at least were groundless. He leaned in and took her nipple into his mouth again, the one on the side where the scarring was. Working slowly, he skimmed his fingertips along the sides of her torso, touching and teasing her skin. Slipping his fingers under the waistband of her pants, he pulled them away.

He slid down the mattress to dip his tongue into her belly button and play with the tiny purple jewel nestled there. All his senses were heightened as he tasted her. The sweet scent of her soap clung to her skin and turned his exploration into an olfactory delight. He planted kisses along the top of her panty line,

stroking the side of her body in long sweeps, cupping her ass. She rolled one hip upward, and he snagged the edge of her underwear and dragged it down, exposing her sex to his sight. Oh yes, this was what he'd been waiting for.

Nudging her legs apart with his shoulders, he settled between her thighs, swirling a fingertip between her curls to open her.

"Please." Melanie lifted her hips higher, and he rewarded her with a slow swipe of his tongue.

He shuddered as her cream hit his system. Too good to stay slow, he covered her with his mouth and ate greedily. Tongue dipping in, then rising to torment the hard nub of her clitoris. Driving in hard until Melanie grabbed his head and called out her pleasure. It happened far too quickly, so he carried on feasting. He brought up one hand, slipping a finger into her core to enjoy the pulses of her orgasm that rocked on and on. Languid pumps followed as he continued to lap and suck her sensitive clit.

She dug in her heels and ground against him, and he willingly gave more. Two fingers now, stroking the front of her passage until she shook. Derrick pulled away and leaned on the bed, his fingers moving constantly as he looked into her face. Two bright red spots flushed her cheeks and her eyes were half-lidded. Pleasure streaked her face when he brought the heel of his hand in contact with the top of her mound. He moved to kiss her again.

Her fingers twisted in his hair, her tongue tangling with his. The taste of her pleasure passed between them, and she arched, rubbing against him like a cat.

She broke the seal between their lips. "I want you inside me."

Oh, yeah. Derrick kissed her one last time then reached over her into his side table. Her warm hands were busy at the elastic of his briefs, stripping off the fabric and enveloping his cock with her tight grip. He rolled to his back and let her play, watching with delight as she explored his length, stroking and caressing with her fingertips.

"You okay?" he asked.

She shuffled closer, kneeling half over him as she turned her bright eyes in his direction. "I'm wonderful. I want more."

"So do I." Every firm stroke brought him that much closer to finishing, and he wasn't ready yet. He grabbed her wrists in his hand and stilled her caress. "You're driving me mad."

Melanie smiled and leaned over to nab the condom. He took the opportunity to swipe at her breast as it came within reach, and she paused, moaning as he suckled. "That feels so good."

He smiled around his mouthful, nipping the tight tip. She gasped and pulled away, her bottom lip caught between her teeth.

"I like your body, Melanie. All of you. You are one nice package."

She raised a brow and sat back, the condom wrapper tossed to the floor as she held his cock in her hand again. Ball-breakingly slow, she rolled the latex down his shaft. "Speaking of nice packages."

They laughed together before he tipped her chin up. “You want to be on top? It’s been a while.”

She answered by dropping to the mattress and tugging his shoulders. “You do all the work this time.”

He had no objections with that at all. He covered her with his body, the warmth of her skin teasing him. The expression in her eyes enticing him on. Then the tip of his cock slipped through her folds, and the raging heat of her body surrounded him. He squeezed his eyes closed, fighting to restrain his eagerness. One slight rock after another, he forced his way into her tight passage. Melanie drew her knees wider to the side, opening space for his hips as they meshed together. It felt so fucking good as pleasure slid down his spine and pulsed in his balls.

He hovered over her, allowing their bodies room to rub as he thrust in, slowly at first. Unhurried and deep, his cock slid into her passage as her cream spread over him. His ability to resist melted and he sped up, switching to hard and fast thrusts. Each plunge better than the last, each drive slamming their groins together. His balls slapped her body, her peaked nipples grazed his chest. When she dragged her fingers down his back, he swore and pounded in wildly. There was an inferno blazing between them, and he wasn’t going to stop until they went out together in a burst of pleasure.

Derrick leaned on one arm and slipped a hand between their torsos to find her clit, pinching in time with his thrusts, and Melanie screamed. Her fingers dug into his shoulders, her heels digging into his butt. She hauled him into her core, and as her orgasm squeezed him, he released all control and exploded into the condom. His balls pulled up, his cock jerking again and again until she’d drained him completely. The room spun, and there was a loud roar in his ears that blocked out all other sounds. Her panting breath hit his cheek, and he took in the scent of sex filling the room.

He could handle more of this. A lot more.

Derrick collapsed to the side, his arms quivering with reaction to the intensity of his release. “Holy shit, that was...” Words escaped him. His brain was mush. She cuddled in closer, his cock still buried in her body, and let out a contented sigh.

“Oh yeah, it was.”

They stared at each other, satisfied and sated. “Round one?”

Melanie raised her brows. “I’m game for more, once I can move.”

Exactly. He kissed her forehead and just lay there. More in a minute. Right now he needed to get some blood back into another part of his body before his limbs would operate. He lazily ran a hand over her naked torso, both the smooth and the scarred. She tensed, but only for a second, before leaning into him and relaxing.

Derrick smiled against her hair. Yup. There were some things said more clearly with actions than could ever be said with words.

Chapter Three

Sketched Out: Feeling insecure, a lack of confidence in the current situation.

She hadn't changed much. Not in the nearly ten years since he'd last seen her. Her petite body was still powerful, lean and made his body ache as she clung to the wall and traversed her way across, staying only a few feet off the ground.

Nathan King rested his chin on his hands, leaning forward in his seat in the balcony area as he watched Melanie bouldering. She wore full-length yoga pants and a long-sleeved shirt—no evidence of her accident was visible, but he knew it was there. He'd seen the news-file photos taken immediately after Mel's fall.

He'd gone off in another direction long before her mishap, and until his most recent assignment had crossed his desk, he'd put all thoughts of her out of his mind. She'd been underage the first time they'd hung around each other, him always careful to stay on the outskirts of her crowd.

Nathan stared across the room, his fascination rising. She wasn't too young anymore.

He clicked a couple of candid shots from the upstairs seating area before packing away his camera equipment and descending the stairs to greet her.

He hung back along the wall and waited for her to spot him. She spoke animatedly with another climber, the woman laughing at something Mel said. Nathan admired how her eyes lit up, a smile brightening her face just like he remembered. Except the slope of her cheek was all woman now, no baby fat or maturing left to do, simply a dark beauty that shone through her healthy glow.

Taking this assignment was looking more positive all the time.

Melanie lifted her head and glanced in his direction. A crease appeared between her brows, a cloud of confusion in her eyes. The moment she figured out who he was, everything changed.

"Nathan? Oh my God, it's you!"

She raced across the floor and threw herself into his arms. The warmth of her torso hit like a thunderbolt, streaking through him and electrifying his entire system. He grabbed on to stop her from falling, bracing his legs to keep them both vertical. Her arms squeezed him tight and he was suddenly aware of the intimate contact between their bodies. Her breasts were compressed against him, his cock against her belly. She squirmed and he let her go, her cheeks flushed as she stared.

"Hey, monkey."

He easily blocked her instant punch to his torso, grinning as he realized that even after all these years her response to his tease hadn't changed.

"What are you doing here? I haven't seen you in forever." She motioned him to the side of the room to a safer place to talk out of the way of climbers and curious onlookers.

"I came to see you."

Her eyes widened, panic-stricken. "Katy. She's okay, isn't she? You didn't come to tell me—"

"Whoa, hang on. There's nothing wrong with my sister. She sent her love when I told her I was heading west to meet with you." Nathan looked her up and down slowly, letting his admiration show. This might be partly a job, but that didn't mean that was all it had to be. He was single, and she was all grown up. This could be a lot of fun for the short while he would be in town.

He was rather looking forward to it.

Her tension dissipated only to be replaced by a frown. "I'm glad she's all right, but I don't understand. Why are you looking for me?"

"Does that surprise you so much? That I'm interested in seeing you?" He couldn't resist. With the back of one finger he stroked her cheek, enjoying how her body jerked in response to his touch, her face heating even more.

"Nate, I'm..." She backed up, flustered just like when she'd been a kid and he'd paid attention to her. Although he'd done his best back then to keep his attraction hidden.

"Can I buy you a coffee? So we can talk?" He knew he was staring, but he couldn't seem to stop. Under her tight T-shirt, her nipples had hardened and now poked against the fabric. The facility had the air-conditioning on high enough it wasn't sweltering hot in the place, but it wasn't cold enough to make her body react.

She fumbled for words. "I'm not done with my workout."

"I can wait." Somehow his hand was on her arm, a gentle caress.

She crossed her arms, casually slipping away from him, and it was his turn to feel embarrassed. He hadn't meant to make a move in public. Not after so many years apart. No matter that the chemistry between them seemed to be heating up in a hurry.

"Melanie. Is there a problem?"

The dark-haired man he'd seen behind the check-in counter stood beside her, glaring at Nathan with suspicion.

Mel blinked hard right before she leaned on the other man's chest, slipping her arm behind his back and settling intimately against him. "Derrick, this is Nathan. He's my best friend's big brother."

Ah, shit. Flirting without asking questions could be detrimental to his health.

Nathan held his hand out to Derrick, fully expecting the guy to crush his fingers in a display of macho strength.

Instead, Derrick gave a friendly grin. “Glad to meet you.”

Nathan noticed he didn’t do anything to move Melanie any farther from his side. Point made. She was taken.

Shit again.

“I was just asking Mel if she’d join me for a coffee. You’re welcome to come along.”

Derrick glanced at the clock. “I’m good to go anytime. Melanie? You done or did you want to climb for a little longer?”

She leaned up and kissed his cheek quickly before stepping away. “If I finish my workout now I don’t have to come back later.” She turned to Nathan. “Are you okay waiting for a bit? Tell me your timeline. If you’ve only got a few hours in town I can totally change my plans.”

“You can finish. I’m staying around for a while. Got a room at the hotel on the lake, so no rush.”

Melanie nodded, glancing between them before retreating to the wall she’d been traversing. Nathan watched in fascination as she shook out her hands then stepped onto a tiny foothold, her body close to the wall, arms extended overhead.

“Family friend? You know Melanie well?” Derrick moved closer and Nathan hid his smile. The third degree started now. That was fine. He had a few questions of his own, and this was as good a way as any to get information.

“I moved away for college and have only seen Mel a couple of times since then. I’m on the road a lot. What about you? You work here at the climbing center?”

“Own it. What do you do for a living that keeps you traveling so much?”

Nathan pulled his camera bag forward. “Photographer. I don’t do war zones, but just about anything else—still life or action—I’ve shot it.”

“You taking pictures around the area for a travel magazine or something? I can make a few suggestions of easy places to access.”

“Thanks. I do need some nature shots, but this assignment is human interest.”

Nathan’s gaze was drawn again to Melanie. She was leaning at a nearly ninety-degree angle, long legs stretched to the side and spread wide, the edge of her shirt separating a bare inch from her pants as she lowered herself down the wall doing a modified chin-up. The amount of strength in her upper body was incredible, and he could just picture the kind of shot he could take, getting in close to angle from—

There was a nudge to his arm and Nathan snapped back to attention.

“Human interest? You want to take pictures of Melanie?” Derrick’s disapproval rang through loud and clear.

“I think I should talk to her about it first, if you don’t mind.”

The pleasant expression on Derrick's face had vanished. Nathan didn't even bother to try and hide his smirk. The boyfriend was going to be protective, was he? Well, Nathan didn't remember Mel ever needing much protection.

"Of course." They stepped aside to allow a couple to access the wall behind them. Someone called Derrick's name. He waved at the couple before motioning to Nathan. "Wait in the viewing gallery until Melanie's done, then we can grab that coffee."

He didn't offer it as a suggestion. Nathan nodded briskly before taking the stairs two at a time. Well shit, the fact that Melanie was attached sucked. He'd been looking forward to getting to know her better over the next weeks. He leaned on the railing, peering down into the climbing area. She fluttered glances upward a few times, her cheeks bright, gaze darting away whenever they happened to make eye contact.

Then again, maybe the boyfriend thing wasn't going to be an issue. Nathan grinned. In fact, there was nothing he liked better than a challenge.

Melanie squirmed in her chair, her body far too hot and needy to deal with this situation. Nathan King. Of all the people to show up now, why him? She leaned against Derrick's side. Yeah, she was hiding. The kind of physical thrill that had hit her when she'd caught sight of Nathan was completely inappropriate considering she'd been sleeping with Derrick for the past three months. Except sleeping was such a weak, pathetic word to describe what they'd been doing. Romping, sweating and screaming out in pleasure. The man didn't do anything by half measures. Not her climbing lessons, not their dating, and certainly not the sex. After she'd gone on birth control and they'd both gotten clean bills of health, their lovemaking had become even more spontaneous. There were a few days she'd truly understood the concept of not being able to walk afterward.

So why did Nathan make something in her core quiver like a needy bird?

"You guys grew up together?" There was a low timbre of stress audible in Derrick's voice. He might be attempting to keep the situation laid-back, but there was no getting around it. Somehow she must have let her unwelcome attraction to Nathan show. Guilt hit. Her growing relationship with Derrick was about more than simply sex—she didn't want to hurt him.

Nathan popped open his wallet and passed a picture to Derrick. "My little sister Katy and Mel were best friends growing up. I think since day one. Our gap in ages meant I wasn't around that much, though."

Enough for her to have had a mad teenage crush on him. Melanie scrambled for safe topics. "Katy said you were working for *Rave* magazine. How's that going?"

Nathan flashed his bright smile and she fought against the spark it lit inside her core. "It's been the best move of my career. With bimonthly releases, I get a ton of work from them. I'm on assignment, and while they occasionally call with last-minute shots they want for the files, most of the time I'm out for a couple weeks at a time doing human-interest stories. Like right now."

Human interest? In this neck of the woods? “Who’s so interesting around here? One of the environmentalist programs? Bear handling?” Melanie teased, sipping her coffee.

“You.”

She choked on her mouthful, spitting back into her cup. “Me? What are you talking about? I just moved here. I have nothing to do with the area.”

He laughed. “It’s not the location, monkey, it’s you. We’ve got a series of ‘where are they now’ articles in the works, and you’re—”

“No way.” She leaned back in her chair, the ache in her hip a clear reminder of what he was talking about. “You want to talk about the accident? *Jesus*, Nate, I thought the blood-suckers got all the mileage out of that disaster back when it happened.”

“It’s not like that, Mel, just hear me out.”

“I don’t want to show the old pictures—”

“We won’t.”

Derrick slipped an arm around her. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”

“It’s not about the past, it’s about where you are now. What you’ve been doing and how you’ve headed into the future.” Nathan’s piercing blue eyes locked with hers and refused to let her go. “When they mentioned your name I thought it was a brilliant suggestion. Do you know how many people you could encourage? How many victims of car accidents or burns could see you living life to the fullest and become motivated to do the same?”

Her stomach fell, all the simmering sexual interest vaporizing and drifting away on the breeze. How could she be an inspiration to others when she had barely peeked her head out of her own personal hellhole? She’d made some headway since moving, and getting involved with Derrick had done wonders for a bunch of her psychoses, but as a role model for others?

Bullshit.

“Nathan, I...I can’t do it.” Her mouth was completely dry, her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. “I mean, I’m employed at the post office. It’s not as if I’m a brain surgeon or a schoolteacher or anyone who makes a difference in other people’s lives.”

“But you could make a difference. Mel, I saw you in the gym. You were working that wall, pumping it out when I know damn well you didn’t walk for months after the accident. It took a lot of determination for you to get back to being physically strong, and I think you’ve underestimated how remarkable that is.”

It was too much. She turned to Derrick and buried her face in his shirt. He held her close, rubbing her back. He remained silent, not taking over and she was so grateful. It took a minute to regain enough control that she could twist her head to stare at Nathan while remaining in the safe shelter of Derrick’s arms.

Nathan’s princely good looks had matured, or maybe it was the fact she was no longer looking through love-struck teenage eyes. He’d cut his dark hair into a close, professional style, and she imagined

all the women at his magazine vied for his attention when he was in the office. No doubt tossing themselves at his feet and willingly crawling between his sheets on a nightly basis.

But right now, with the firm beat of Derrick's heart under her ear, and his arms supporting her, there was nothing in Nathan's eyes saying sexual intent. There was compassion, and a streak of stubbornness that she'd expect from him.

Could she do this? Talk about a forced move into the light. Letting Derrick see her naked and touch her scarred body—that was one thing. They'd shared enough time over the past couple months to make being with him seem normal. It was private, and usually she was so sexually turned on by the time she stripped that passion smoothed away any remaining nervousness that arose.

She still hadn't managed to show her damaged skin in public. Not even a regular T-shirt. The thought of anyone other than Derrick seeing her made bile rise to the back of her throat. Imagining the potential taunts and questioning glances threatened her breathing. She had no guarantees people would be cruel, but it was no use.

She might be trapped in a cage of her own making, but she was trapped, nevertheless.

Anger rippled through her. She wanted to live. Fully. Wasn't that her goal? And while she wouldn't give up what she had with Derrick for the world, she still had a long way to go.

Melanie squeezed Derrick's arm, thanking him for his silent support before facing Nathan straight on. "What are you thinking about?"

His eyes lit up. "Two parts. The first is for the magazine. They need a couple dozen pictures for the article, indoor and out. I'd take a mix of pictures—some at work, some at your home and some at the climbing wall. I'll do a short interview, but the pictures are my main contribution. The second thing is a project I've got an idea for on the side—it's a graphic presentation. Images telling the story. We can take pictures wherever and however you feel comfortable, but I can show you some samples of what I've got in mind. We can discuss that in more detail later."

He wanted to take pictures of her showing her scars to the world. To show her living in spite of the accident that never should have happened. Oh Lord, this was going to kill her. "Do I get to see the pictures?"

Nathan responded immediately. "I'll give you total control over what pictures I hand over to my magazine."

The hair at the back of her neck stood upright. Derrick squeezed her fingers. "You don't have to do this," he repeated.

It was too much to decide in an instant. She examined Nathan's face. Years ago she'd wanted nothing more than to have his undivided attention. Now she dreaded it. Life was unfair in how it granted wishes.

His smile stroked her. In spite of its warmth, there was a nagging ache inside warning her this experience could be hell for more reasons than baring her scars.

“I need time to decide.”

Nathan’s hopeful expression faded, but he nodded. “I can understand that. I deliberately didn’t phone ahead of time—I thought this discussion would be better in person. But if you could let me know in the next couple of days, I’d appreciate it. I’m not trying to rush you, but I have deadlines to meet.”

He returned the conversation to Katy and what was happening with her and the rest of the family back in their hometown. Light, newsy information meant to put her at ease.

The coffee burned a hole in her stomach with every sip.

When they’d finally finished their drinks, Nathan plopped a light kiss on her cheek, then disappeared down the street, his camera bag slung over his shoulder.

She and Derrick walked in silence back to his apartment. His fingers twined with hers, strong, supportive. Her mind raced with images and discussions from the past, distant days as well as the more recent time she’d spent in Derrick’s presence.

At what point would she be able to let go of her burdens?

Derrick led her to the couch where he proceeded to cuddle her in his lap and rub the tension from her shoulders until she was able to let out a long slow breath. She twisted to face him. His forehead was creased with worry and she smoothed a finger between his brows.

“Hey, it’s not that a big a deal.”

“It is to you. Mel—I know you’re trying to be strong and move forward with your life, but that doesn’t mean you have to say yes to this offer.”

He was right. There was no one holding a gun to her head. There was no life-and-death decision that needed to be made this instant, like grabbing a safety rope as a hold gave out. But there was a time that waiting became the wrong response, and she was never going to reach her goal if she didn’t keep moving.

“I know I don’t have to, but what if I should? What if this is like Nate said? Something not only for my sake, but to help others.” She closed her eyes, trying to ignore how her stomach squirmed as she imagined baring herself. “I’m not the only one with scars, and I got mine in a fairly innocent way.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Melanie shrugged. “It was an accident, and there was no one to blame. You said it—a freak rope failure. I was climbing, which has intrinsic dangers. What about the people hurt in car accidents or house fires? They had no hand in their situations, but they’re still scarred and have to deal with it.”

He reached out to cup her face in his hands, his thumb tracing the thin line of the single scar on her cheek—the only visible cut on her face. “Sounds as if you’ve given this a lot of thought. You can’t have come up with all this since we left the coffee shop.”

“I did tons of therapy with a sports psychologist after the accident, but frankly? It’s a hell of a lot easier to say it than think about doing anything with it. Being told my injuries were somehow better since I didn’t get them from a vicious rape or a drunk driver slamming my vehicle—”

“That’s absurd.” Disgust rang in his voice. “I can’t believe anyone would ever say anything like that to you.”

She sighed and leaned her cheek harder into his hand. “You’d be surprised what things people feel are their right to tell you. To be sure you know how lucky you really are.”

Derrick shook his head, then brushed his lips over hers. “Again, just because Nathan offered this shot doesn’t mean you have to do it now. If you are interested in the idea, you can arrange to do it at your own pace, with anyone.”

“Maybe. But *Rave* magazine? That’s a hell of a platform.” Melanie snuggled in tight to his chest. “No, Derrick, I think this might be the right time, and the right place. I trust Nathan as a photographer. But...” She dropped her volume, forcing the words out. “I need to ask a huge favour.”

Because if she was going to show off to the world, she needed his help. She didn’t want to have a crutch in her life. Not a thing, not a person, but giving up Derrick’s comforting touch and presence right now was impossible. “I can only do it with you there. Is that possible? I know it’s a huge imposition, but if you’re present it will help. So much.”

He pulled back to stare into her eyes, his gaze thoughtful as he examined her face. The caring lover she’d grown to appreciate over the past months—he was probably considering what was the best for her. Derrick nodded slowly. “How about this. If you and Nathan can work around the hours the climbing gym is closed, you can use the place to do your shots. There will be no distractions and no audience.”

Extreme relief shot through her. Oh God, she hadn’t even thought about that part. She hugged him close, burying her face in the vee of his neck, loving the way he created a wall of protection to hide behind.

“Thank you.” And the rest? She sat back quickly, catching his gaze again. “And you’ll be there?”

“As long as you want me.”

Wasn’t that a loaded question? She shifted, straddling him to be able to reach his lips easier. “I want you. I want you now.”

She wanted to be held and caressed. Distracted from the heavy burden in her brain. He kissed her with just the right touch of compassion and rising lust, and her body softened. Warmed in all the right spots. He ran his fingers down her back, and she arched against him, breasts growing heavy with anticipation.

He kissed her jaw, held her firmly, yet tenderly. A wave of need swept past, followed by guilt. She’d been turned on back at the climbing wall as well, and that had nothing to do with Derrick.

She pulled away. “Oh damn.”

A low rumble of discontent escaped his throat as he paused. “What?”

“Oh *damn*, I need to tell you...” Sure, how was she supposed to say this? Mortification hit hard, and the heat flushing her face was more from shame than the expectation of Derrick’s lovemaking.

She didn’t realize she’d dipped her head until his fingers under her chin brought her gaze back to meet his. “Mel? What? Is this something to do with me watching the shoot? Is that going to embarrass you—?”

“Oh hell, no. I’m just trying to tell you...” She’d sworn to be honest in her relationships, and she wasn’t the type to let a situation start that could cause them trouble down the road. “I need to tell you about Nathan and me.”

One brow snuck upward, his expression highly amused. “You mean the fact he wants to get in your pants, or the fact he turns you on?”

Her jaw must have hung open for a full minute before she found her voice. “You’re kidding. You figured that out how?”

Derrick grinned. “Sweetheart, I’m not stupid. I know a guy putting on the moves when I see it. And your response? You have this little habit of flushing right here—” He dragged a finger down her throat and over her chest. “When you get excited, it shows.”

She was so embarrassed. “I had a crush on Nathan from the time I was about thirteen. I followed him around Katy’s and his house one entire summer. He must have been so freaked at having a teenager dogging his heels.”

Derrick stroked her back, smooth and even. Tantalizing circles that pulled her a tiny bit closer to him on each rotation. “And did you do anything about that attraction?”

“I was fifteen, he was like twenty. Of course not.”

“So, you’ve got the object of your teenage crush hanging around.” Derrick linked his fingers with hers. “Mel, I’ve been enjoying our time together, a lot. I don’t think the fact the guy turns you on is bad, it proves you’re human. Call me crazy, but the fact he’s attracted to you is okay with me as well. Maybe that’s a guy thing—I’ve got you, he doesn’t. You know, caveman attitude.”

Melanie laughed softly. Sexy, kind and understanding. She’d have to have her head examined to give this up. “You are who I want to be with. Not him.”

His grin lit the room. “Then I don’t mind if he gets your motor running, as long as I’m the one in your bed.”

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her.

Chapter Four

Dyno: A dynamic movement where momentum is required to propel the body to a new position.

Melanie grabbed him by the shirt and clung to him as their lips meshed. A gentle caress of mouths, with no teeth, no frantic moving to the next stage. Almost as if they were exploring each other for the first time.

It was an offering, a sacrifice. Something to affirm that while having Nathan show up created a new situation between them, the foundation they had built was solid and worthwhile.

Derrick rolled her under him on the couch, working his way down her body. Removing her clothes, kissing all the tender spots he'd discovered over the past months. His fascination with her breasts made her smile.

"I still can't believe you like them that much."

Derrick hummed happily. His palms forced her nipples upward so he could more easily suckle one, then the other. "More than a mouthful is too much."

She laughed. "Barely a mouthful. Oh, that's good." She held on to his head, keeping him close. His lips surrounded one tip, his fingers pinching and drawing the other nipple tight and ready for his hot mouth to lick. Circles followed by long, slow licks. A shiver raced along her spine and she pressed harder to his lips, looking for a little more.

The soft fabric cradled her torso as he tugged her toward the end of the couch. She laughed as he pulled her yoga pants from her in one smooth practiced move. Somehow he caught her panties at the same time, and she lay sprawled totally naked before him.

He stared at her, his gaze intent, hunger on his face. "I know why Nathan wants you."

She hesitated. Why was he bringing up Nate?

Derrick rose to his feet, looming tall and muscular over her. He still wore all his clothes, and she realized with a start she wasn't embarrassed in the least to be completely naked before him.

"You have no idea how beautiful you are." He rasped out the words—lustful and low.

"Right."

He squatted beside her, shaking his head slightly as he drew a finger down her body. "Your body is powerful. Slim in the right spots, curved perfectly in others."

His palm cupped her hip for a second before slipping back to cradle her ass.

The expression on his face, even more than his words, stroked her. "I'm glad you like how I look."

He grinned wickedly. "And the way you smell."

"Oh my God." He had picked up her legs and draped them over his shoulders, and her sex clenched. Wanting something to grasp, to fill her. She didn't have long to wait. Maintaining eye contact, he lowered his head and breathed in deeply.

"The way you taste."

She would have protested, but the words smeared into a moan as his mouth made contact. His tongue, gentle but thorough on the outer edges of her sex. Teasing, offering a glimmer of satisfaction then stealing it away. He avoided her clit, instead lapping everywhere until she was squirming to find what she needed. His hands tightened on her ass then his tongue thrust in deep and she squealed.

He fucked her with his tongue. The peaceful, slow attack sped up along with her heart rate, along with the sizzling in her core building to explosive levels. "Oh, Derrick. Yes, *yes, yes.*"

She couldn't stay still. The velvety caress of the couch under her back contrasted with the firmness of his hands. Soft noises carried in the windows, the birds adding a nature soundtrack to the sounds of his mouth moving eagerly over her. When he finally pulled back far enough to make contact with her clit that was all she needed to begin riding a wave of pleasure. Melanie closed her eyes, concentrated on how good it felt to have him carry on touching and lapping until the tremors died away and let her draw a normal breath of air once again.

Her ears were still ringing, and she missed the moment he rose to his feet. The next thing she knew she'd been flipped, her legs draped over the armrest, leaving her ass high in the air as the cool air of the room drifted past her wet core.

Then the hot hard tip of his cock touched her and with one slow, deliberate press, slid in deep. The stiff fabric of his jeans brushed the backs of her legs on every thrust. In contrast, the smooth heat of his shaft filled her. She felt so alive as the forceful motions of his hips rocked her on the couch. The slight abrasion against her nipples kept the heat building from her earlier orgasm. She twisted her head to the side, resting her cheek on the seat cushion to look back at him.

Derrick smoothed his hands over her ass cheeks in circles before holding on tight and bracing her for his forward stabs. His gaze danced over her, watching where they joined together as if fascinated.

"Even here, you're beautiful. Wet, tight. Oh God, so good." He closed his eyes for a second, face tight in a grimace. Melanie squeezed her internal muscles as hard as she could, loving the way he sucked in air, his eyes popping open. "You're dangerous."

She snickered and repeated the move.

"Fuck. Do it again."

Melanie obliged, the increased pressure drawing her nearer to completion as well. He wiggled his hips, nudging her knees farther apart and let his cock slip even deeper on the next thrust. All her breath pushed from her lungs, and when he reached between her legs and stroked her clit, she lost it. The wave of contractions spread like happy ripples through her sex, dragging a shout from Derrick's lips and he came, hot seed spilling into her.

He collapsed over her back, the pressure of his clothed body over her skin perfect, enticing. He tenderly kissed between her shoulder blades, caring in his touch.

"Like I said, beautiful."

The word described him and his heart completely. How could a man be so trusting to understand that she was attracted to another man, and still give to her so fully?

She wasn't going to question why. When she managed to find enough energy to drag him out of the living room and to the bathroom to clean up, she tried to return the favour and show a bit of what she was feeling.

That she was maybe even starting to fall in love?

"Slowly turn your head upward. There. Perfect. Okay, go ahead."

Nathan snapped off another series of shots as Melanie twisted her way across the lower half of the wall. At his request, she'd worn only a sports bra instead of her usual long-sleeved shirt.

It had taken her a long time to remove her shirt and step onto the climbing floor.

Her left arm and side showed the scars, but the main focus was the muscles flexing and moving smoothly as she grasped the wall.

Derrick stared from his position across the room, wondering if he wasn't the sickest bastard in creation. They'd turned up the air-conditioning in the gym, but with the extra lights Nathan had arranged all over the place, the heat level had risen, causing a slight sweat to break out on all of them. Melanie, even with the minor amount of effort she was currently putting out, had a shining slick to her skin that made him want to drag her off the wall, drop her to a mat and fuck her senseless.

Right there in front of Nathan.

Of course, that was the other part of the heat filling the room. Melanie had been upfront about the attraction she'd felt for the guy. It was impossible to miss, and seemed unstoppable.

The disturbing part was Derrick had no desire to rip Nathan's head from his shoulders. In fact, as Melanie's pulse picked up, Derrick's fascination increased. Every time Nathan helped position her on the wall, his hands firm and confident on her body, Derrick's dick got harder.

Melanie's breathing accelerated, that telltale flush covering her chest. Derrick took another long swig of his water bottle and wondered if the two of them would notice if he pulled out his cock and jacked off right here and now.

Fucked in the head, that's what he was. Watching his girlfriend get as good as fondled in front of him, seeing her get turned on, and all he could think was how happy he was for her and how much he needed to ease his balls.

Nathan lowered his hand, the camera dangling from his fingers. "Take a break. I want to try another angle and need a second to set up."

Melanie dropped to the mat, landing as soft as a cat on her feet. She shook out her arms, wiggling her fingers to get the blood moving again. Derrick peeled himself off the wall he'd been holding up and strolled over as casually as he could with his cock a solid brick against the front of his pants.

He stepped around Nathan to reach Melanie, rubbing his hands up and down her arms to help relax the muscles.

She stared at him, her flush spreading farther as she pressed in for a kiss and the ridge of his cock met her belly. There was no way she could avoid feeling it. Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips, and if it was possible, he got harder. Derrick leaned over to whisper in her ear.

"How you doing?"

She swallowed.

His lips brushed her earlobe. "Other than needing to be fucked?"

Her eyes widened. "Oh hell, I'm sorry, but..."

Derrick brushed back a strand of hair that had escaped her braid. "It's hot in here, isn't it?"

She nodded. "It's the lights."

A burst of laughter escaped. He stroked her arm, brushing the side of her breast. "Nice try."

Melanie leaned in and squeezed him tight as she whispered in his ear. "Are you sure this isn't pissing you off?"

"Positive."

"I feel so guilty. I don't understand my reaction—I mean, I might have been interested in him years ago, but I'm happy in my relationship with you. Why am I reacting like a dog in heat?"

Because Nathan was treating her like a desirable woman? "I'm not mad. Although—fair warning? When you're done with this shoot, I'm going to drag you into my office, lay you on my desk and fuck you until you're a boneless heap."

Her eyes widened to saucer-size. "How the hell am I supposed to keep climbing after you say something like that?"

"Guys? I've got an idea." Nathan's announcement broke in and cleared Derrick's brain for all of two seconds. "Derrick, can I get you to do some assists?"

“You want me in the pictures?” That idea kind of sucked. He hadn’t seen that suggestion coming at all.

“Only parts of you. I’ll show you.” Nathan motioned to the wall. “Melanie, climb up. I want you to lean back and have Derrick reach across your body.”

She willingly stood on two small footholds, grasping the larger jugs he’d had her use earlier, but she frowned. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Just get set up and I’ll show you.” Nathan gestured, and Derrick moved in to help. They had no ropes this time, even though both of them still wore their harnesses. Melanie was only a foot off the ground, bringing her head level with his.

“Okay, like this now.” Nathan abandoned his camera and moved in closer, hands landing on her hips to align her the way he wanted. He slid one hand up her side, so concentrated on what he was doing he seemed oblivious to the fact his palm slipped over the bare skin on her right side before pausing on her torso directly in line with her breasts. “Lean against me a little. That’s it. Now, Derrick, check this out. I’m going to hang on to the wall, but lean out of the way. Got that?”

Derrick nodded, trying to ignore the surge of blood headed south as Melanie licked her lips and closed her eyes. The more excited she got, the more he ached to do something about it.

Nathan stepped back and reached for his camera. “Now take my place. I’m looking for the contrast of a more masculine limb next to Melanie’s feminine figure.”

Melanie’s gaze followed Nathan’s retreat for a second before she turned to face Derrick. She mouthed the words *Oh my God* and he snorted.

Yeah, she was turned on big time.

He took his place and deliberately copied everything Nathan had done, including rubbing his way up her body to get into position.

“Bastard,” she muttered.

Derrick stepped to the side, making sure the only thing in the shot was his arm. That meant his hips were pressed tight to her ass, letting her know exactly how hard his dick was. “I’m so looking forward to helping you get into position in the shower later.”

“Awesome, guys.” Nathan stepped around the open area, clicking madly. “Derrick, if you can reach the wall with your other arm—yeah, there. Perfect.”

A trickle of sweat rolled down the side of Melanie’s neck, and Derrick instinctively brushed his face against her. She arched, just the tiniest bit, but it was enough to press her tighter to his groin, and he groaned out his approval. The tips of her nipples were hard, stabbing the thin fabric of her bra. Her breathing sped up as he stared over her shoulder and planned exactly what he was going to do to her when this session was over.

Nathan strolled from side to side, clicking away merrily. Melanie wiggled for a second, her ass rubbing his dick in an innocent coincidence—or was it?

“You need something, sweetheart?” He whispered the words, letting the tip of his tongue brush the dangling lobe of her ear.

“Stop it.”

“You mean that?” He forced the side of his arm to her torso and adjusted his grip. The movement made him rub her nipple and she moaned.

“God, I’m going to explode.”

The secretive conversation was made even raunchier knowing Nathan watched them through the lens of the camera. They weren’t alone. Every nuance, every touch, Nathan was there, a silent observer.

Maybe it was a touch of possessiveness that made Derrick rock his hips, the minute motion mimicking what he wanted as soon as humanly possible.

“Change of position,” Nathan called.

Derrick scooped up Mel and hugged her close as he stepped away from the wall. He lowered her, letting their torsos rub together until her feet touched the floor.

Her bright eyes stared into his, a tiny smile quirking the corner of her mouth. “I will get my revenge,” she promised.

“Bring it on.”

They grinned at each other before turning to face Nathan.

Nathan strategically arranged himself behind a chair to hide his erection. The generic shots were turning out fine—not as spectacular as he hoped to see for his special project, but more than sufficient for the *Rave* articles. And after getting a glimpse of how Melanie reacted to Derrick... Well, even though Nathan longed to be the one making her respond, with a little direction the boyfriend could assist in capturing some potential award winners.

Over the years Nathan had learned how to pull a response from his models. It wasn’t the lighting or the framing of a shot that made it unique and mesmerizing. It was the emotion portrayed in the eyes, the faces. The tension of muscles under skin. The merest whisper of a frown or a bead of sweat—that’s what made people remember a photo days or even months later.

Sometimes he’d arrange to shoot the pictures at a location that pushed the project to that incredible next level. Returning a family to the site of their lost home, the burnt remains a backdrop for them facing the future, or a child walking past the hospital where they’d spent the past Christmas—Nathan sensed how to get what he wanted, but he only ever did it with the full consent of his models. It wasn’t about taking advantage of them, but working with them to prove they were capable of the next step.

Like Melanie—although he had to admit his emotions were more conflicted when it came to her. She oozed sensuality from every inch of her skin, scarred or not. When he'd planned this trip, all kinds of mental images of what they could do together had bombarded him. He'd wanted to be the one making that sheen of desire rise to her skin, wanted it to be him taking her home at the end of this session and playing sexual games until they were both sated.

But in the end, as long as the shot worked, he would settle for Derrick's participation. At least for now. It was all about timing—the lights, the energy levels.

And like taking baby steps, it was time to move to the next stage. Nathan put down his camera and strode over to turn off the extra lights he'd brought into the gym. "I want to try something else, but you have to tell me if you're comfortable with it."

He sat in one of the folding chairs and dug a couple of water bottles from the cooler. Melanie and her sidekick accepted them, and Nathan waited. He wondered if Derrick was really as calm and peaceful a guy as he portrayed. If Nathan had made a miscall, this next move would get his ass wiped all over the dusty floor mats.

Only one way to know for sure. He pulled out a file folder.

"So far what I've been doing are basic shots for the feature article. I've just about finished them."

"That quick?" Melanie wiped water from her mouth, and Nathan forced himself to stop staring at the perfect swell of her lower lip. The fact he was also imagining what those lips would look like wrapped around his cock had nothing to do with why he was here.

"I will need a few shots outdoors—and I hope you'll be able to help us out there, Derrick."

The dark-haired man nodded slowly. "There are a couple places I can lead you to that are less popular, yet good solid climbing walls. But, Nathan, you're aware Melanie isn't up to climbing anything technical yet, right?"

She stiffened in her chair. "I'm capable of doing what needs to be done."

Derrick dropped a hand on her knee. "I agree. You are capable of anything you put your mind to, but I'm not belaying you up a technical route when he should be able to get the pictures he needs without pushing your boundaries. You've come a long way. That's the goal, a little at a time."

Hmm. Melanie sat back quietly and Nathan examined Derrick closer. Seems the guy wasn't just brawn and no brains. Time to see how he'd react to this push.

"I agree. I can work with whatever you feel is appropriate. I don't need a shot of Melanie dangling in midair against a huge backdrop. What I want is at the base, outdoors, creating another step in the big picture. I won't push beyond what you feel comfortable with, okay, Mel?"

She nodded and he smiled at her.

“We’re got barely an hour left before you said the wall officially opens. The natural lighting is awesome right now with the sun coming in through the skylights. I’d love to take a few shots for that other project I mentioned.”

“The coffee-table book?”

Nathan pulled proofs from the file. Here’s where the shit was going to hit the fan—or not. “Again, only what you’re comfortable with, but here’re some sample shots I took last winter. It’s all about playing with the shadows and light. The human body is a work of art, and that’s what I’m trying to show.”

He passed over the pictures and held his breath.

Chapter Five

Sandbag: To underestimate a route's difficulties.

Melanie's eyes grew wide, but it was Derrick's expression as he peeked over her shoulder that made Nathan the most hopeful. The boyfriend's gaze shot up to meet Nathan's, and there wasn't anger in his eyes, but intense concentration.

"Holy cow, Nathan, you taking pictures for *Penthouse* or something?" The light joking in Melanie's voice didn't disguise her touch of interest. "Because I have to tell you upfront, there's no way I've got the body for this."

She had no idea, did she? "Mel, that's bullshit, but that's not the point. No, it's not *Penthouse*, and I swear the intention is not to give teenage boys wet dreams. Think Greek statues, Renaissance painters—this is a celebration of the human body. But I want to show more. I also want to celebrate the human spirit, and that is where you are such a fantastic example."

She rotated the eight-by-ten she held toward him. It was a shot he'd taken last winter of a female skier, lounging on an emergency blanket in the middle of a snowfield. The black and white proof made the contrasting textures even more stark.

Long smooth lines of skin, the grainy surface of the snow in high relief, the woman's naked torso reflected like a mirror image on the silvery blanket. Her skis, boots and poles scattered in a heap beside her like a sacrificial-offering pyre. He was proud of the shot, and his model had been even more thrilled.

"This woman is totally naked, Nathan. I'm not posing for you in the buff."

He held up his hands in surrender. "Didn't ask you to. But—would you be willing for me to use some artistic license and make it *look* as if you're wearing a lot less than you've actually got on?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Using computer editing?"

"Nah, good old-fashioned methods of shooting from the correct angle." Nathan glanced at Derrick. "With a little help from you. Want to try a couple shots then tell me what you think?"

"These aren't going to *Rave*. Right?"

"Of course not, and remember, I promised you'll get to pick the ones I do offer them in the first place. I don't know which five or six they'll actually use. I have no control over that, but you'll know upfront which shots will be possibilities."

Derrick leaned closer and whispered in Melanie's ear. Nathan waited as patiently as he could, hoping this wasn't the moment that the whole idea collapsed around him.

The expression on Melanie's face wasn't giving anything away either. Except for her uneven breathing, which he'd noticed happened a lot during the photo shoot. Hell, his own breathing wasn't much smoother. The chemistry in the room had been enough to make them all hot and horny.

Nathan hadn't had a steady girlfriend for years. Love them—thoroughly—then leave them happy had become his motto. With his travel schedule there was no other way, and really, it wasn't that bad a life, being responsible for no one but himself.

Melanie sat up and cleared her throat. "If you take a few shots today, can you develop them and show me what you mean? That way I can decide better what I'm agreeing to."

Shit, yeah!

"Oh course." He stood and examined the walls closer. The perfect place to begin? "Stand in the corner and let me grab what I need."

He deliberately turned away to let Derrick and Melanie have a moment without his attention. He forced himself to breathe and keep his body loose and relaxed. Sporting an erection right now wasn't the way to keep Mel relaxed.

Oh hell, the images racing through his brain were going to kill him. Just because it seemed he wasn't going to get any action this trip didn't mean his body was happy about the fact.

He called over his shoulder as he gathered his gear. "If you can roll the top of your pants down a little, but leave the harness on, that would be great. I want it to look as if there's nothing on you but the climbing belt. If I shoot from the right angle, all we need is one small twist to your climbing top and a little assistance from Derrick."

Nathan strolled back to where Melanie waited in the corner where there was a beginner's climbing route. Back in the day, he'd seen her climb something like this freestyle, no ropes, laughing as she flew past the caution line and made her way to the top unprotected.

He wasn't going to demand anything that wild.

She stood strategically again, the side of her body with the scars tucked to the wall. Derrick remained close, a fierce guardian. Fine—Nathan had no objection to using the guy to get what he needed. Nathan put the camera away for a moment, then stripped off his shirt.

Melanie's bright laugh burst out. "Oh my God, Nathan, why are you wearing a bra?"

He grinned at her, thrilled to see the girl he'd been attracted to peeking from her shell. "Demonstrating what I want you do is easier with visuals. I need you to adjust your shoulder straps so that your shoulders are left bare. Like this—"

Nathan twisted and squirmed until all the fabric in the sport bra lay across his chest in a narrow band. He'd picked up the thing at the thrift shop the previous day, and now stood in a ridiculous pose. Her giggle of a response delighted him.

Melanie smiled hard. "You goofball."

"This must be big-city fashion or something," Derrick teased, a low rumble of amusement in his tone.

Nathan grinned back. "You're just jealous that you too don't have a fine article of clothing such as this to wear."

"Oh hell, yeah. I'm so envious I'm going to go get my feather boa out of storage."

Nathan good-naturedly flipped him the finger. The easy banter between them smoothed the tension, and the next thing he knew Melanie had popped out from where she'd hidden behind Derrick, her bra now twisted in imitation of the one he wore.

"Like this?" She cleared her throat. "I don't..." She blew out a slow breath. "This is tough, Nate. I never knew how tough it would be."

He stepped forward. "If it's too much, we can stop."

She shook her head, but tucked in against Derrick's side. "I'm okay, just, can I close my eyes or something?"

"Of course."

Derrick kissed her temple. "Give me a second. I've got an idea."

He snuck away, heading behind the front desk. As soon as he left, Melanie wrapped her arms around herself.

Nathan's heart was breaking. He hadn't expected her to be so fragile after all this time. He lowered his voice. "I mean it, monkey, if you want to stop, I have no objections. I'm not going to be pissed off or report you to Katy for banana stealing or anything."

The pain in her shining eyes contrasted with the stiff determination of her mouth. "I said I'm fine. I want to try. I want to see what the pictures might look like, because I can't honestly tell you yes or no otherwise."

He nodded before turning away, removing the sports bra and replacing his T-shirt, trying to make the situation easier. He didn't look at her until Derrick returned and held out a scarf to Mel.

She took it gingerly. "You're going to blindfold me?"

Derrick glanced at Nathan. "It shouldn't matter for these shots if there's extra fabric in the way, right? They're just samples for Mel to check out?"

It was brilliant. "I can work around that."

Mel handed the scarf back to Derrick. "You better stick close, that's all I'm saying."

"Like glue, girl, like glue."

Derrick wrapped the bright blue fabric around her eyes twice before tying it off, the short tails falling down the back of Mel's head to land on her bare shoulders.

Now that he wasn't worried about her catching him staring, Nathan allowed himself to finally look his fill. The skimpy line of fabric covering her breasts was no barrier to his appreciation of the firm swells. Her muscular arms and trim waist made him long to be able to smooth his hands over her body and enjoy her more intimately.

A soft cough brought him back to the sudden realization Derrick was probably at that moment planning his demise for openly lusty after Melanie. Only the expression on Derrick's face was unreadable—his own interest in the woman standing at his side crystal clear in the ridge bulging the front of his pants.

Derrick was just as turned on as Nathan, and Nathan hadn't a clue what to do.

So he did the only thing he could think of. Picked up his camera and directed Melanie and Derrick into the positions he wanted. He started slowly. After getting Derrick to place Melanie back in the corner, leaning on the wall, Nathan took the simple shots first.

"That's right. Relax your neck, let your shoulders fall. I'm taking a picture from the neck up, arranging the shot frame with the top edge of your sports bra."

"I still don't understand how you think this will produce anything someone will buy for a coffee table. I'm rather ordinary to look at, Nathan, really I am."

"Bull." Derrick beat Nathan to the punch this time. "Don't put yourself down or I'll make sure you know exactly how attractive you are."

Nathan's fingers skittered on the shutter button as he compelled himself to hold the camera steady. Derrick had placed a single finger on Melanie's throat, hovering over where her heart beat visibly. He dragged his hand downward, stroking softly. Nathan kept clicking, catching her shiver, the resulting line of goose bumps that rose over her arm.

"You don't have to fit some textbook-model stats to be gorgeous, Melanie. You've got grit. You've got the most incredible smile. But your body? Hell of a package." Derrick leaned in and dropped a kiss over her heart and Melanie instinctively arched her back, breasts reaching forward.

Nathan was going to fucking die. He had barely enough brainpower to somehow keep snapping shots.

Melanie cleared her throat. "Derrick—Nate's watching."

The words whispered out, chased by her tongue as she licked her lips. The blindfold remained in place. Nathan kept silent, waiting to see what Derrick's response would be.

"Of course he is, but he doesn't matter, babe. I'm the one who's telling you how beautiful you are. Don't you believe me?"

"I do, but...he's watching."

"Doesn't matter. Pretend he's not. Pretend there's no one here but us."

Derrick stretched his arm across her body and took her lips like a starving man. Melanie snuck one hand up, fingers tangled in Derrick's hair. Her other hand splayed against the wall as she got caught up in the kiss.

Maybe he was a bastard, but Nathan never stopped taking shots. He dipped to his knees, twisting to achieve the camera angles he needed. While Derrick and Melanie's lips meshed, their panting breathes echoing off the two-story ceiling, Nathan focused less on big-picture shots and more on revealing a mosaic of flesh and need. The arch of Melanie's shoulder, the smooth curve of the upper swell of her breast. Derrick's hand hit the wall next to her torso, the line of his biceps perfectly covering the swatch of fabric over her breasts. The muscular arm appeared as the only thing keeping her upper torso from full exposure to the camera's lens.

Gorgeous.

In his peripheral vision, Nathan spotted a beam of light inching closer as it fell through the skylight to hit the mat at their feet. Inspiration hit, and Nathan didn't hesitate.

"Derrick, help Melanie to the floor. Place her in the sun."

The other man dragged himself away, blinking hard as he fought his way back from the lust-filled creature Nathan had been capturing. Derrick nodded agreement, slipping his hands up Melanie's torso until he could lift her, taking her to the off-kilter square of brightness marking the center of the gym.

"Nate?"

God, the lost-little-girl sound trembling on her voice was going to kill him. "Don't worry, monkey, nothing scary is happening. It's as if you're back in drama class and you have to pretend to be a tiny little seed. I want you to curl up into as tight a ball as you can."

She nodded slowly, her fingers still linked with Derrick's as he stood to her side. "Do you..." She cleared her throat. "Do you want me to take off my top?"

Oh shit. That was so like the Melanie he remembered, attempting to push her own limits far sooner than she needed to. Nathan's gaze shot to meet Derrick's. The warning shake of Derrick's head wasn't needed. Nathan nodded silently, acknowledging his understanding. She wasn't ready for more, not today. "Nahh, these are test shots, right? Just pop your butt down and let me take advantage of the light."

The visible relaxing of her body showed they'd made the right decision. With incredible grace, Melanie sat, pulled her thighs to her chest and wrapped her arms around her shins.

"Do you need me to do anything?" Derrick asked.

Nathan stepped in circles around his subject, working as he spoke. "Not this time. Since it's just the test shots. Wait—yes, in a second I'll use your shadow. Okay, Mel, remember that drama-class thing? You're a seed, and it's springtime. Let's see you grow."

Melanie lifted her head from where she'd buried her face against her knees. Her eyes were still covered, but her smile shone out clear and bright. "Oh, come on, you're not going to tell me what kind of

flower I am? What's my motivation? Am I a good seed? Or a bad one? I can't possibly do this kind of improv without more direction."

Nathan and Derrick both laughed.

"You're nuts, that's what you are," Derrick teased.

"Ahhh, a peanut plant. See, that's what I mean, Nate. Give me instructions, and I can do anything."

As if by magic, the high sexual tension and lingering fear that had fogged the space around them for the past couple of hours faded away, and for the next thirty minutes there was nothing but easy camaraderie between them all.

Friends. Nathan finished his work even as he struggled through what was a massive mental change in game plan. It was becoming crystal clear that Derrick and Melanie were more than something casual, and although a part of him still wished he had been the one kissing Melanie senseless earlier, he wasn't planning on sticking around after this assignment. Fucking up someone else's life wasn't something he wanted to take the credit for.

As hard as it was to accept, being friends with Mel was all he was going to get.

Derrick stirred his coffee slowly, the thoughts racing through his brain enough to madden him. The whole photo session had made him harder than a pipe, and there was no way he could simply let it lie. He wasn't usually the type to get demonstrative in public, yet the rush he'd gotten taking charge of Melanie in front of Nathan had been undeniable.

And that was only the start of the issue.

His normal go-to guy in terms of talking about women and relationships was out of the question. He could just see it now, asking Kane for suggestions about dealing with his sister in regards to sex. Not happening.

So instead, he was going with the back-up help. He made his way over to where Jack sat, his fingers flying over the surface of an iPad.

"Okay, geek boy, put the toys away."

Jack grinned at him and clicked off a few final buttons. "Ass. Just because you hate technology doesn't mean the rest of us need to ignore it."

"Don't hate it, but I can live without it most of the time. I do love my GPS."

The sunny outdoor patio was filled with locals and tourists taking advantage of the gorgeous August day. "Jack, got a tough one, and I need some suggestions."

Jack raised a brow. "Me? You're talking about a woman situation here? Because you always go to Kane for that kind of thing. I thought I freaked you out."

"Yeah, but since this involves Melanie, I can't ask Kane."

“Right, you two are going out. I hope it’s nothing bad, because while I’m not her brother, I’ll still beat your ass if you’ve done something to hurt her.”

Derrick shook his head. “Things are great, the woman is a goddess, and I have no intention of hurting her. It’s this old friend of the family, Nathan King. Did you hear about him being around?”

“Taking pictures of her for some news article. Kane wasn’t a hundred percent happy about it.”

Oh boy, this was not easy. “Look, I need your honest opinion. You’re involved in a relationship with a woman who is also involved with another guy. How does it work?”

Jack hesitated. “You’re not asking about the physical dynamics are you?”

Now there was a discussion he didn’t want to have with Jack. “Hell, no. I know you and Kane are both doing Dara, and I don’t care if it’s together, from the rafters or painted with whipped cream. It’s the emotional side I’m trying to figure out. I’m not stupid, it’s clear this is more than a fling for you three. It’s not as if you’ve been hiding it in public, especially not over the last few months.”

Resignation and amusement both flashed over Jack’s face. “I must have ‘let’s talk about our deepest feelings’ written on my forehead. Yes, Derrick, spill all your emo questions on me. I’m used to it now, after all this time with Kane.”

Kane? “Really?”

Jack laughed. “Just tell me what’s up.”

Derrick nodded, still slightly disturbed by the image of Kane and Jack having long, deep meaningful conversations, and yet—why was that strange? They would have to talk through some major shit if they were going to survive having three people involved in a relationship.

He pulled himself back to the present. “Here’s the deal—Melanie and I are solid as far as I can tell, but she’s still got issues in terms of body image because of her scars. And yet, up pops this dude from her past, and she’s not only interested, he is as well. And I’m fucking freaking out because instead of wanting to kill him, I’m thinking this is exactly what Melanie needs—to be admired by someone else, and not just me.”

Jack stared out the window at the street for a moment, a heavy sigh escaping his lips. “You do this crap even better than Kane. That’s a tough one. I’m no shrink, but when someone’s been through an incident like Melanie, it makes sense that it’s a long road to full recovery. It’s probably a positive sign that she’s showing an interest in someone. I mean, not that it’s great for you or anything.”

Derrick waved a hand. “I mean it—things are good between us. She confessed to me she had a crush on him way back when. He obviously has an interest in her. He was taking pictures earlier, and the room just screamed with this *fuck me* tension. Only, I’m wiggling out because I’m not...”

He trailed off, not sure how to explain it right.

“Feeling possessive?”

Derrick swore. “I’m fucked in the head, aren’t I?”

Jack laughed. “Well, that makes us even, because I get the same damn reaction every time I catch Kane and Dara getting naked together. I wait for the flare of anger to hit, and when it doesn’t arrive I wonder if my balls are going to shrivel up and fall off in punishment for denying my manhood.”

The picture of totally-in-charge Jack taking a backseat didn’t sit right, but the confession made Derrick’s hope rise. “Really? I’d always thought you meekly sharing a woman seemed crazy.”

“Trust me, there’s nothing meek about it. It pissed me off for the first couple months at times, but now that we’ve been together in a committed relationship for eight months, I’m not sure how we managed before.” Jack held up a hand. “Don’t get me wrong, we still have fights, but considering there are two of us to deal with Dara when she’s hormonal? Much easier than having to figure out a woman all by yourself.”

“I’m not talking about forever, Jack. It just struck me maybe Nathan would be good for Mel short term.”

“Help her know that someone else feels she’s attractive?”

“That kind of thing, yeah.” Derrick laughed at himself. “Insane, right?”

Jack leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “Actually, no. I mean, it depends on the way you go about this. You’re not talking about taking off for a few weeks and letting the guy bonk her, are you?”

No freaking way. “Screw that. If she’s doing anything, it’s going to be with me there, making sure she’s okay all the time.”

“See, there’s where your situation and ours is different—although I guess our crazy situation began for a similar reason. You’re talking about something that helps you get to the end result that’s best for Melanie. Confidence in herself.”

“Right.”

Jack nodded. “I hear you. The only reason we started our three-way relationship was because it was the best thing for Dara at the time. And then it turned out to be the best thing for us all. Kane officially told his parents last month we’ve got this insane setup going. We’re...” Jack rolled his eyes. “Oh God, it’s fucking contagious. Now I’m the one acting like a girl. The three of us are buying a house together. Dara’s expecting.”

“Holy crap.” Derrick paused, considering. “Congrats.”

Jack’s instant brilliant smile wiped away the question if this was a good announcement—the pregnancy—or not. “Thanks. Keep it under your hat for a bit, though. We just got it confirmed, and Kane wants to be the one to let the rest of his family know. And before you ask, because it’s written all over your face, no, we don’t know who the dad is. Chances are we’ll figure it out when the kid arrives, since Kane and I have such different colouring, but we pretty much don’t care.”

A million questions rolled through Derrick’s brain, none of them related to his real dilemma. “You guys have a lot of guts. It’s not going to be easy, raising a kid in your unique household.”

“It’s going to work, because we’re committed to make it work. Like any long-term relationship.” Jack tilted his head at Derrick. “What about you? If this is serious, you and Melanie, you willing to do what it takes? Your situation isn’t exactly like ours, but it’s still the same question at the root of it.”

No, this wasn’t Jack and Kane’s situation with Dara at all. Derrick was sneakily suspicious he was falling in love with Melanie, and yet having Nathan join in and help show Mel that she was an attractive, vibrant woman in spite of the scars, seemed like the right thing to do for her sake.

The only reason she was doing the photo shoot was to help others. Screw that. She had needs as well, and he was willing to push past his comfort zone and make sure she got whatever it took for her to get that “full life” she longed for. Even if his solution wasn’t typical, adding another guy in the picture might be just the cure needed.

“You’re shitting me.”

Derrick ignored his comment, instead handing over a list. “You can get most of these things at Kane’s shop. I’ll loan you what I can, but you should make sure you have these items that fit properly.”

Nathan swore his mouth flapped like a fish while Derrick went on and on, continuing to list the places in town to find the camping supplies needed for their overnight trip.

Hell, no. That wasn’t where the first part of this conversation was going to stop. Nathan held up a hand, fingers spread in an attempt to arrest Derrick’s rapid info dump.

“Back up, man. What the fuck did you just tell me? Before the camping shit.” Because he really had to be going deaf.

Derrick sighed as he turned back to his desk. “Damn it, don’t make me say it more than once.”

“I think you need to repeat it until it sinks into my brain. Did you just suggest that while we’re out on this trip, I should try to seduce Melanie?”

“Not...seduce. I want her to be able to call all the shots.” Derrick leaned one hip on his desk, tension hovering around him. As if every muscle waited on the edge of exploding. “Level with me—do you find her attractive?”

Nathan reeled back. *Just the type of question I want to answer to a seemingly jealous boyfriend with enough muscles to beat me silly.* Fine, Derrick was going to ask the tough ones? Nathan went for broke. Maybe he was about to get a fist to the face, but screw it. “Hell yeah. I’ve been thinking about her ever since I got the bloody assignment.”

“That’s what I thought. And if I hadn’t been in the picture, you would have done what?”

This wasn’t happening. “You’re a strange bastard, Derrick. I would have asked her out while I was here. But she’s not alone. You two are seeing each other. I don’t mess with other guys’ women, not when they’re in a happy relationship.”

“She wants you.”

The instant silence in the room rang in his ears. Then anger joined his confusion. Maybe Derrick was going to be the one nursing some bruises soon. “What kind of boyfriend are you? Are you trying to pimp her out or what?”

Derrick rose to his full height, which let him peer down at Nathan with a rather intimidating presence. “Shut. Up. That’s the farthest thing from what I’m suggesting. God damn it, I’m just—” He turned to slam a fist on the surface of his desk. “*Fuck.*”

He shook his head and dragged a chair over, collapsing onto it as he leaned his elbows on the desk. Nathan waited, ready to bolt, still wondering how the hell this turn of events had happened. He hadn’t dreamed it though—Derrick had suggested he let Melanie know he was attracted to her.

Derrick made eye contact before speaking quietly. “She’s been self-conscious of her body since the accident. You saw some of that in the gym the other day, but it’s not just a cosmetic issue. The questions she used to get from the public are annoying, but it’s deeper than that. Some asshole insulted her the first time she attempted sex, and until I came along, she’d been letting her sensuality get buried by fear.”

“Shit.” The urge to go and rearrange the idiot’s face flashed white-hot. “Who was he?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Derrick pointed a finger in his direction. “What is important is the fact that you turn her on. She’s had this major crush on you since she was a teen, and if you had shown disgust in her body and scars, the impact would have been devastating.”

Nathan frowned. He’d known about the crush. Kind of been counting on getting to take advantage of that attraction now that they were both grown-ups. “What’s wrong with her body?”

Derrick grinned, and the anxiety level in the room dropped. Maybe this wasn’t going to end in physical violence. “Exactly—there’s nothing wrong, but you’re probably the only other guy she knows who sees *her* and not some mass of scarring.” He gestured to the chair next to him and Nathan sat. The conversation was unbelievable, and yet made perfect sense.

“That’s a screwed-up thing to do to a woman. Melanie went through hell and back physically recovering from the accident. I’d like to find out who the jerk was and make sure he knows better than to hurt someone like that ever again.”

“I agree, but at the same time, it’s more important to be there for Mel, as satisfying as administering justice would be.”

They stared at each other, the gentle sounds of the small town making their way in through the open window. The conversation turned in a new direction, as if there was a connection between them. No longer were they on either side trying to get Melanie’s attention, but on the same side, buoying her up. Nathan took a deep breath. “Now that I’m over my shock, can you try that again? What exactly do you want me from me?”

“I’m not suggesting you do anything you don’t want. I’m not telling you Melanie will even agree. The only thing I’m saying is that as her friend, and more, I’m fine with you letting her know how attractive she is. Even if that includes things of a mildly sexual nature. I’m going to be there one hundred percent of the time, but this could be something that helps get her past a tough part of her recovery.”

Nathan shook his head. “The whole idea is bizarre. I mean, it makes sense, but it’s not anything I’ve ever heard of before.”

“I know, but I think this relationship between Mel and me has the potential to be long term. I’d far prefer to have her face this side issue of her body image with you, someone she trusts, and now, than have her carrying the hurt for longer and have to deal with this shit somewhere down the road.”

“You’re still a fucked-up bastard, you know that. Right?”

Derrick laughed, slapping his hand on Nathan’s knee. “Trust me, I was the first one to realize that.”

Unbelievable. Nathan paused, realizing this was one of those moments where he could head down two different paths and his world would be totally different because of his choice.

Only this time, the decision wouldn’t only affect him.

Derrick rose to his feet. “We’ll be two days in the bush. Just—act natural.” He grinned at Nathan. “Sweet-talk her like you’ve been doing.”

Bastard. “Are you going to tell her what you told me?” Nathan couldn’t imagine how to even start that conversation. This one had been freaky enough.

Derrick raised a brow. “When it’s needed, yes, but for now, I’d like to just play it by ear. What do you say?”

There was no way he was turning down this opportunity. Nathan let his grin loose. “I’d say Melanie is going to damn well know that she’s an attractive woman by the time we get through with her.”

Chapter Six

Gumby: A novice climber.

Melanie rolled her head, stretching the tight muscles in her shoulders in an attempt to loosen them. After the drive to the trailhead, the hike, and setting up in their remote campsite, she'd thought they'd take it easy for a few hours, but no... Immediately after lunch Nathan hauled out his camera equipment and started gushing about the light being perfect.

Three hours later, she was praying for clouds.

"Freaking slave driver."

Derrick laughed and dropped his hands on her arms, rubbing in more sunscreen while at the same time pressing so perfectly on her muscles he dragged a groan from her lips. "Nathan's not a bad guy. Not when it comes down to it."

She gave him the evil eye. "You're not the one doing one-hand hangs for half of eternity here, dude."

"Yeah, yeah, life sucks, doesn't it, sweetheart."

She swung at him, and he ducked, grabbing her around the waist and twirling her in a circle until she shrieked with laughter. "Put me down, oh my, Derrick, stop it."

Nathan peeked from behind his tripod, broad grin firmly in place. "Okay, recess is over, children. Time to get back to work."

Melanie gave him her middle finger, then stuck out her tongue. He retaliated by snapping a picture, and she rolled her eyes. "You did not take a picture of that."

"Got one of you flipping me the bird as well. I think I'll blow it up to portrait size and give it to your parents for Christmas."

She stuck her fists on her hips. "Hey..."

He clicked off another shot and she gave up.

"Jackass."

"Monkey."

Melanie spun on the spot and returned to the rock where they were bouldering, her chin held high, letting her hips wiggle as she walked.

She couldn't believe it. Aching muscles or not, she was having the best time ever. It was like a flashback to her climbing days. Joking around and just hanging out with her buds. Nothing serious to accomplish and lots of new routes to try.

While he'd made her pose and not simply lounge around camp, Nathan had been pretty low-key about the whole picture-taking thing, compared to how closely he'd directed them back in the climbing gym. She'd even forgotten he was there as she and Derrick worked one section of the new route—arranging where they had to touch in order to go along the same path. Following a route had always been her favourite climbing activity.

This afternoon, she and Derrick were bouldering. No ropes, nothing farther off the ground than six or seven feet—low enough to stop her anxiety levels from flaring. Just a wonderful, tough physical challenge.

They'd started at the bottom edge of the huge rock, where a section of the base had caved away years ago. The first hand and footholds they chose placed them face up toward the overhang, butt and back only twelve inches off the crash mat they'd brought with them for safety.

If she fell making the first moves, she wouldn't fall far. And she had lost her grip, a couple times, until she'd figured out how to use the proper leverage to get around the corner and cling with her fingertips to a protrusion that had barely enough space for two fingers. That allowed her to use her stomach muscles, haul up one leg to a hold, cantilever herself to the side and finally make it to the vertical wall to work the next section.

Nathan cut in. "Hurry up, guys. I've got all the pictures I need of you on that hunk of rock. How about getting to the new territory?"

Melanie wrinkled her nose at him. "It's not as easy as it looks, Nathan."

He shrugged. "Whatever."

Oh really? His smirk lit a spark inside—one that wanted to challenge his cocky grin. She had aches in all the right spots, her muscles nice and warm. Melanie paused as she realized she hadn't thought about her scars once in the last couple hours, not even when she'd heated up enough she'd stripped down to her sports bra. The rush of excitement that washed over her made the dare burst out. "I bet you can't do it."

He lowered the extra camera he'd been playing with while waiting for them to carry on. "You've made all of three moves, monkey. Not like it's a huge challenge yet or anything."

"Oh, brother, are you in for it now..." Derrick muttered.

Melanie set her fists on her hips and smiled sweetly. "Put your money where your mouth is. I bet you can't do this route, not even if we show you an easier way."

Nathan sneered. "I'll offer chocolate if I can't."

Oh God, he was so going down.

"Right this way."

Derrick stepped aside and Melanie gestured Nathan forward. He crawled under the overhang willingly and grabbed the handholds.

“Your feet go to the right... Yup, that one. And the other over here.”

“Here?”

She giggled. Nathan was tall enough once he did touch the holds he was going to have a hell of a time getting his ass off the mat. “Perfect. Now, lift your hips.”

He flexed his muscles and managed to get into the first position.

“Impressive. Now go for it.”

Nathan tried, and while he had the strength, he didn’t have the technical experience to make the moves. He slipped off the rocks and smacked into the mat, flat on his back.

“Well done. *Not*. Where’s my chocolate?”

Nathan blew a raspberry at her. “Patience, monkey. That was only my first attempt.”

She shrugged. “First, tenth. Same result.”

He set up again, and again. The fifth time his ass hit the mat, she snorted. This was getting more and more entertaining.

“Damn it.” Nathan growled.

“He’s got the wrong foot pressure.” Derrick pointed out.

Melanie checked Nathan’s position. “Oh, you’re right. Nate, this time, push off with your right foot completely, but keep the left foot on the wall. It will give you the extra reach you need to make the catch.”

He leaned his head back and flashed that deadly grin, and something else warmed inside, not quite so competitive in nature. Damn, the man was a walking advertisement for testosterone and how to use it well. “You’re going to have to give me a little help, darling. I was watching through a camera lens before. Where am I reaching?”

She touched his outreached fingers with her own. “You’re here. You need to slip your fingers this direction—” She connected with the hold, keeping her elbow in contact with his hand. “See, it’s only a few more inches. Course, you should just let me know where the chocolate is now, so I can enjoy it while I watch you fall on your ass another dozen times.”

“Ha, ha. I can do this.”

“Suit yourself.” She stepped back, slipping next to Derrick where he leaned on the neighbouring rock face. He snuck his hands around her waist and tugged her closer, fingers caressing the bare skin at her side with delicate strokes, and her heart rate accelerated.

Nathan fell twice more, but her attention was drawn away by the increasingly intimate caress Derrick applied, sneaking his hands casually higher to brush the sides of her breasts.

“Stop that. You’re getting me all tingly,” she whispered.

“That’s the idea.” He chuckled and tugged her directly in front of him, aligning her so the length of his erection pressed between them. “You’ve been driving me mad. Your ass looks marvelous in those climbing pants.”

So much for worrying about needing sexy, skin-revealing outfits to turn him on. “Animal.”

“*Snaaarl*.” Derrick nibbled on her neck and Melanie sighed with happiness.

“Damn it, Mel, how the hell did you get around this corner?”

The pitiful question from Nathan interrupted the direction her thoughts were heading—which was fine, since there wasn’t going to be much opportunity to get naked with Derrick for a while anyway. Not with them all camping for the night in a single four-man tent.

“Hang on, Nathan, Mel will show you how.”

Melanie glanced at Derrick, pulling a mock pout. “I will? Why would I do that?”

“Sportsmanship?”

She narrowed her eyes.

“Come on, give Nathan another chance. He’s not as experienced as you are. Go under and demo again.” Derrick patted her on the ass.

Melanie planted a quick kiss on his cheek before slipping onto the mat and grinning at a frowning Nathan. “You really think you can do this?”

“I’m close, but I’m missing something.”

Five years of practice? “Try again and I’ll watch from here.”

Lying beside him allowed her to see exactly what he was doing wrong as he extended his torso and attempted to catch the next hold. It also let her see every muscle in his body flex—and while he wasn’t as cut as Derrick, it was still a fine view.

He’d been working hard, both earlier in the sun and now, and a fine layer of sweat made his skin shine. She breathed in deeply, the musky scent less dirty and far more arousing than she hoped. Melanie tilted her head back to see Derrick squatting outside the cave area, watching, and she shivered. Why did it feel as if he wasn’t keeping an eye on her to make sure nothing happened, but almost as if he hoped something would?

She cleared her throat. “You still aren’t using the muscles in your left leg right.”

“I pushed off,” Nathan complained.

“You did. But it’s not a push you need, it’s an extension, and you have to employ your full toe and calf muscle.”

Nathan dropped to the mat and groaned. “Show me again.”

Mel nodded. “I will, but first, try once more in slow motion, and I’ll point out the muscles you need to use.”

Nathan set up as she wiggled toward the base of the wall, planting her hand on his thigh before she thought it through.

Oh my God, he was solid. Unyielding muscles flexed under her fingers, and she forced herself to concentrate. “This is where you need to push off, then you can...”

She traced down his calf muscle, caught hold of his ankle and tugged slightly. “Up on your toe. There. That will give you an additional three inches, and that’s all you need to reach your goal.”

“Additional three inches, hey? Never been told I needed it.”

She flushed instantly. What was she supposed to say to in response to that? “Move over and I’ll show you one last time.”

Nathan dropped then slipped to the side to let her access the first holds.

Melanie dragged her gaze off Nathan, wondering if she’d caught some kind of a flu that made her insanely hot and feverish. There was no excuse for this. She’d told Derrick she found Nathan attractive, but that didn’t give her the right to fantasize about the guy right there in front of him.

She lifted her hips and got into position.

“Nate, you’ll never see what she’s doing from over there. Come over to this side,” Derrick ordered.

Melanie’s hands nearly slipped off completely when instead of crawling out to come around to her left, Nathan wiggled under her. There wasn’t enough room for him to pass by without brushing their bodies together, no matter how close to the rock face she clung.

And it seemed she wasn’t the only one feeling the heat. He was most definitely hard more places than his arm and leg muscles. Melanie held her breath as he passed, glancing at Derrick to see just what the hell was going on.

He winked.

Winked?

“Okay, Mel, do a slow-motion reach. Nathan, put your hand on her left thigh and feel how the extension starts—it’s not only the thigh, it’s the calf as well and the toe as a final move.”

Nathan wrapped his warm fingers around her leg. His palm cradled the back of her thigh as he stroked downward.

She tried to concentrate on the climbing move, but her focus was gone. A burning sensation skittered along her nerves in direct opposition to the path of his hand, heat flaring into her core. Melanie slid off the rock and lay still for a moment, heart pounding. This was insane. Impossible. Nathan stared into her eyes, his gaze fixed on her as he flipped his grasp to cover the top of her shin. Inch by inch he smoothed his palm upward. The new grip meant his fingertips tickled the inside of her thigh, edging closer to her sex. Fiery shots raced ahead of his touch, and she bit her lip to stop her panting breaths from escaping and revealing exactly how turned on she was.

Maybe she should ignore him. He was going to stop any second—this was a totally innocent move on his part, and she shouldn't make it dirty simply because she was horny enough to want to strip and crawl all over him—

Sudden energy flashed to her muscles, and she scrambled out from under the rock, crawling crablike away from Nathan. Escaping, retreating. She stood, teetering briefly before a broad body made contact with her.

She spun, squeezed her face tight to Derrick's chest, wrapping her arms around his torso like a tangling vine. If she didn't look at either of them, she could pretend she hadn't just considered letting Nathan King touch her intimately. Fake that the issue was her scars, when this time her damaged body had been the last thing on her mind as she'd lain in the arms of her teenage fantasy.

Derrick stroked her head, his solid body tight in all the right places. Including—*oh my*. He was hard? That in itself wasn't unusual, but now? The timing seemed improbable. He reached under her hips and lifted her, allowing her to cling tighter to his neck, their faces now level.

"Derrick, I—" How to explain? Make an excuse or tell the truth?

He kissed her. So, so tenderly. The moist heat of his mouth as he nuzzled her cheek, her temple, made tears spring to her eyes. One brush passed over her lips. One landed on the tip of her nose before he tilted his head to recapture her gaze. "I think you're a very beautiful woman."

She flushed. He thought she'd freaked over her scars. For a moment she debated taking the easy way out, letting him continue to blame this on her past fears, then guilt hit. If she truly cared about Derrick, and that was the way her heart seemed to be heading, she would not lie about something this important. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

He'd turned them so her back was to Nathan. What was he doing? Had he followed them? "This whole picture-taking thing is getting to me. I've never felt like this before."

Derrick's dark eyes crinkled at the corners. "Because you feel attracted to Nathan? As well as me?"

"I don't want to hurt you." The confession was barely audible. She might have shared about her past interest in Nathan, but it *was* the past. She didn't want to do anything to screw up her future with Derrick.

He shifted position, adjusting until he found a comfortable rock to sit on. She was in his lap now, resting on his strong thighs. His broad shoulders under her hands were strong and yet relaxed.

"I'm not upset with you." He wrinkled his nose. "I am at a loss for words though, so excuse me if this sounds stupid."

Melanie wiggled upright. "What?"

Derrick's smile had a guilty twist to it. "Mel, you know I find you attractive, but I'm not the only one. Nate thinks you're pretty incredible as well."

Air stuck in her throat. "You... How do you know that?"

The guilty expression spread, becoming more obvious. “We talked about it.”

Holy shit. The guys she’d hung around with on the climbing team had talked about girls all the time, but it was locker-room talk. Conquests and game plans. Surely Derrick and Nathan were above that kind of thing. And why was Derrick looking so sheepish?

“You talked about me? What specifically did you discuss?”

A hand brushed her neckline, and she startled, nearly falling off Derrick’s lap. Two sets of hands caught her, Derrick’s familiar touch on her hips.

Nathan’s firm grasp on her shoulders.

“We talked about the fact I can’t keep my eyes off of you.” Nathan stood close behind her body, heat from his torso making her insides squirm. He loosened his clasp and slid his fingers down her arms, the light stroke causing a reaction in her core similar to putting flame to kindling.

Derrick pulled her hips in tighter until her sex rested against the very apparent ridge of his arousal. “I told him how important you are to me, and he shared how much you’ve meant to him. As a friend, and someone he greatly admires.”

Melanie wasn’t sure if she was holding her breath, or if her body was incapable of performing the simple tasks necessary to survival. When Derrick dipped his head, brushing his lips against hers, his kiss gave her something to cling to. She accepted the worship of his mouth even as her mind spun.

The vulnerable sensation rippling through her body had nothing to do with her past injuries. It had everything to do with the rising lust she seemed helpless to resist, the yearning to be caressed by the two men who mattered the most.

A warm hand slipped across her belly, palm in full contact, and she froze. Nathan was touching her. He delicately circled her bare belly button—she had taken out the ring for climbing—before pulling his fingers back to wrap them around her waist. Settling directly on top of her scarred skin.

Oh my God.

Instant fear surfaced, even though she had buried it under layers and layers of barriers. Bile rose to her mouth, in anticipation of the coming agony. Any second now Nathan was going to recoil in disgust, and his response would rip her soul in two. A blur passed in front of her eyes as she waited for the dagger to stab into her heart.

“Breathe, Mel. Come on, I’m here, holding you. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Derrick’s voice dragged her back from the wall of anxiety that had rushed up, blocking all possible escape routes but sheer panic. She took a deliberate breath of air through her nose before lifting her gaze to his.

He remained waiting like a rock, something solid to cling to. Still, the mixture of terror and desire clouding her brain made concentration difficult. “He’s t-t-touching me.”

Derrick nodded. “If you like it, he’ll continue to touch you. But only if you want.”

“You’re a very desirable woman, Melanie.” Nathan swept his hand over her abdomen again, ranging higher this time. The tips of his fingers brushed the underside of her breasts and sent jolts of excitement to her nipples, her core.

In spite of the ache in her body, she needed to know. Her heart was fragile—even more fragile than her body had been three years ago as she lay crumpled at the bottom of the hill. Melanie spoke her fears. “I don’t understand. Derrick—what’s happening? Are we not a couple anymore?”

“Oh, Mel.” Derrick cupped her face in his hands. “No, that’s not it at all. I need you, I want you, and have no intention of letting you go. But I also care enough about you to give you what you need.”

“What I need?” Another gentle pass of Nathan’s hand over her sensitive skin caused a shiver that consumed her entire body. “You think I need...Nathan?”

Derrick soothed her, hands and lips petting her softly. “You tell me.”

Sunlight wavered around them, the tall trees swaying in the breeze making the shadows dance around the clearing. It was the most peaceful of settings, and she closed her eyes and soaked in the serenity around her to force out the fears rocking her world.

Sexually aroused, emotionally anxious—and stunned by what she grew more certain was love shining in Derrick’s eyes.

Melanie twisted until she sat sideways in his lap, both legs dangling to the side. She glanced behind them where Nathan squatted. There was no mistaking the heated interest in his expression as his gaze roamed over her body.

Derrick thought she needed Nathan. Did she? Her first response to him touching her scars had been worlds apart from her reaction earlier in the gym, and on the bouldering wall. Instead of a rush of desire, she’d felt dread.

Why? Why the change?

Because he’d made actual contact. That’s when she’d been rejected before.

She touched Derrick’s face. “You want me to let him touch my scars. To prove that they don’t mean anything.”

“To prove your attractiveness is far more than skin-deep.”

Even as fast as her heart fluttered, there was a twist of irony in the setup. “This seems a radical form of therapy.”

Derrick bumped his nose against her cheek, breathing from the vee of her neck. The warm puff of his breath slid down her skin like a delicious secret. He spoke for her ears alone. “Doing is much better proof than discussing for hours. I’ll be right here, and you can say stop whenever you want. Kiss him if you want, touch him, allow him to touch you.” He pulled back, staring possessively at her lips. His tone dropped, thick with lust. “And when you’ve had enough, I’m making love to you until you lose all doubts about how desirable you are.”

She squeezed her legs together at the instant response his promise created in her body.

“Do you understand?”

Melanie nodded slowly. It was preposterous. Fantastic. Slightly mad.

Derrick paused. “If this is what you want, it’s up to you to take it.”

Brilliant. There would be no chance down the road she could claim this was something she’d felt pressured into. If she wanted, she could act. Make it her decision to step forward to prove herself attractive to more than just one man.

A rush of self-reproach hit. Why *wasn’t* being attractive to Derrick enough? He’d been so consistent and caring, and she still hadn’t been able to move beyond her limitations. Melanie lifted her lips to his and accepted his kiss. Hard for a moment, both of them affirming their connection, needing proof of it. Derrick eased back, a questioning expression on his face as he waited for her decision.

Having Derrick in her life was the start of healing, but she still felt caged. And it was past time to fix this problem.

This offer—to try and break the final chains that wrapped her in bondage—it was as if a lifeline was being stretched to her. Even though her limbs trembled, she turned to face Nathan, because she damn well needed this for her soul.

“Monkey?” Nathan’s knuckles were white where he’d dug his fingers into his thighs as he waited a few feet away. The grass lay crumpled under his knees, a smear of dirt along the edge of his shorts. Patient, and oh-so masculine. No longer the young man she’d lusted after before she even knew what lust was.

She shook her head, casting aside all her childish connections. “I’m not a monkey anymore. I grew up.” And the grown-up woman had needs the teenage fantasy couldn’t answer.

But the man before her could.

Nathan’s response was a skin-tingling, body-melting smile. “I noticed.”

She shuffled forward on Derrick’s lap, the firm base of his thighs giving her a chair-like base to rest upon that allowed her feet to touch the ground. With one hand she reached for Nathan, and he moved to accept it.

His fingers were less callused than Derrick’s. Not soft, but not the hands of a climber. With her wrist captured, Nathan rotated his hand, delicately holding her palm upward in the circle of his fingers.

“Derrick is right. You can say stop at anytime. I find you very attractive, Melanie Dixon, and I can’t wait to prove it. In detail.”

She couldn’t tear her gaze away. He seemed fascinated with the tendons in her wrist, tracing them with the fingertips of his other hand, inching his way up the sensitive skin of her arm until he made contact with the inside of her elbow. Traveling in conjunction with his touch was a freaky sensation somewhere between being tickled and being held at the edge of a rocking orgasm.

Was it possible to climax without a single sexual touch?

“I want to kiss you, Mel.”

He waited for her response, his long dark lashes that she’d envied as a teen lazily fluttering as he stared at her mouth.

A kiss would be good. If she remembered how to talk, she would tell him that. Instead, she managed a nod, and his smile arrived right on cue. He released her wrist, slipping one hand all the way up until he cradled her neck. His other hand dropped to rest feather-light on her thigh.

Nathan leaned in until his mouth made contact with hers, tracing his tongue over her bottom lip tentatively. Even as she pressed closer for more, Derrick’s firm grasp reassured her, his thumbs stroking slowly back and forth over the curve of her hipbones, adding to the desire rocking her core.

The situation was bewildering, but the actual increase in her pulse had everything to do with arousal instead of fear and she could have cried because it felt so wonderful.

She crushed her lips against Nathan’s, not allowing him to remain delicate. His response was immediate—passionate and demanding. He held her head in place and took her mouth by storm. Thrusting with his tongue, biting her lips, rocking the pleasure in her to a higher level in a split second. It was unlike any childish fantasy she’d clung to and, *oh God*, it was good.

The heat behind her confirmed Derrick was still there. That when she’d had enough of Nathan’s caresses, her lover was going to make her body sing like he had proven over and over he could—

The line between panic and pleasure blurred further. It might have been fear that started her heart racing in the first place, but it was the sensation of Nathan’s hand moving on her thigh that pushed a needy cry from her throat.

Chapter Seven

Crux: The hardest move on a route.

The breathless sound echoed in his ears, and Derrick felt the same damn shiver of lust that occurred when he was the one making Melanie respond. He was a fucked-up bastard—Nathan and Mel’s lips were locked together, the man’s hands were moving on her body and not one single iota of jealousy registered. If anything, Derrick had gotten harder in the last minute than he’d been before.

He stroked her skin under his fingers, smooth on one side, pocked and marred on the other—there was nothing about her body she had to be ashamed or worried about. If having Nathan touch her could convince Mel of that forever, this was the cure to use.

She gasped again and Derrick tightened his grip on her hips. Centering her, being there for her. Listening for any indicators she wanted to retreat, but even while she leaned away from Nathan’s kiss, Melanie reached up to catch hold of his head.

“That was way better than when I was sixteen.”

Nathan grimaced. “You weren’t supposed to know it was me who gave you that kiss.”

She wriggled in Derrick’s lap as she laughed. “Oh my God, are you serious? Even blindfolded I knew it was you.”

Blindfolded?

Then there was no chance to ask any questions as the train moved forward in a rush.

“Take off your top.” Nathan flicked a glance over Mel’s shoulder at him then returned his full attention to her. Under Derrick’s hands, she’d gone tight. Rigid as a rock wall, and Derrick wondered if Nathan had pushed too hard.

She leaned against his chest and took a deep breath. Nathan waited, silent yet demanding. Derrick was on the verge of speaking—of suggesting this wasn’t needed. That he’d made a mistake, when Melanie surprised him.

“Close your eyes,” she ordered back, and Nathan complied, snapping them shut. His hands remained resting on her thighs, hunger on his face.

Mel twisted her head. “Derrick, you still with me?”

“All the way, whatever you want.” Whatever it took to make her happy. Derrick was more convinced every minute he was in for the long haul.

She nodded, then maneuvered the sports bra from her body, dropping it to the grass beside them. Derrick peeked over her shoulder to admire the tight points of her nipples poking from the rounds of her breasts.

“Hmm, can I touch as well?” he asked, and Melanie reached back and caught his head, tugging until their lips met. Passion rocked through him, a thunderous noise in his ears as they kissed—so right and familiar now, yet new and unique each time. Derrick wrapped his hands around her torso to cup her beautiful breasts. He played with her nipples between forefingers and thumbs, lightly teasing the tips, rolling and tugging and pinching until she moaned.

Moisture touched his fingers, and Derrick swallowed the exclamation she made before pulling back to observe Nathan come in for a second slow swipe over the exposed peak of one breast. Nathan had kept his hands locked on Melanie’s thighs, only his mouth touching, tongue darting out to flick the tip again and again.

Derrick adjusted his hold to bare more of her breast, and Nathan took immediate advantage, wrapping his lips around the entire nipple and sucking.

Melanie writhed on Derrick’s lap, her ass rubbing his erection as she arched and pressed closer to Nathan’s eager mouth. “So good. Yes, like that...”

As Nathan moved his hands up to cradle and caress, Derrick slipped his out of the way, simply enjoying the heat of her in his lap, the brush of her skin against his torso as she continued to lean in his direction. He watched. Assessing, judging, ready to act if her enthusiastic response changed, but there was no need. She caught Nathan by the hand and directed his touch, their fingers linked as she allowed her old friend to brush the damaged skin on her torso, the side of her breast.

More kisses followed, hot and needy, as Nathan took Melanie’s lips again. When he leaned away Melanie sucked in air as Nathan’s gaze flashed over her body.

“Every inch of you makes me want you. No scars can change how attractive you are. Nothing can.”

A hesitant smile crossed her face a split second before he recaptured her lips. Then he kissed his way down her throat and across her collarbone to once more worship her breasts.

A purr of contentment escaped her. Derrick rejoiced. That was what he wanted to hear, to witness. Every inch of her craving sexual release, no thought of her scars or the trauma she’d gone through.

And sexual release she would get. Derrick snuck his hand over Melanie’s hip and under the elastic of both her climbing pants and panties. Over the soft curls covering her sex, wetting his fingers in her cream and drawing it higher to rub her clit.

Together he and Nathan took her to the edge of pleasure. They whispered words of admiration, stroked her skin, kissed her bare torso. Nathan bit one nipple then suckled hard, and Derrick took that moment to thrust two fingers into her core.

“Oh *God*.” She squirmed, not in retreat, but to allow them both to reach her better. “More. Please, more.”

More? They gave it to her until she gasped for air. Derrick ground the heel of his palm against her clit as Nathan pinched her nipples, kissing her hungrily.

The flush of arousal over her chest heightened in colour, the sounds she made shifting from words to guttural mutterings then moans. Tiny cries and gasps until she went silent, the calm before the storm.

Melanie shook as she came, her sheath pulsing tight around his fingers, a long low keen of satisfaction rising on the air. Nathan dropped his head against her chest, his dark hair covering her skin, his breath escaping in rapid gasps. Derrick clung to his own sanity for a moment. He needed her like crazy.

More than that, he needed to finish this as a couple, not a trio. He wasn’t about to toss Nathan in the dirt, not after he’d given so willingly to Melanie, but the next step was going to be him and her, alone. Urgent desires and violent passion swirled inside, and Derrick caged them both as he waited for the right moment. This was for her.

She relaxed, boneless in his lap, one arm rising to cling to his neck, the other reaching out so she could brush her knuckles over Nathan’s cheek.

“Wow.”

Nathan grinned. “You liked that?”

She laughed, sitting up to deliver a quick kiss over Nathan’s lips. “I liked it a lot. But I need—”

She glanced over her shoulder and Nathan hummed. “You need time with Derrick. No worries.” He rocked away, slowing his breathing.

Melanie twisted to curl up in Derrick’s lap, as if a bird seeking shelter. She tucked her face into his neck, and he hoped she wasn’t retreating. Then he realized this time she hadn’t hid the scarred side of her torso from Nathan’s gaze.

The two men locked eyes. It wasn’t a complete cure, but it was a step in the right direction. Derrick dipped his chin and Nathan nodded acknowledgment.

Melanie burrowed her hands under Derrick’s shirt and scratched his back, and the rush of need that assaulted him nearly tossed him to the ground. It tore open his barely contained ardour. Foreplay was over and there was only one place this was going. He lifted Melanie into the air as he stood, leaving Nathan behind with their gear.

Melanie sighed, resting her head against Derrick’s chest, the heavy thumping of his heart rhythmic in her ear. Every step he took rocked her body against him. “That was simply—”

“Don’t talk.” The words were ground out so low and guttural she peeled herself away to see what was wrong. He shook his head, his nostrils flaring as he carried her back to the wilderness campsite they’d set up. She forced her lips together to keep from blurting out her questions.

He dropped her on the solid wood of the picnic table, and she bounced as her butt landed on the flannel cloth she'd spread earlier.

"Take off your pants," he ordered.

Derrick ripped off his shirt, the rigid planes in his abdomen flexing as he reached for the snap on his pants.

It wasn't anger driving him. Relief shot through her, and she remembered his promise from earlier. As stupid as it was, shyness hit and she glanced toward the trees where Nathan remained. "But—"

"Now."

She'd never seen this side of Derrick before. Need and desire pulsed from him like a tangible thing. His hands were on her pants before she could protest again, stripping the fabric away. He tugged her to the edge of the table then buried his face between her legs.

Crazy emotions jumbled together with her instant physical response to his touch. His tongue drove her mad as he took possession of her hips and forced her into a position he liked better.

Melanie let her worries and concern wash away as Derrick brought her back up to the verge of another release so rapidly she thought she'd have trouble ever taking a full breath again. Every time she attempted to fill her lungs, he thrust into her core and made her gasp with pleasure. When he exchanged his fingers for his tongue, her sheath wrapped tight around him and her desires whipped into a frenzy. The cloudless sky overhead spun in a circle as an orgasm washed her from toes to brows, and her mind went numb.

Then he stood, dropped his pants and slammed his cock into her with one thrust.

"Derrick!"

He supported her knees in the air, her thighs lifted to vertical as he pounded his groin against her body. Every thrust powerful and deep, stretching, filling her to capacity. Making her weep with want.

"So. Fucking. Beautiful. Every bit of you."

He stopped, cock buried in her core. His eyes flashed, dark obsidian globes backlit with the fire of passion. He ran his hands up and down her thighs, tiny rocks of his hips keeping the intimate connection going, but dragging the sensory overload farther into her extremities. When he pushed her knees toward her chest and leaned over her, his cock pressed even deeper.

A whimper escaped.

Derrick stopped instantly. "Mel?"

"Oh, *God*, do that again." More. He'd have her begging if he didn't move.

Slow, tortuously slow. His deliberate control as he withdrew caused the wide head of his shaft to stroke all the sensitive places inside her.

"I couldn't stand it anymore. I needed you," he confessed.

Another plunge forced a gasp from her lips. "Need you too. Oh please, Derrick."

The teasing edged her back up like a sizzling fuse. Her climax hovered just out of reach. Melanie grabbed her knees, folding herself in a virtual pretzel. Giving him everything. Begging without words for him to continue.

He grinned, the flash of his teeth bright against his tanned skin.

“You like this?”

She couldn’t speak. Forced herself to nod.

He sped up slightly, strokes still long and powerful. “Even better?”

She opened her mouth as he snuck his fingers between their bodies and found her clit. He pressed the aching nub between his fingers and buried his cock deep.

Melanie closed her eyes to concentrate on just how damn good it felt. “Oh, yes. Do that.”

It wasn’t an easy position for either of them, but she’d lost her fear of where they were and could only sense what she needed. What they both needed.

Each other.

The boards were solid under her back, the sun heated their naked skin. The summer-turning-to-fall scent floated past on the light breeze. All her senses seemed to be turned on high, even the taste of the air more robust than usual. She should have been cold with all her exposed flesh, but there wasn’t an inch of skin that wasn’t steaming hot.

She opened her eyes to meet Derrick’s, and this time, it was the tenderness she saw that made her dissolve. The physical connection between them was good, but it was that something extra that made sex magical. Tipped her over the edge, made her fall in headfirst, her body’s response pulling him along, her heart succumbing as well.

Nathan remained motionless, indecision locking his limbs. Hard physical need urged him to follow—to demand more from Melanie. He’d barely gotten a taste of her, and what he’d experienced wasn’t nearly enough.

But when she twined herself around Derrick and the man carried her away, Nathan hesitated. This wasn’t about him, never had been. The whole insane scenario had been for Melanie’s sake.

He collapsed back onto the grass, arms flung to the side, willing the blood that had pooled in his erection to vanish. Pleading for the images in his brain to fade enough he could get to his feet without the violent desire to interrupt the lovers and throw himself into the action again.

A slow roll allowed him to crawl to his knees, then fight his body to vertical. There was a distinct lack of blood in his brain as he found himself picking his way through the woods toward where they’d made camp. Responsibility motivated him—he needed to make sure Melanie was okay. He hadn’t believed the idea was a great one in the first place. Letting her know he was attracted to her? That was easy. But Derrick

should have known Melanie wasn't the type to want to fool around. This could have been a huge mistake, no matter how much he'd enjoyed touching her. No matter how much more he wanted to experience.

He pushed aside a branch and froze. He'd been a fair distance behind, intending to give them space, let them settle and talk things through. Only the sight that greeted him wasn't the two in deep conversation, or Melanie in tears. Instead her naked body was arched in ecstasy as Derrick lapped at her pussy like a starving man.

Nathan had forgotten that part of the discussion.

Her moans of delight did what Nathan thought was impossible—made his dick hard again. She'd teased him unintentionally all day, but seeing her spread out and in physical rapture?

He stepped back into the shadows and rubbed his palm over the fly of his pants, attempting to soothe his aching hard-on.

The erotic tableau before him evolved again. Derrick thrust into Melanie's sweet body, and by instinct Nathan's hips jerked.

Fuck it. He lowered his zipper and pulled out his cock, finally able to see straight as the pressure eased. There was nothing to distract him as he stared, mesmerized, letting the semen escaping from his cock ease his hand on his shaft. There was nothing light and delicate about his touch. He bucked into his fist matching the tempo of Derrick's hips, and with everything in him, Nathan wished he could feel Melanie surround him. Experience her wet heat, the tight pressure squeezing on his cock. Touch her body and let her muscles drag him over the edge.

It was dirty and gritty, being a voyeur, and yet he couldn't tear his eyes away. So much for apologizing for his earlier behaviour—he was ready to explode just imagining being intimate with her. Thrusting like a madman into the woman who had taunted his dreams.

Derrick rearranged Melanie's limbs, and the view got even better. Nathan had a clear visual line on every plunge, every snap of Derrick's hips against her ass. The sounds she made were enthusiastic and vigorous, carrying on the air to where he stood.

It wasn't enough. He wanted to be the one making her moan. Sucking on her breasts, licking in endless circles over her skin until she screamed in pleasure. He closed his eyes and thrust harder, his balls dragging higher to his body until the spark of fire flashing up his spine exploded out his cock.

Holy. Crap. Nathan pumped into his fist, strands of semen spurting out to coat his fingers, splay over the plants at his feet. His legs grew shaky, and he barely managed to catch hold of the nearest tree to keep upright.

Of course that was the moment Melanie shouted, Derrick's cry overlapping hers only a second behind. Nathan automatically thrust again, even with nothing left to spill. Feverish heat raced over him, all sweaty and sticky and void of all mental ability.

What the hell had just happened?

Nathan staggered a pace or two, propping his back against a tree. His breathing was ragged. His softening cock hung in the air while his pants flapped around his knees. There was a sweet twittering as birds floated past. Branches wiggled—probably from a squirrel or some other kind of small animal. He was surrounded by the freaking animal kingdom, and he'd just shot his brains out the end of his dick.

"I am so fucked."

Nathan forced himself upright. Scrambled to put everything in place. Finding his footing wasn't as easy, then he remembered the equipment still left at the boulder. He should go back. Retreat and gather their gear. Give Melanie and Derrick time to clean up and get themselves together.

That's what he should do, but the temptation to witness the conclusion of the story was too great. He twisted and stared at the picnic table. Derrick had pulled Melanie to a sitting position, and they were kissing tenderly, bodies still joined. The portrait was incredible—sexual, explicit and affectionate all at the same time.

An unfamiliar emotion stabbed deep. Even as Nathan admired how well the lovers suited each other, while he appreciated the esthetic beauty of the contrast of feminine and masculine bodies, the ache inside had nothing to do with missing a great photo op.

Nathan whirled. He staggered unsteadily for a second before catching his balance and making his way back to the boulder to gather their abandoned equipment. Maybe if he kept himself busy he'd be able to ignore the truth. Wanting to have more physical contact with Melanie was explainable, both from the perspective of their past history and general male admiration for a beautiful woman. But it was the unmistakable signs that the other two were falling in love that made him insanely jealous.

He was honest enough to admit that while he didn't want her forever, the connection Derrick and Melanie shared was looking more desirable than he'd ever imagined.

Chapter Eight

Epic: A really big adventure.

Derrick sent Melanie into the tent to find clean clothes while he wrapped a towel around his hips. He got a big pot of water boiling and laid out supper supplies. Cleaning up from their escapade would be a little tougher in the outdoor setting than it would have been at home with hot showers, but the whole experience had been too spectacular to complain about the extra work.

A soft cough brought his attention to the edge of the clearing where Nathan stood, hands full of gear. “Is it safe?”

A mix of guilt and gratitude washed over Derrick. “Nate. Come on. I’ve got things started for our meal.”

He gestured toward the table and Nathan deposited the collection of belongings they’d left behind.

Derrick smiled with approval as he picked out Melanie’s top. “I didn’t expect her to go for it that quick,” he confessed.

“So, everything’s okay?”

The unusual tone in Nathan’s voice drew Derrick’s attention upward. The other man’s bright smile was absent, and Derrick hurried to reassure him. “Everything’s aces. Mel’s great, and I have no issues. You?”

Nathan glanced toward the tent before sitting on the bench and speaking quietly. “She’s an incredible woman, Derrick, and I can see why she means so much to you. That indomitable spirit I always admired—she’s still got it.”

Pride and possessiveness swelled in Derrick. “Her fears are being taken down one by one. You did a good thing earlier. Thank you.”

Nathan snorted. “Trust me, it wasn’t a hardship.” He paused, although Derrick could see he longed to say more.

“What?”

“Is that it? I mean, how do you expect me to act for the rest of the trip?”

Oh hell. “Like do I assume you’re not to touch her anymore?”

Nathan nodded.

It only took a moment to consider. “You know what? I don’t think I’m the one you need to ask.” God, this was tough. Derrick wanted nothing better than to say hands-off, but the reasons he had suggested this scenario in the first place still applied. Once was not a cure. And he had to admit, it had been pretty hot seeing Melanie that turned on. “Keep playing it by ear. I’m not going to kill you in your sleep, and if Mel wants this trip to continue with both you and I paying attention to her—I’m willing to give her what she wants. You?”

The playboy’s grin was back, even though the smile didn’t seem to reach Nathan’s eyes. “As long as she’s willing. I find I’m a glutton for punishment.”

The zipper on the tent opened and both of them swung to look. Melanie’s hair stuck up in a tousled mess as she poked her head out the front flap. Her gaze snapped to Nathan, her cheeks flushed bright.

Derrick waited. It felt like he’d been doing a lot of that lately.

“Can I have a washcloth, please?”

Nathan rose and stepped to Derrick’s side. “I’ll take over supper prep. Give her a hand. Can I use a little of that water as well?”

Derrick nodded, pouring a container half-full and adjusting the temperature with cold water from another jug on the ground. “There’s another bowl in the rubber tote by the table. Help yourself. Just give us a few minutes.”

He left the tent unzipped to let in more light and allow the fresh breeze to play over them. Melanie waited with her arms curled around her legs, the vivid red spots on her cheeks making her look healthy and full of life.

Derrick stroked her cheek, loving how heat radiated off her. “Lay back, sweetheart, and let me help you.”

The washcloth remained warm even after he wrung out the moisture, and as he slid it over her, she relaxed on the sleeping bag, a contented expression playing over her face. One long, satisfied sigh escaped her lips. “That feels marvelous.”

“How you doing? Did I wear you out?”

“Not completely. I’m still up for more climbing this evening.”

He rinsed the cloth a few times, enjoying the chance to wash every inch of her so intimately—her total trust in him clear as she watched him intently.

“I told Nathan the rest of the trip—what happens is up to you.”

“I heard.”

Derrick put aside the cloth and lay next to her, his head supported on an elbow as he stared admiringly into her face. “Is that okay?”

She nodded, then pulled him down for a slow kiss that reassured him the fires between them weren’t going to stay banked for long.

They dressed, crawled out of the tent, joined Nathan at the table—all normal activities and far more comfortable than it could have been. Melanie laid a hand on Nathan's shoulder for a moment before seeming to change her mind and wrapping him in a huge bear hug. The man's pleased smile lifted Derrick's heart.

Whatever happened, they were all in it together.

After a bite to eat, they went back to climbing. Nathan snapped photos. He stopped at times to join in and attempt a few moves. They talked non-stop—about Nathan's previous assignments, his travels. Derrick shared climbing stories. Melanie's laughter flowed easily. The whole situation was easy and comfortable, like three good friend sharing time together. Nothing more than casual hugs and easy caresses occurred between them, but more importantly in Derrick's mind, Melanie allowed pictures to be taken regardless of whether her scars were in the picture or not.

She was slowly accepting. Hesitantly opening up more.

They called it quits for the day when the sun started to fade around eight, and made their way back to the campsite to grab a snack.

The discussion ebbed and flowed. Derrick rearranged one of the logs in the fire. Bright sparks flashed upward, and Melanie *oohed* in delight. Derrick took his seat on the blanket they'd draped over the ground, and she crawled into his arms. Quiet peace settled as he stroked her hair and the back of her neck. Streaks of brilliant sunset filled the western sky, and the red glow of the fire added a layer of intimate relaxation to the setting.

He squeezed the arm he'd wrapped around Melanie's shoulders then turned to face the other man. "Spill the beans, Nate. You never did explain how you ended up in the middle of a game of spin-the-bottle with Melanie."

Nathan shook his head, firelight reflecting in his eyes. "Stupidest move ever. I was back from college for the holidays and wandered downstairs to discover Katy's Christmas party had devolved to the point of darkened lights and giggles in the corners of the room. I slipped out of sight as fast as I could, but I didn't know they were doing some weird variation on the kissing game. They had planted girls in each of the downstairs rooms and blindfolded them."

Melanie held up a hand in protest. "We were trying to make it less embarrassing for the people who didn't get picked to be kissed. It was your sister's idea."

Derrick laughed. "Let me guess. You walked into a room and found Mel."

Nathan swirled a finger around his head, as if wrapping it with something. "And they'd covered her eyes completely, so she had no idea it was me and not one of her teenage boyfriends."

"That's what you thought," Melanie muttered.

“It’s true. You finally squeaked out like a mouse and asked why I wasn’t kissing you.”

“Not a mouse. Just trying not to give away I knew it was you. Because there was a slight chance you might kiss me if you *thought* I didn’t know it was you.”

“Bullshit.”

Melanie slapped Nathan on the knee. “Dude, none of my ‘boyfriends’ were old enough to have five o’clock shadow. Plus there was that scent—probably only deodorant, but I knew the type you wore. I smelled it the instant you opened the door.”

Nathan groaned as he rubbed his temples. “Shit.”

She smirked. “Anyway, he finally stopped being a chicken and kissed me. Never slipped me any tongue, much to my dismay, but he held the back of my neck, and I think I nearly came from that alone. It was as if I’d stuck my finger in a light socket and gotten an electric zap that went all the way down to my toes.”

Derrick laughed as Nathan pretended to be electrocuted, shaking his limbs and torso rapidly. Melanie smiled happily at Derrick, her body warm and intimate with his. She reached for his hand, linking their fingers together.

Derrick basked in the obvious connection she was making with him.

“I’m sorry I ruined all your teenage fantasies.” Nathan winked, then poked the fire thoughtfully.

Her tongue slipped out to moisten her lips a second before she spoke. “Well, we all have to grow up sometime.”

She turned and brought her lips next to Derrick’s. The warmth of her breath washed his cheek, and she brushed her lips against him before whispering in his ear, “I want to make love to you by the fire.”

Oh hell. His dick flashed to rock hard, the images of flickering light dancing over her bare skin driving up his lust. “And Nathan?”

She drew back far enough to look Derrick in the eye. “I want him to take pictures. For his book.”

Was it hypocritical his mind protested the idea of being on display like that while he longed to see *her* naked in the firelight? “Of us making love? That sounds rather kinky.”

Melanie rolled her eyes. “Well, I don’t want to make a porn flick, but if he can take pictures and make them—presentable—I’m game. If he’s interested.”

A sharp gasp escaped Nathan. “Are you serious?”

Melanie nodded. “Serious. Nat—” She paused, then the rest of her words rushed out. “I’ve thought about it all evening. I like you, and you turn me on, but it’s Derrick I want to be with.”

Derrick’s heart swelled. Her confession made everything that much brighter.

Nathan touched his fingers to her cheek. “And I have no trouble with that. Honest. I like you too, and I understand.”

She broke free and stood, stepping to the edge of the firelight and grinning at them both even as her chest continued to heave. "Tell me what to do."

"Monkey, you've just made my year. Let me grab my camera bag." Nathan leapt up and scrambled toward his gear. Derrick glanced at Melanie thoughtfully.

"You sure about this?"

She nodded. "I've been trying to force another panic attack, and it's not happening. Being with you two has been perfect. Since this photo shoot means a lot to Nathan, I thought this might be a good time. I loved those shots he showed us earlier. I really, really want to try this."

Derrick leaned back on the cushioned log, letting his admiration for her show. "Then I really, really want to see you naked."

She looked out from under hooded lashes. "Even if it means you might be in some of the shots?"

Nathan had said all the pictures would be theirs to veto. "I get to make love with you. How could there possibly be a downside to this scenario?"

He stripped off his T-shirt before rising to his feet and reaching out a hand. She slipped into his arms so perfectly, the soft flannel of her shirt teasing his naked chest as he held her tight to his torso. One hand he spread wide over the curve of her lower back, with the other he reached up and caught her neck. Nibbling along her jaw, sneaking up on her lips to make her his. It was going to be his touch that took her all the way to paradise.

Beside them, Nathan drifted like a helpful specter, rearranging the heavy blanket closer to the fire, smoothing it out. Then he moved in one last time and kissed Melanie's shoulder, stroking his fingers down her back. "Have fun, kids."

He faded out of the light. Became only a darkened figure in the background, another of the flickering shadows dancing in their peripheral vision. Derrick forgot he was there. Forgot everything except the woman before him and the fact she wanted him.

One button at a time he opened her shirt, the smooth glow of her skin between the swathes of fabric appearing golden in the firelight. She hadn't pulled on a bra. Derrick's mouth watered as he stepped back to admire her.

Melanie's gaze caught his, trapped him. Held him like an animal mesmerized in a bright light. Only the light came from within her as she shrugged off her shirt and let it fall to the ground. His gaze dipped to her naked breasts, peaked nipples revealing her own arousal.

"Take it off," he ordered. Derrick palmed his erection, rubbing forcefully to give a moment's respite from the aching need he had to fill her completely. "Take it all off and show me how incredible you are."

The hesitation she'd shown a few days previous had vanished. She snuck her fingers into the waistline of her pants and slid them down, stepping out from the puddle of fabric. Her skin glowed in the firelight, and even the smooth flawless right half of her torso was dappled with patchy colour from the flickering

flames. The tiny pair of panties she wore covered only the smallest part of her mound, silky ribbons all that held the sides over her hips.

Derrick panted with urgency as she turned, displaying her ass, a single strip of fabric disappearing between her cheeks. Some women could wear a thong well—and *hot damn*, Melanie was one of them. He longed to cup her ass cheeks in his hands. To rub the muscular swells and cradle them in his palms. To nip and bite his way along the crease between her leg and ass. To lick everywhere until she screamed in pleasure.

“You like what you see?” Melanie played with the ribbons on the sides of her panties. Teasing him, making him so mind-fogged he was ready to forget everything except being inside her now. One side at a time she tugged the knots loose. The scrap of material dropped to the ground, leaving her completely bare to the elements. The fire’s illumination spotlighted her.

He kicked off his shoes, stripped off his pants. Methodical. Brainless repetition, since the only thing on his mind was her. And not her body, but her soul.

“It’s not just what I see that turns me on, Mel.” Naked, Derrick stepped onto the blanket, his erection slapping his belly. He cupped her face in his hands. “It’s what’s inside that makes me crazy about you.”

If it were possible, the light in her eyes grew even brighter.

He made love to her, the warmth of their bodies forcing back the cooling night air. Even the fire’s heat faded as he touched her, stroked her to a higher pitch. Licking and sucking, caressing her breasts, the smooth slope of her belly. Priming and readying her for when he could wait no longer. They slipped together in one blissfully perfect moment, him surrounded, her accepting. The fire crackled and snapped as she moaned out her pleasure, calling louder on each progressive thrust. Melanie lifted her heels, dug them into his ass to help slam him into her core until there was no hope of retreat and only an explosion to experience.

Derrick stared into her eyes as she came, bliss causing her focus to blur. Then she shoved him over the edge as well, her sheath constricting around him so hard his climax ripped loose. Pulse after pulse of pleasure beat through him. Nothing remained but the connection between them that stole his ability to think. He clung to his sanity long enough to lower himself beside her instead of crushing her under his weight. Still connected, still intimately joined, he stroked her skin as she smiled sweetly at him. It took a long time for their breathing to return to normal as their bodies came down off the incredible high of passion.

But one thing was never going back to the way it had been before. Derrick wondered if the fact he’d fallen in love would be written on his every move from this moment forward.

Chapter Nine

Choss: Rotten rock—looks solid and safe, but is actually brittle and dangerous.

Melanie pulled up to the front of her rental, confused by the sight of her big brother Kane's truck parked outside.

"Do you want us to wait here?" Derrick asked.

"No, you may as well help me carry my gear inside before we nab some supper. There's no way I'm cooking, and I don't think there's much in the fridge anyway."

Nathan grabbed her duffle bag off the backseat and winked at her. "Dinner's on me."

She returned his smile easily. There was nothing awkward between them, and she was so thankful. Even Saturday night, after she and Derrick had basically stripped and gone for it in front of the man, she'd experienced no discomfort. Sharing the tent with the three of them, breakfast and the hike out—all of it companionable and relaxed, and it was due to Nathan's easygoing attitude. She knew it, Derrick knew it. Nathan was there, a part of their time, but not a challenge to their relationship, and grateful seemed an understatement for what Melanie felt.

It wasn't just the ease between the three of them that made her giddy. They'd stopped to fill her car, and she'd suddenly become aware she was chatting to Derrick out the window as he pumped gas, her bare arm resting in plain sight on the open window ledge.

Someone had wandered past en route to paying at the kiosk, glanced at her and continued without another look.

There were no words to describe what a rush that was—to not have panic hit. To not want to hide.

She was still grinning from ear to ear when she opened her front door and ushered the guys into her small rental house. Kane rose from her couch, his face a storm ready to happen.

"Hey you, what you doing?" Melanie dropped her climbing bag on the countertop and headed to give him a hug.

"Waiting. I didn't think you were going to be this late." He nodded curtly at Derrick, eyed Nathan with suspicion. "You guys have good climbing conditions?"

"It was great. We got the pictures we needed for the article as well." And she had slept fantastic after all the attention, sexual and otherwise, but she wasn't about to tell her brother that part.

Kane glared at Nathan but spoke to her. “Did you sign anything? Do you have to let him keep the pictures?”

A small bubble of her happiness burst. His unexpected and harsh tone confused her. “Why are you asking that? What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong is that Mr. Big Shot Photographer over there has been feeding you a line, and I’m worried.”

“Nathan? He’s working for *Rave*—”

“Right. A ‘where are they now’ update to show how far people have come since their tragedies. Well, the first story in the series was in this weekend’s magazine and it’s nowhere near the inspirational thing you told me Nathan was looking for.”

Nathan stepped forward. “What are you accusing me of?”

“I don’t know, maybe setting my sister up?” Kane snapped. “The article was supposed to be something Melanie could be proud to be involved with. If this is your idea of good publicity, then you’re going to be in a great deal of pain when I’m done with you.”

Holy shit. Melanie stepped between her brother and Nathan. “Kane, stop. What are you talking about?”

He slapped a magazine into her hand. It was folded open to a page with bold pictures. The photos were gorgeous, a celebration of light and shadow. She recognized Nathan’s work from the test shots he’d done for her.

Nathan moved to her side. “What’s wrong? My photos are good.”

“The pictures are great, the story is crap,” Kane growled. “It’s dark and bitter, and more like a *National Enquirer* or a scandal sheet than anything else. The man was supposed to be making a comeback from a drunk-driving accident—turns out he’s the one who was drunk, and the article shows he’s even more of a loser than before the incident.”

“Oh, come on, so just because someone else in the series hasn’t done as well as Melanie, that’s my fault? My byline is on the photos, not the story.”

“Yeah, but it seems that you’d be in on the whole series concept. What do they intend to write about Mel?”

Nathan shook his head. “What I shared was what I was told—it’s all supposed to be positive stuff. I had no information about the guy in this article other than clicking the shots, so don’t make me out to be some kind of evil villain.”

Melanie had had enough. She swung to Nathan’s defense. “Kane, stop it. Stop it right now. I trust Nathan. We not only go way back, but we’ve talked a ton over the past couple days, and I know he’d never do anything to hurt me.”

Kane glared at Nathan for another moment before turning on Derrick. “And you—I thought you were my friend until I had an eye-opening conversation with Jack. How the hell could you think taking another guy into her bed would be a good thing for Melanie? What kind of asshole are you?”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She held out a hand to stop Derrick from answering. “Oh my God, Kane, you did not just say that. How dare you stick your nose into my personal life?”

“It’s true though, isn’t it? You fooled around with them both this weekend.”

The fact she hadn’t actually slept with Nathan was none of Kane’s business. “Derrick’s number-one focus has always been what’s best for me.”

“Letting another guy into your relationship? That’s not how a man who cares about you acts, Mel.”

The implied insult that she wasn’t capable of making her own decisions was more than enough to ignite Melanie’s temper. “Oh, like you’re the one to give me shit. You’re sleeping with Dara, and so is Jack. How is that any better? In fact, if anything it’s even weirder because you and Jack are like best friends. Don’t be a bloody hypocrite.”

“We both had a long-term relationship with Dara before we stepped into anything physical. You’ve only been with Derrick for a couple months, and he’s already inviting another guy into the action? When you don’t know how long the dude will stick around or what his real motivations are? It’s not the same.”

“Butt the hell out, big brother.”

“I *am* your big brother. I care about you and I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“This isn’t about you. Holy *crap*, you have no idea, do you?” Melanie shook her hands in his face before stepping back. Nathan had retreated slightly, standing uneasily by the edge of the living room. Derrick waited at her side, a dark tower of barely contained simmering rage. She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at her brother. An emotional explosion trembled on the horizon. She lowered her volume to emphasize her words. “You have no idea how much pain I’ve been in over the past couple years. Not physical, but mental. How I could barely make it out of bed some mornings because I was sure someone would find a way to remind me I wasn’t what I used to be. That I was lacking.”

Kane’s face had gone pale under his summer tan. “I didn’t know it had been so bad.”

She hadn’t finished. Slowly over the past week all her burdens had come unraveled, been lifted from her, and being able to vocalize what a relief she experienced made her voice tremble. Melanie lifted her chin defiantly, directing a fierce look in his direction. “Well, after this weekend *I* know I’m not less of a woman than I was before the accident. I had two gorgeous guys lavish attention on me, and it felt damn good. They gave me physical proof that not only was I strong and brave, and all those things, I was desired. Lusted after, even, and *by God*, it was amazing.”

All Kane’s bluster disappeared, and he seemed to struggle to get the words out. “I...I don’t know what to say.”

Guilt radiated from him, but that wasn't enough to wipe away his interference or the other hurt his words had caused. She turned her back on him for a moment to lay a calming hand on Derrick's arm and speak quietly. "Thank you for letting me deal with this."

Derrick nodded, the tension in his body relaxing a notch. "Your battle, but let me know when you need backup. By the way..." He leaned in closer. "You're spectacular when you're pissed."

Oh God. The flash of amusement his words caused smothered a huge section of anger still burning inside her. Impulsively, she wrapped her arms around his broad chest to hug him tight. How did he do that? Offer exactly what she needed to hear? "You are so perfect."

He rested his chin on the top of her head for a moment as he squeezed. Derrick was a rock, her rock. Solid, and completely there for her. Not to take over her life, but to provide a firm place to stand while she took back control.

She was falling in love harder by the minute.

Melanie turned to face her brother. He'd meant well—she needed to remember that—but it was well-meaning friends and family who had caused a lot of her pain. "There's nothing else to say, Kane. There was nothing you could do to fix it, so I kept it to myself."

Kane looked wearily around the room as he dragged a hand through his hair. He took in Nathan, standing alone to the side. His gaze lingered on Derrick and the way he held her close. "Okay. You're right. You're right, and I need to butt out. But Mel...if you do need me in the future, tell me. Please."

She sniffed, her throat tight with emotion. "I will."

He glanced again at Nathan. "Anything, including shit like breaking knees. I know how to make someone disappear so they'll never find the body."

Yup, that sounded like her family. She forced out a laugh. "Have shovel, will use it? Kane. It's going to be okay. I really do trust Nathan."

"I'm looking out for her too. Stop being an ass toward both your sister and me. Damn idiot." Derrick's deep rumble made Melanie hide a smile.

"Yeah, well, I'm still not sure I approve of you dating her, so don't push it, spider-boy." Kane hesitated then held out his arms. Melanie slipped from Derrick's embrace to give her brother a quick hug.

Kane took his leave with only a few more suspicious glances directed Nathan's way.

And then, they were alone.

Melanie made herself busy, unpacking and tucking her camping gear into the storage chest in the corner. Some of her bright happiness had disappeared, clouded by Kane's accusations, but she figured it would pass. She just needed a few minutes to get her brain back on target and remember the past thirty-six hours.

An incredible thirty-six hours. It seemed too short a time for the changes she felt inside to have occurred.

"I swear, Mel, I knew nothing about this." Nathan had the article in hand and a huge frown marring his face.

Shit. She hurried to his side and tugged the magazine from his fingers, tossing it to the couch. "I said I believed you. Nate—you've never been the kind of guy to go around hurting others. I don't think you're going to start with me."

"But what if—"

"What if *what*? What could they print that could possibly hurt me anymore?" A huge sweep of emotions rushed her again. Incredible gratitude was the most prevalent, and that's what made the words easy to say. "'On the outside, Melanie Dixon appears to have healed, but in reality, she's still a mess of scars.' Nathan, if they had done this article even a few months ago that would have been true."

"Oh, Mel."

The late-afternoon sun shone in the windows, lighting the tiny living room. Derrick sat on her well-worn couch, his dark eyes watching her intently, his body poised and alert. As if ready to leap to her side on a moment's notice, to either guard and protect, or to care for her more intimately. Nathan's eyes revealed his deep desire to provide her the assurances he thought she still needed.

What she needed now was not what she'd required a day ago. Healing had arrived and it felt incredible.

"But, guys, it's not a few months ago. It's not even yesterday. It's today, and right here and right now, I'm not the same woman. Because of both of you."

She'd been turned inside out over the past two days. Stripped bare, in more than one way. Discovering she'd fallen in love with Derrick had filled her heart to the top with hope and happiness. Yet somehow, Nathan had done the impossible. He'd made the scars fade more than she ever thought possible.

The two of them had done it—Derrick by being willing to ask, Nathan by giving unselfishly. She couldn't let things end this way. She wanted to give back to them both, the two men she'd come to care for so deeply.

Empty Chinese food containers littered the floor around them. Contentment and warmth filled him as Derrick watched Melanie pull another laugh from Nathan.

When she'd made them grab takeout instead of eating at the restaurant, he'd wondered what was going on. Then she'd sweet-talked him into opening the gym so they could haul out mats and set up their own private smorgasbord, and it had made even less sense.

Until she'd started provoking Nathan. There was no way the man could continue to be gloomy over Kane's accusations, not with Melanie applying her full power to teasing him.

She was a live wire—sheer vitality radiated from her every move. Not sexual in nature, but simple all-out energy.

He was going to explode with happiness. Seeing the woman he'd always knew she was emerge—it was a miracle, and he'd gotten to watch it occur. The barriers and walls were gone, her liveliness turned way up past high.

Melanie Dixon was a power to be reckoned with, and he was madly in love with every enthusiastic inch.

Derrick leaned on an elbow and enjoyed the interplay snapping between the other two.

“Like that’s a threat, monkey girl.”

“Oh yeah? You’re a good one to talk. Couldn’t even finish a basic 5.5 route.”

Nathan sniffed. “I’m an *artiste*, not a jock.”

Melanie tackled him back to the mat and tickled him.

“Stop it, not on a full stomach. I call *deliberate cruelty*. Derrick, make your woman stop picking on me.”

Derrick wasn’t getting in the middle of this fight. “Hey, if she’s happy, who am I to hold her back?”

Melanie nodded curtly, a smug expression on her face as she straddled Nathan’s chest. “See? If I’m happy, then all is good with the world.”

She swung off Nathan and plopped to her butt next to him on the mat before turning to face Derrick and winking.

His face ached from smiling so much. “Okay, sweetheart. What do you have next on the agenda? I can’t believe you wanted to eat here for the incredible ambiance.”

“Hey, I like ropes.”

Derrick managed to not choke on his own spit. Oh, the images in his brain.

She knelt, the tip of her pink tongue poking out to wet her lips for an instant as she glanced between them. “I meant it, guys. What I told Kane. You’ve made a huge difference in my life.”

It wasn’t what she said, but how she said it that made Derrick’s pulse pick up. The light-hearted teasing was gone, replaced by a thoughtful, contemplative tone.

“We care about you.” This wasn’t the time for confessions of love.

Melanie twisted to press both hands to his knee. “I care about you as well.”

The short silence that followed felt relaxed. Comfortable.

Until she turned to face Nathan. “And you—I still can’t believe you. You’re like a saint to put up with all the teasing I did this weekend.”

“Saint Nathan.” He seemed to consider it seriously for a moment before reaching to tweak her nose. “Don’t think it fits. It’s okay, monkey, I survived.”

Her expression was unreadable. “Surviving isn’t always enough, Nate. I’ve learned that the hard way.”

Derrick stroked a hand down her arm. There were no words.

She turned to face him, whispering for his ears alone. “I want to prove to Nathan that I trust him. I want to thank him for being there.”

Derrick didn’t think she was talking about a store-bought gift. “He doesn’t need anything. Caring for you doesn’t require payment.”

She straightened, anger flashing. “Caring for me also shouldn’t require him to put up with being insulted.”

Ahhh. “Kane thought he was looking out for you.”

“Unintentional pain still hurts like hell, Derrick.”

They stared into each other’s eyes. She gripped his forearms tightly, clinging to him. There was something in her face that made him pause. Longing was there, but also an incredible strength.

It took all his strength to ask the question. “What do you want?”

“To finish what you offered me in the mountains. What I was barely able to accept, but the acceptance changed my life. To be with two men I trust explicitly.”

His blood pressure shot skyward, pulse pounding. Without intending to, his volume rose as well. “Be with us how? Sex?”

“Melanie, what the hell are you talking about?” Nathan roared. Derrick snapped his head up, ready to protect her. Guard her if necessary. But the other man was shaking his head, hands raised in protest as he rolled to his knees. “Damn it, this isn’t something to joke about. Don’t go screwing things up with Derrick. Not for some kind of cheap thrill.”

Melanie scrambled upright, her petite body seeming to tower over them as he and Nathan remained sprawled on the safety mats. “I’ll have you know I don’t consider anything about you *cheap*.”

“Mel—”

“I *trust* you.” Melanie touched Nathan’s cheek. “You and Derrick. Completely.”

Derrick’s confusion and momentary sense of betrayal morphed into understanding. She wasn’t asking on a whim, or out of a misplaced sense of obligation.

If her self-esteem had been tied up in the aftermath of her fall, Nathan’s was connected with his photography. Kane’s accusations could have hit hard. She had assumed Nate needed her as much as she’d turned out to need him. Wanted to wash away a little of the hurt Nathan had experienced in exchange for the gift he’d given her.

Nathan caught her hand where it lay against his cheek, kissing her palm softly before pulling her close and enveloping her in an enormous bear hug. He gazed over her shoulder at Derrick, shaking his head slightly as he stroked her hair.

“Oh, monkey. I think I’m a little bit in love with you right now. You’ve got a heart that simply refuses to stop giving, and I’m honoured beyond belief that you’d offer yourself like that. But I have to say no.” Melanie protested, and Nathan pulled away and stuck a finger in her face. “I am first, and foremost, your friend. Getting a chance to prove that you’re an extremely attractive woman was a wonderful experience, but I’m bowing out of anything else. Unless…”

Derrick froze.

She straightened. “Unless what?”

There was a moment of hesitation before Nathan spoke, and then he stared at Derrick, as if asking his permission. “I want to watch again.”

Melanie took in a rapid breath and Derrick tucked her back against him as she swayed off balance.

Nathan chuckled. “Does that surprise you? It did me, a little. Seems I’ve got a kink I wasn’t aware of before.”

“Watch? You want to watch…what?”

Nathan stood and paced toward the wall, turning slowly to face them, one brow quirked upward. “You two make love. Maybe take a few more pictures.” He shrugged lightly. “If the answer is no, I’m fine—”

“Yes.” Melanie sat upright, then stiffened, twisting to face Derrick. Her mouth hung open in a perfect O as she stared for a second. A blush raced over her cheeks and she lowered her eyes. “I mean, if it’s okay with you.”

He pulled her against his chest, breathing in her scent and feeling the tension in her body as she leaned in tighter. He spoke softly, just for her ears. “I understand why you suggested this.”

She tilted her head back to stare at him. “It’s important to me, Derrick. To be sure Nathan knows how *much* I trust him, but not if you don’t want to. I’m sorry I sprang this on you without asking first. That was wrong of me.”

There was no way he could remain angry, not when the expression on Melanie’s face so clearly showed her heart.

She knew what she wanted, and why, and damned if he wasn’t going to give it to her. Didn’t stop possessiveness from rising up and flooding him as well. They could give reassurance to Nathan, but at the end, everyone would know who belonged with who.

Chapter Ten

Hangdog: A climber who hangs from the rope on a route.

Derrick delicately brushed a knuckle along her jaw as he admired her dark beauty. The way her eyes flashed, mouth twisted into a smile that was one hundred percent trouble, her chin rising in challenge. He slid his fingers around the back of her neck, teasing as he leaned in to kiss her. She grabbed his head and gave back as good as she got, a heated exchange, all teeth and tongues. They scrambled each other's brains as the air between them evaporated.

That wasn't the only thing that had vanished. Derrick dragged his hands down her shoulders to discover she'd been busy. Her clothing had disappeared, and all he touched was sweet, hot flesh.

His knees shook with anticipation. Then she slipped out of his arms as mysteriously as her clothing, only for him to feel a tug on his zipper and his jeans being peeled off his hips.

"Holy hell." Derrick focused downward to find Melanie kneeling before him. She was stark naked, big brown eyes staring at him as she wiggled his pants lower then leaned in to nuzzle his groin.

He was going to die, but he'd die happy.

Melanie caressed a hand over his erection, palm curving around his shaft as she dragged her fingernails over the fabric constraining his cock. When she finished by cupping his balls, stars blurred his vision.

Stripping off the final barrier between them was the work of a moment, and he didn't feel any remorse when she wrapped her fingers around his shaft and held him tight. She wanted to give Nathan a show? He'd accept the challenge and revel in every moment.

The touch of her tongue made his spine straighten, but it was the moist heat of her mouth enclosing his cock that turned his mind to mush.

Derrick watched, fixated, as she moved in an easy rhythm over him, saliva slicking his cock as she bobbed her head. Ball-breaking pleasure wrapped him tight as she sucked hard on each withdrawal. The urge to tangle his fingers in her hair and take control hit. He wanted to slam forward, feel the soft back of her throat against the crest of his cock. But even more, he wanted to switch positions and drive into her sex. Feel her tightness and heat until he had nothing left to do but give in to his release.

He closed his eyes and savoured her touch. Whatever she wanted—he'd do it. Willingly and completely. Which meant no matter how good this felt, he couldn't let her take him over the edge that approached at the speed of light.

He pulled from her mouth with a soft *pop*, the hard suction she gave at the final moment enough to make his eyes cross.

"Stand her up."

Nathan's gruff command brought Derrick back to reality—he stood naked in his climbing gym, as another man watched him play sexual games with Melanie. It shouldn't have turned him on as much as it did, seeing the hunger on Nathan's face that matched the desire in his own belly. He stooped and lifted Melanie to her feet. Their bare skin made contact, his erection trapped against her firm stomach. She wiggled, causing a fire of urgency to rain down.

It was time for him to take control. Because while Derrick's ardour was racing upward at the thought of how hot the situation was about to get, his heart could only handle sharing Melanie, even like this, one last time. From here on, he was going to make sure all her fantasies were two-person only, with him and her in the starring roles, no audiences. And no one else directing the action.

Derrick twirled her on the spot, leaning her naked body against him. That left them both facing Nathan. If the other man wanted to watch, Derrick would make their playtime something worth witnessing. Something to claim Melanie in an unmistakable manner. Fuck if that made him a possessive asshole—she was his.

He reached around to cup her breast, his palm covering the firm mound as he massaged and teased, his fingers plucking at her nipple until her head fell back against him and she whimpered.

"What do you want, Mel? My mouth? My tongue stabbing into you until you can't think?"

She squirmed, widening her stance. "Anything. Everything."

"Ropes?"

Utter silence greeted him. Then her breath quickened, and her chest heaved as she fought for control.

Yes.

He kissed her nape. Soft. Gentle. Made sure she was solid on her own before he released her and made his way to the baskets where they stored the climbing ropes. He ignored the thicker weight and reached for the softest one. Once he had it in his hand, he made eye contact with her and slowly pulled the length free. In all their escapades over the past months, he hadn't used ropes with her. One handful after another, the loops fell to the floor at his feet, their weight creating a hushed pulse with every new section. He let the strands slide through his fingers, enjoying the complete fascination he witnessed on her face. The trembling in her limbs.

He grabbed one more thing, then stooped and picked up the coil before returning to her side. His cock was so full it barely moved from its vertical position as he walked.

She flicked a glance at both his hands as he approached, examining the items he held. Her gaze landed on his groin, and she licked her lips. The tiny flash of pink tongue teased him. He wasn't going to be able to last long once they got going.

He stopped beside her, letting the rope hit the ground with another solid thump.

Goose bumps rose over her skin, and he smiled as he knelt at her feet.

"Step in."

Melanie raised a brow, but obediently lifted one foot at a time, resting one hand on his shoulder as he slipped a well-padded climbing harness onto her.

"Derrick? What are you doing?" Melanie brushed his fingers as he worked to close the buckle on the harness.

"You said you like ropes. So do I."

Her eyes went black, pupils so wide they blurred into her dark brown irises.

Derrick threaded one of the fixed climbing ropes through her harness loops, tying off the figure eight faster than he ever had in his life. Then he reached down and got ready for the best part.

"Back on your knees." Shit, was that his voice? He half expected her to run from the room screaming, the words burst out so gravely and harsh.

Instead, she smiled and fell gracefully to her knees. Only her gaze remained glued to the rope, and her breath hitched again.

He stepped behind her, leaning down to kiss her shoulder. He trailed the end of the rope over her back, and she arched in reaction, perfect breasts presented toward where their now-silent witness stood.

Derrick concentrated for a moment, gathering his own strength. Then he began.

Her arms he left hanging. The first loop of rope crossed her body from left to right, the strand passing between her breasts. The second loop he wound around her torso, then a mirror loop right to left, framing her torso into erotic art.

Every layer he added—slow, methodical—brought increasing noises of pleasure from her lips. Small moans and sighs. Tiny gasps as his knuckles brushed her skin. When he was finished, the waist belt he'd placed on her was covered, except for the traditional leg harnesses looped around each of her thighs. The attached belaying rope lay free, blossoming from the middle of her back.

Nothing guarded her sex. She was locked in place, unable to move her upper body, and yet her sex, her breasts—all bare for his pleasure.

And hers.

He knelt, raising her chin until he could stare into her eyes. Making sure she was fine, that she was still on board. From the happy sigh she gave him, the hint of glazing in her eyes, and the wetness painting her inner thighs, it was clear she was enjoying herself.

"Ready?"

She nodded. He touched her breast again, just passing a fingertip over the peak, and her eyes closed. “Hmmm.”

“More?”

Derrick waited for her nod, then paced to the wall where the rope of her harness fed up to the ceiling carabiner. He lifted her skyward, only a couple feet, securing the loose end to the wall. He’d chosen a fixed rope that left Melanie suspended in the center of the room, free of any entanglements.

Derrick dropped to his knees and nestled his face against her, smelling her arousal, feeling the curls damp with moisture.

“Oh God. Derrick...”

He lifted her left leg over his shoulder, bringing her that much closer. One hand he slipped upward to open her, enjoying the way her cream glistened on her lips. Leaning in closer, he licked, her instant gasp of pleasure making him smile against her sex.

Then he gave up all restraint. Nibbles and long solid laves. A teasing caress around the heated nub of her clit. When that pulled a soft moan from her, he did it again, pausing to flick harder with the tip of his tongue. He’d barely gotten started when Melanie cried out, her fingers below the ropes clutching the straps of her leg harness as her body pulsed in climax.

It was only the beginning. He dipped in for another round.

Melanie still hung suspended in the air, shaking from yet another orgasm. “Enough, stop. Oh please, I need...”

She wasn’t sure what she needed. Oxygen? It was hard to breathe, but that had nothing to do with the ropes enveloping her body. Everything to do with the man stalking her like a wild beast ready to take down his prey.

Never had any prey been as willing as she.

Derrick caught her against him, kissing her until the air thinned to the equivalent of a high mountaintop. When he finally let her go, she could have sworn the room was spinning.

“You ready?” Derrick snuck away for a moment, grabbing two more ropes from where they rested against the gym walls. Released from his hold, she twisted in an actual circle, her rope supporting her vertically, but not restricting the slow spiraling motion.

He knotted the new ropes together then passed the connected section around her upper torso. When he tugged, she tipped forward in slow motion, supported on the webbing in the middle.

The combination of ropes and harness put her on her belly in a flying position. Or, wrapped up as she was, like a fly in a spider’s web.

She glanced over her shoulder. “Am I ready for what?”

Sex and fire shone in his eyes as he ran a hand over her rope-encased back, down her naked butt. “Anything I want.”

There was possession in his tone. He opened her legs wide and stepped between them, and comprehension hit. “You made a sex sling.”

“Hmm. I did.” His cock nudged her core and she closed her eyes to concentrate fully as he pressed them together. Stretched wide, open to his invasion, his cock hot and hard as he filled her.

Each backward rock speared Derrick deeper. The sensation was physically powerful, and exactly what she wanted—to offer herself up and be unconditionally accepted. Not even once had she considered her body except for the pleasure she could give him. The bliss he was causing.

Not even once had she considered Nathan watched.

The shock that raced through her at the realization was startling in its intensity. She had offered herself to Nathan, wanting to give to him if he needed her, but it was the man she’d come to know in such an intimate manner over the past months who held her mesmerized. With his touch. His claiming.

It was impossible to feel guilt. This was what Nathan had asked for. It was what she needed.

Derrick clung tightly to her hips as he pounded into her, unrelenting strokes feeding the fires inside that were ready to burst again. Then, before she could come, he stopped the momentum of her swing. His harsh groans echoed off the walls, his body bent over her as he held himself deep. Melanie let her head hang and breathed through her nose, the smell of climbing chalk buried beneath the scent of sweat and sex on the air.

When he lifted his torso, it was to let his hands roam again. Stroking in sweeps over her bare cheeks, teasing her hips and inner thighs. He tugged her legs downward, then stroked his fingers over her hole, teasing the sensitive nerves.

“I’m going to fuck your ass.”

It wasn’t a question, but it was. He’d never taken what she wasn’t ready for, or what she was unwilling to give. He stroked again. A slippery finger dipped into her passage, and she squirmed. Where he’d found the tube of lube—she didn’t need to know.

“Oh yes. Do it.”

He worked her in a rush, fingers scrambling on her hips. Soon it wasn’t fingers touching her, but the hard and much larger tip of his cock.

Derrick pushed forward, opening her, and she squeezed her eyes tight. The fire she felt wasn’t pain, wasn’t pleasure. Somewhere between the two sensations she hovered, just as she floated off the floor of the gym. Between worlds, between realities.

With a final groan, Derrick brought his groin tight to her ass, and she sighed.

“So damn beautiful.”

Then Derrick swung her away and let her weight in the sling and momentum drive her back on him. Melanie gasped, needy moans escaping as he speared her again and again. He wasn't gentle anymore, and she couldn't do anything but accept his need. The nearly violent pleasure he thrust upon her.

The burning in her ass was good. Dirty and hot, and just when she thought she'd explode, he dug his fingers into the softer flesh of her hip and froze, fighting for control. Melanie let out a little scream as he pulled her upright, the move burying his cock in her ass.

There was no room. No retreat. If before she'd been between worlds, she'd traveled light years farther into outer space.

He touched *her*, inside and out. Her body, her mind. Her soul.

And there were no more scars there.

Time blurred, sensations shot to a tantalizing edge before rocketing her off the cliffs and setting her into freefall. Her climax tore her apart and rebuilt her as her body squeezed tight around his shaft. Voices shouted in passion—hers? Derrick's? They were together and one. Melanie leaned back, letting Derrick support her as she gave way to complete boneless relaxation.

Oh God, that had felt good.

She couldn't open her eyes, she was so sated. He withdrew from her body, lowered her to a kneeling position. Even as the ropes fell from her limbs, even as the harness was removed, she drifted in some faraway place she had no intention of leaving anytime soon.

How Derrick found the strength to carry her, she had no idea—she couldn't peel her eyes open. Not when he laid her on the mat, not when a warm cloth touched her body.

And when his strong arms held her close as they lay back on the mats, Melanie gave a happy sigh and let sleep take her.

Nathan stared down from where he'd retreated to the upper galley for a better view. Melanie curled herself around Derrick, her hair strewn over his naked chest as she used him as a pillow. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, their torsos touching, limbs tangled together. Light movements of their chests revealed the easy breathing of sleep overtaking them.

They looked good together. They were good together.

For the past week Nathan could have sworn he was riding a bloody roller coaster. Steamy sexual desire followed by intense frustration. Professional advancement and condemnation. Helping a friend tear down walls that had trapped her for years, then realizing friendship was all he could offer her—if he wasn't riding a high he'd been hitting a low, and the cumulative effect had come close to draining him of all common sense.

Kane's outburst had shocked him, but not because he didn't know deception occurred in his business. His intentions were clear as far as the magazine was concerned. It was the fact that for him being with

Melanie *was* far more about sexual experimentation than long-term commitment. Kane had hit the nail on the head with that one, and guilt rode Nathan hard.

The only redeeming factor was his decision to not come between Derrick and Melanie.

And then? When she said she wanted him? *Goddamn, fucking hell.*

Nathan had wanted her too, and it had taken all his strength to turn away. To walk out without one more taste of the paradise that was going to be Derrick's to enjoy for what looked to be forever.

He had watched, the burn of jealousy fading as he visually feasted on their lovemaking. It wasn't his turn for love like this, but seeing it? Knowing it could be real?

That was a gift he'd never expected to receive.

Nathan watched the lovers snuggle together on the mat, oblivious to his presence. This was as it should be, and only one thought repeated in his mind.

Time to move on.

It had been good to witness unconditional love. Someday he hoped to find for himself what was growing between Melanie and Derrick.

Nathan grabbed his camera bag and backpack, and silently slipped out the door.

Chapter Eleven

Red-Point: Lead climb from bottom to top without falling after rehearsing the moves.

Melanie wrinkled her nose in disgust. The only thing that made her read to the end was morbid curiosity. Kind of like slowing to check out a car accident. “This article isn’t any better than the others.”

“But at least it’s not about you.” Kane plucked the magazine from her fingers and tossed it in the trash.

“I feel damn sorry for the poor sod it is about.” Derrick passed the popcorn bowl over, and Melanie mindlessly added butter and salt.

The second of *Rave*’s two September issues was out, without the article featuring her, and Melanie was both confused and relieved. Just as Kane feared, each new magazine release had proven the stories to be sensationalized garbage. Even knowing she wasn’t yet the focus of negative attention didn’t make Melanie’s anxiety disappear. While she trusted Nathan, he had been clear the actual article was out of his control. She’d almost resigned herself to being center stage in a nasty exposé.

Still, there was something else wrong she couldn’t put her finger on. She helped carry the snacks into the living room, distracted from her gloomy thoughts by the sight of her brother with his best friend Jack, their pregnant partner snuggled between them. Now that it was official the three of them were together on a permanent basis, Melanie got a huge kick out of teasing Kane.

Dara didn’t seem to mind the banter—in fact, she aided and abetted every chance she got.

“You need anything, Dara?” Melanie plopped the popcorn bowl on the coffee table, moving aside beer bottles to make room.

Dara glanced on either side of her before turning back and raising a brow. “I have two guys at my beck and call. Trust me, if I want anything, they’ve got it covered.”

Jack chucked a piece of popcorn at her. “Kane’s on slave duty this week, woman.”

Of course his instant capitulation two minutes later when she asked him for a glass of water proved her point, and Dara winked at Melanie from where she was curled up, nestled between her men.

Melanie crawled onto the love seat next to Derrick, and they all dove back into their movie.

By the time the DVD finished, Melanie had realized what was bugging her. She slipped back into the kitchen and was digging through the garbage when Dara wandered into the kitchen, Derrick on her heels.

“It’s not Nathan.” Melanie flipped the magazine open and scrambled through the pages.

"It's not Nathan what?" Dara asked.

"The pictures. Look, Derrick, those aren't his shots. That doesn't look at all like his work." A huge sigh of relief hit, even though now she was more confused than ever.

Dara made a disgusted sound. "Throw the magazine out again, Mel. There's nothing in that trash you need to see."

"But Nathan isn't listed in the credits anymore. Not for any of the shots. I wonder why?"

"When is the article on you supposed to be published?"

Melanie thought for a moment. "He said it would be fourth quarter, since he was taking the shots in August. But *none* of these pictures are his, and I know while he'd been assigned to get all the illustrations for that series of articles, he usually has other credits as well."

Dara leaned back on the kitchen counter, the front of her shirt hanging loose. "Maybe he switched jobs? Have you managed to get hold of him at all?"

"Just a couple emails. He said he was fine, things were okay. It was like talking to a total stranger. At least we know he's still alive, but that's about it."

"Then there's not much you can do but wait." A huge yawn escaped Dara. "I'm sorry, but I'm ready for bed."

A couple hearty laughs sounded as Jack and Kane joined them, carrying in the dirty dishes. Kane wiggled his brows at her. "No objections on my part with that suggestion."

Dara smacked him on the chest. "Behave. You two are the reason I'm totally exhausted at nine o'clock. Building a baby is hard work."

"So's starting one." Jack ducked under her swing then scooped her up in his arms, ignoring her protests. "Thanks for the evening's entertainment, guys. We'll see you in a few?"

Derrick leaned Melanie back against his chest, resting his chin on her shoulder. She savoured the warmth of his body as her brother and the others took their leave. When she really considered it, the article was an annoyance on the edge of all the good things she now had in her life. And Dara was right—there was nothing she could do anyway but wait.

"I'd better be getting home as well." She twisted in Derrick's arms to give him a good-night kiss.

He brushed their lips together and refused to let her escape. "Stay."

It wouldn't be the first time she'd slept over. In the month since Nathan had vanished, they'd spent more and more time together. She still hadn't gotten up the courage to actually confess her feelings in words, although they both seemed to have come to the conclusion they liked each other. A lot. Melanie opened her mouth to answer, and he kissed her again, stalling her response. She smiled against his lips, stroking her fingers over his broad shoulders. She loved being in his arms.

Derrick whispered against her cheek. "Stay with me forever."

A shiver raced up her spine. *What?* "Derrick?"

He held her chin delicately in his strong fingers. "I love you. I want this to be your home. With me."

Melanie's heart pounded, a flush of heat racing over her entire body. "You love me?"

He laughed, and the lightness of the sound broke into sparkling pieces and bounced off the walls of the room to fill her ears with joy and her heart with hope. "Damn it, Mel, you missed your cue. It's like climbing. You ask 'On belay?'" and I respond 'Belay on.' So when I say 'I love you', you're supposed to say it back. I know it's taken me a damn long time to get up my courage to ask you. I was holding out, trying to figure out the exact right moment, but unless I've been totally misreading you for the last—"

She dragged their mouths together and kissed him senseless until there was no possible way he could be uncertain of her response.

October

"Derrick, come look."

Melanie carried in the package she'd found on the front porch when she got back from her run. The parcel was well wrapped, and she brought it into the living room, excitement rushing her as she spotted the return address.

"What's up?" He wandered down the stairs, wearing nothing but his jeans and total distraction hit. Reaching with one hand, she touched his chest and let him draw her in for a long, slow kiss that made her toes curl.

She was the luckiest woman in the world. Melanie released him, sighing with sadness as he pulled on his shirt and covered up all that wide expanse of firm male chest. She couldn't get enough of him. Even having moved in together didn't give her enough time to fully appreciate not only his body, but his presence.

How he made her feel inside and out.

The leaves on the trees had completely changed colour in the past week, and they were well on their way into fall. Outdoor climbing was over for the season, but she'd been working hard in the gym whenever Derrick was scarce, getting ready to share her surprise with him.

She shook the box. "This was on the top of the steps. Look who it's from."

Derrick swore lightly. "Nathan. Bugger it. Go on, open it up. Let's see what he sent us."

He tugged her toward the couch, and they sat, sunshine falling over their shoulders as she worked the edges of the paper open.

The wrapping fell away to reveal a fabric-covered hardcover rectangle. Melanie grabbed the handwritten note taped to the front and leaned against Derrick to read it with him.

Hey, Monkey.

You've probably been wondering what the hell is up with the article, etc. When I got back and went digging I found a few things I didn't like. Kane wasn't far off in his accusations, and Rave did have an agenda. It wasn't mine, so I didn't deliver the pictures I took. That kind of put me in breach of contract, making it simpler to quit, and that's about all I have to say about that.

She'd have felt guiltier if they hadn't already discussed the likelihood. "Oh my God, he did quit."

Derrick squeezed her shoulders for a moment. "It was always a possibility. He's a big boy. Trust him, he knew what he was doing."

Melanie nodded, but she still felt remorse for having been a part of Nathan losing a prime position.

My private project, on the other hand, rocks. As promised, final decision is up to you. I've made a mockup—done in private, so no one but me has seen it. No one will see it unless you and Derrick give me the go-ahead.

If you approve, I'll work toward publication. If not, this book is for you to enjoy, my gift to you both in celebration of your courage.

I'm shooting freelance now and doing okay. I'll drop in when I'm in the neighbourhood. You're special people. Thanks for sharing your lives with me.

Derrick picked up the book and laid it across his knees, opening the front cover to reveal a full-page black-and-white photograph of Melanie. Shadow-draped, her naked body was silhouetted against a pale background. The strongest point of illumination highlighted her face and her eyes. Her attention was riveted on something before her, and the camera angle made it appear she looked directly at the viewer, demanding they see her absolute determination.

The title in plain font, black on white—*Rising, Freestyle*.

The dedication—*To Melanie, who ascended from darkness into the light never losing the beauty in her soul.*

Page after page of the most gorgeous and sensual pictures followed, tastefully done, but all downright erotic. Close-ups defining the detail of her neck, the curve of her buttock, the contrast of Derrick's heavy thigh muscle against Melanie's leaner limb. A loop of rope draped over her breast, the faintest shadow of the climbing wall with a marked route disappearing skyward in the background.

Derrick turned to each new offering with deliberate care. Reverence. Not only pictures, but simple one-line text accompanied the occasional shot, echoing the words Melanie had shared over the weekend away. Each one revealed a moment of pain, her struggles.

The need for time to bring healing.

The necessity of devoted friends.

The rediscovery of love—for herself and for another.

“This is incredible.” Melanie ran a finger over a close-up image of Derrick kissing her back. Firelight glowed, the hints of reds and yellows creating a mystic world. His darkness was somehow made deeper, her body ethereal and angelic in comparison.

And in spite of her scars, stunning.

Derrick pressed his lips to her temple. “Because you are, and always have been, beautiful.”

By the time they finished the book, tears threatened to fall as she appreciated Nathan’s sublime skill with photography. Understood what a gift he’d given to her, not only when he was there, but now through his art.

She looked up to see Derrick ignoring the photo book and instead staring at her.

“Are you okay?”

Oh God. There was only one possible answer to that question. “I have never in my life been better. Derrick, if I said I wanted Nathan to go ahead and get this published, what would you think?”

He considered for a moment, his expression somber. “I don’t know, there’s a shot of my bare butt in there, you know.”

She’d noticed. “That’s my favourite. Think I’ll ask Nathan if I can have a blowup for our bedroom.”

Derrick grinned. “If I can ask for an extra of the shot of your boobs.”

Melanie hit him before carefully placing the album aside and crawling up to straddle his lap. “Serious.”

“I am serious.”

She tugged his chin up and slowly lowered her head until their lips brushed. Familiar, yet magical. His kiss ignited flames inside and warmed her soul.

A solid knock on the front door was the only thing that stopped their caresses from carrying on to the next logical progression.

Melanie abandoned his lips with reluctance. “Save my seat.”

“Permanently.”

Images from the incredible offering Nathan had produced still flooded her mind. Somehow they would track him down and let him know their decision. Tell him to stop in and visit them soon.

Melanie swung open the door and stared into a familiar pair of blue eyes above a cocky smile.

A happy squeal escaped as she threw herself into Nathan’s arms. Melanie clung to his neck with one arm, squeezing his neck tight as she laughed and cried and pounded on his shoulder with her free hand.

“It’s you. It’s you.”

Nathan laughed and squeezed the air from her lungs with his hug. “It’s me. Can I come in?”

He managed to place her feet back on the floor only a second before being caught in a hug by Derrick. Melanie couldn’t stop her heart from racing. Nathan was back.

He'd left without saying a word.

She thumped him on the shoulder again for good measure. "You ass. What the hell were you thinking, running out on us?"

Nathan followed Derrick into the living room. "I was thinking you needed to move on, and so did I."

He had a point, but Melanie was still pissed. "You could have said something before you disappeared."

"And what's with the magical appearance right now?" Derrick asked. He pointed at the photo album on the coffee table. "Were you in the delivery truck with the packages?"

"Sort of." Nathan gave a sheepish smile. "I dropped off the book and I've been parked on the street up the road waiting until one of you picked it up. Felt like a complete ass every time one of your neighbours walked by and eyed me like I was a crook casing the joint."

Melanie checked him over. He looked good. Trim and strong, still as dashing as ever.

But he didn't make her body ache like he'd done before.

She glanced at Derrick. He smiled and held her hand, all warm and intimate in his. Both of them at ease. This was their home now, and Nathan was simply a good friend come to visit.

A deep sense of peace rolled over her. "Come on—I'll make us coffee."

Melanie led them into the kitchen and got the water going as conversation spilled around them. She had so many questions she wanted to ask, but in the end, it seemed most of them came down to one thing.

Were they all happy?

Nathan sipped from his cup before pointing between them. "So, what's up with you guys? One house, I hear."

Derrick beamed. "Melanie's moved in. I sacrificed my closet space to her shoe collection."

Yeah, right. "Damn, I forgot I was supposed to start leaving stockings on the shower rod."

They exchanged contented smiles before Melanie tore her gaze away and returned to Nathan. "And you? The note said you quit *Rave*."

He nodded. "There was a little more involved than that, but it's okay. You don't have to worry about them including you in the series either—that was part of the deal with me leaving."

An icy cool wall of relief hit. "You're serious? How did you pull that off?"

He shrugged nonchalantly. "Part of my negotiations. I can't talk about the details, but I don't want you to fuss, okay?"

"Do you miss working for *Rave*?" She didn't want to have ruined his career.

Nathan snorted. "Not at all. The freelance I'm doing pays just as well, and now that I've bought a camper, I'm mobile and can work anywhere. Amazing how being able to travel freely makes it easier to get some assignments."

“Sounds as if you’re even more footloose and fancy-free than usual,” Derrick teased. “Going to take advantage of better weather in the south and get away from the coming snow?”

Derrick continued to quiz Nathan on his plans, and Melanie simply soaked it in.

With her lover’s arm around her, Melanie was anchored in the warmth of her surroundings. She enjoyed the chatter as Nathan filled in the missing gaps from the past months, and his optimistic hopes for the future. Knowing that Nathan was going to be okay, finding a place in Derrick’s heart—her happiness was almost complete now.

There was only one more thing she wanted to accomplish, and it was time.

Somehow they ended up back at the gym, Chinese takeout boxes scattered again.

“Why do I feel like we’ve entered a time warp?” Derrick stroked her hair as Melanie leaned against his chest. He hoped she wasn’t going to suggest another round of sex in front of Nathan. He wasn’t willing to share her ever again, not even that way.

She giggled. “Sorry, no wild sexcapades this time.”

“Well, damn,” Nathan complained. “I had this new rope trick I wanted to show you.”

She stuck out her tongue and he instantly clicked a picture. “Will you stop that?” she demanded.

“Monkey.”

“Jackass.” Melanie scrambled to her feet. “I want to climb. Derrick, belay me?”

That wasn’t what he expected. “Right now?”

She was already scrambling into her harness. “Now.”

Derrick exchanged a confused shrug with Nathan, but went to grab his belt. Nathan gathered the remains of their dinner and cleared the floor, stepping out of the way to allow Melanie access to the wall.

She grabbed him by the arm on her return journey, hauling him close and hugging him fiercely. Nathan was stiff at first before returning the salute.

They were both grinning like fools when he stepped away.

Derrick was in the middle of checking the straps on her harness when Melanie caught him unaware. The gentle touch of her lips to his cheek was accompanied by her fingers tangling in his hair. She tugged until their lips connected, then continued the light blessing of their mouths together.

It would be easy to do this all night long.

When she pressed her hands to his chest, it was to both push them apart and to keep them together, her fingers clutching the front of his shirt. “I love you.”

A rush of happiness hit like a rockslide, making his knees weak. “I love you too.”

“On belay?”

Oh man. Would he ever get used to her high-energy mood swings? Derrick adjusted the rope, taking up the slack and pulling his head back into the game. “Belay on.”

Melanie grabbed the wall, stepping up to lift both feet clear of the floor. “Climbing?”

He’d support her as high as she wanted to go. “Climb on.”

One move followed another. Deliberate. Cautious, yet not. She tested her grip before releasing each previous hold, but she didn’t take the simplest route up the wall. She reached and stretched, using her muscular legs and flexible core to attempt challenging holds.

Nathan stepped behind him and spoke quietly as if afraid to disturb her. “What’s she doing?”

Derrick shrugged but kept his eyes locked on her rising body. “Proving something to us? Something to herself?”

“She doesn’t have to prove anything to me.”

Melanie didn’t even hesitate as she passed the fifteen-foot marker, progressing one hold at a time. Pride swelled inside Derrick at her fearlessness. “I couldn’t agree more.”

Halfway up the wall she paused. “Take.”

“Got. Fabulous work.” The poise she showed highlighted how far she’d come in the past five months.

“Oh, I’m not done.”

Derrick waited, watching her peer down at him from her perch. “What’s up, sweetheart?”

She flashed a grin on them both. “Give me slack. I’m climbing the rest freestyle.”

Shit. “Melanie...”

“Do it. I’m good. Really I am.”

He paused. Assessing. Looking into her bright eyes, her confident face. It took a lot for him to release his own fears. “As you wish.”

She blew him a kiss before facing the wall resolutely. “Climbing.”

Derrick forced himself to obey her request—mostly. She wouldn’t get hurt. Worst-case scenario, if she did slip off a hold, the rope he still controlled would halt her before she’d fallen far. He wasn’t strong enough to let her completely free, so he cheated, just a little. Gave her a loose rope, but took up the extra slack to make sure the most she could fall was less than five feet.

It wasn’t a case of not trusting her skills, but loving her enough to care even when she didn’t ask him to.

“She’s beautiful when she’s climbing.” There was a note of awe in Nathan’s voice.

“She’s beautiful all the time,” Derrick corrected.

And when Melanie reached the top of the wall and sounded the bicycle horn mounted on the ceiling, Derrick fought back tears.

“Take.” Sheer delight tinged her voice as she called out.

Derrick tightened up the extra rope to secure her in position. “Got.” *For now. Forever.*

Far above them, a loud shout echoed off the walls as Melanie cried out her victory, both hands raised over her head. She spun in a lazy circle as he lowered her to the ground and into his arms.

“I did it.” The words brushed past his cheek as she whispered in his ear. “I really did it.”

Derrick squeezed her close in spite of the ropes and harnesses tangled between them. She’d more than accomplished her goal. She’d risen above her fears, and he was going to enjoy every moment of watching her face the future.

Together, they could rise above any challenges that came their way.

About the Author

Vivian Arend has hiked, biked, skied and paddled her way around most of North America and parts of Europe. Throughout all the wandering in the wilderness, stories have been planted and they are bursting out in vivid colour. Paranormal, twisted fairytales, red-hot contemporaries—the genres are all over.

Between times of living with no running water, she home schools her teenaged children and tries to keep up with her husband—the instigator of most of the wilderness adventures.

She loves to hear from readers: vivarend@gmail.com. You can also drop by www.vivianarend.com for more information on what is coming next.

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Falling, Freestyle

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Black Gold
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Rocky Mountain Haven

Never venture out of bounds without a buddy—preferably two.

Falling, Freestyle

© 2010 Vivian Arend

Dara's past four incredible years have been lived to the fullest. Along with her best friends, Kane and Jack, she's left no local wilderness unexplored, no ski slope unchallenged. Yet lately she wonders why they've never seen her as more than a buddy with breasts. When—or if—either man will cross that unspoken line.

It's a line Kane eyes harder every day. Since high school, he and Jack have shared everything. A condo, vacations—and their best girl. Kane's ready to get serious about his wilderness school and outfitter business, and that includes putting down roots. Preferably with Dara.

Wary of the men who've recently been sniffing around Dara, Jack has a growing sense that he or Kane better make a move soon, or they're going to lose out on their perfect match. Question is, who does she prefer...and who's going to bring their easygoing trio to an end?

Overhearing the boys arguing over her, Dara's floored—and torn. Choose between them? No way. Drastic measures are called for, a plan for their annual holiday getaway that will clarify her feelings once and for all—or lose everything in a sexual storm of whiteout proportions.

Warning: Old friends turned lovers can get into the most trouble—exhibitionism, bondage, spanking. Anal sex, oral sex, unauthorized use of ski safety harnesses, icicles in the hot tub... The author apologizes in advance for any melted monitors.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Falling, Freestyle:

Alpine Responsibility Code

Rule #5—Safety restraints must be used at all times.

Dara stood erect, her breasts like some kind of missile system. Cocked and fully loaded, they aimed forward, barely contained by the wisp of fabric on her skin. It was the sexiest thing she owned and she felt more naked in it than if Kane had insisted she come to dinner in the nude.

She'd packed the scanty lingerie with uncertainty. Heck, she'd bought it during her mad planning session for this getaway, trying to think of what the guys might find attractive. It wasn't her usual attire—having a string up her butt was not what she'd choose to wear most days. Besides, it was scary how much the shop had charged for mere inches of material.

It was all worth it when she saw the expression in Jack's eyes as Kane led her around the corner. His hands skittered over the utensils he was placing on the table.

"Oh sweet thing. Where have you been all my life?" He gave her one of his exaggerated winks.

Suddenly she was comfortable again. These were her buds, her “cuddle in the dark because there’s a lightning storm outside the tent” friends.

Her lovers as of an hour ago.

There was nothing to fear from them, not even clad in the most come-hither outfit in the world.

Kane seated her carefully, taking the chair on her right. Jack sat on her left and they all filled their plates with the pasta and aromatic sauce.

Jack placed a piece of bread on her plate and she wrinkled her nose. “Garlic bread?”

Kane pointed with his knife. “He made Caesar salad too. We’re all goners, so you’d better eat some in self-defense.”

“Garlic breath. Ugh. I guess we’re not planning on doing anything else tonight.”

The expression in Jack’s eyes shot down that idea immediately. Dara took a deep breath and turned her attention to the table. She couldn’t maintain his gaze, not yet. Not when he seemed to look straight through her and see what she really wanted.

Which wouldn’t be so bad if she knew herself.

Their lovemaking before supper had made it clear she was physically compatible with both the guys. Now she needed to concentrate on her real agenda. Who did she want the most, not just in the bedroom? Who did she have the best chance at forever with?

She reached for her fork and stopped in surprise. “Umm, Jack? The food looks great, but you forgot to give me any utensils.”

“Didn’t forget.”

Okay, now he was getting annoying. She pointed beside her plate. “Hello, nothing to eat with.”

His fingers encircled her wrist and tugged her arm toward him. Jack laid a thin black strap over her skin and smoothed the Velcro fasteners together. The band formed a loop around her wrist, like a sports-watch strap. A longer section, with a locking clip, extended five inches toward the floor. She stared at him in confusion, attempting to pull her hand back. He closed his fingers over the strap and trapped her in place.

Oh my God.

Kane cursed. “You just happened to have handcuffs in your luggage?”

Jack shook his head. “Safety harnesses from my skis.”

Dara’s head spun a little as her heart rate increased in a rush. Pure adrenaline shot into her veins and morphed into desire. The tiny scrap of lace between her legs grew instantly soaked. Jack’s pupils dilated as he steadily returned her gaze. He waited, his hand supporting hers and she knew he’d felt her tremble. She waited, willing the blood pounding through her limbs to slow enough she could stay vertical.

“Dara?”

Jack held out his other hand, a second restraint dangling from his fingers. His unspoken question hung in the air. Did she want this?

Hell, yes.

Slow, unsteady, she lifted her arm and offered her wrist. Kane swore quietly. Jack pressed a kiss to her palm, his gaze locked on hers. “Good girl.”

He fastened the second strap, then rose to his feet. She kept her gaze fixed on the table, sensing him walk behind her. Waiting for his touch. A hand landed gently on her shoulder and she shivered. He kissed her nape, brushing back her hair to whisper in her ear.

“There’s a flush over your whole body right now. Like a glow, lighting your skin. It’s going to make you more sensitive. Make every touch so much richer.”

He drew the back of a finger down her throat and over the upper swell of her breast. The way Kane had arranged her breasts in the supporting cups had forced the edge of her areolas to be visible at the top of the wispy fabric. Jack caressed, butterfly soft, along the dividing line between skin and material, and she swore her heart would explode.

His palms came to rest on her arms, slipping downward until he reached her wrists. Carefully he brought her hands together behind her back, looping the extra material around her lightly. The click of the clips locking together echoed in her ears louder than the blood roaring past.

A moan escaped. She was on fire.

Jack slid a finger inside the strap loops, testing the fit. “They aren’t tight, but you let me know the instant you want them off, understand?”

She nodded, unable to speak. If she truly wanted to escape she could slip free. It was the thought of being restrained that carried her into the fantasy.

Jack knelt and cupped her chin in his hand. He pressed his mouth to hers, his tongue stroking her lips—soft, teasing. When he drew back she would have followed and he brushed his knuckles past her cheek in a tender caress. “Later. Now we eat.”

Dara breathed out slowly as Jack regained his seat. She jumped lightly when a hand touched her right shoulder, Kane seeking her attention. His expression made her whimper, just a small sound of desire escaping as the hunger visible on his face twisted her insides.

“You have no idea what you are doing to me.” Kane’s words drove the need in her core even higher.

She caught a flash of his blue eyes before he kissed her as well, rough and thorough. Sucking the air from her lungs, his fingers tangled in her hair to hold their mouths together. She lost track of where she was, forgetting even that they were in front of Jack. The haze of excitement enveloping her grew until she attempted to clasp him back, and her arms wouldn’t budge.

Another burst of lust shot through her. Oh my God, the restraints. Whatever else happened this weekend, she was already more turned on than she’d been in her life.

Play out the hand her way...or fold?

Raising the Stakes

© 2010 Jess Dee

Three of a Kind, Book 2

After four years, Megan Loxley has given up waiting for her best friend, Desmond Reed, to realize she loves him. It's time to move on. When Des introduces her to his poker buddy, Alex Truman, the instantaneous sparks that flare between them signal her life is about to change forever.

Des could kick himself. How could he have failed to notice the perfect woman was by his side all this time? Now it's too damn late. And her innocent prodding about why he's suddenly so distant is only making his hunger for her worse. Then she gets one step too close—and his self-restraint snaps.

Stunned, bewildered, furious, Meg can't help but respond to the kisses for which she waited so long. God help her, she loves Des. And Alex, too. Immeasurably. Now what?

It may make her the greediest woman alive, but she's determined to win the next hand—even if she has to change the game a little. First step: state her wildly sexy proposition in a language both men will understand...and hope they'll stick around and play by her rules.

Warning, If you're looking for a cool game of poker, you won't find it here. This novella is so hot the cards are still smoking. The heroine may be new to the game, but she knows exactly how to play her two kings.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Raising the Stakes:

Megan stood in the doorway.

She was a mess.

Her hair stood in disarray, her dress was crumpled. Tears streaked down her scarlet cheeks and her gaze was wild, a mixture of horror, confusion and despair.

"Alex..." His name was a guttural moan.

He bolted off the chair. His knees jerked as he straightened. Warning prickles tapped at his spine. What the...?

She launched herself at him, her words tumbling from her mouth as she threw her arms around him. "Alex. I'm so sorry. God, so sorry. I didn't mean for... Please, you have to know I love you. Have to believe it. I do, I love you."

Before he had a chance to answer, she kissed him. Her lips begged his for a response, pleaded for his forgiveness. For what?

He stood immobile, his arms suspended in the air. Did he hold her, hug her? Did he kiss her back?

God, how could he not?

“I love you, Al. I swear.” Her mouth was frenetic.

He couldn't help himself. He kissed her, drowned in the pleasure her mouth evoked, even as her apology worried the back of his mind. He held her waist, pulling her closer. Her skin was hot to the touch, burning, and her nipples were hard points against his chest. This was Megan at her most aroused. A woman unable to step away from the spiral of hunger that whirled within her. A woman who wanted and needed and desired. This was a Megan he recognized. A woman half-sated sexually and half-mad with need.

The half-mad with need he could deal with, he could resolve. The sexual satiation? It made him want to fucking murder someone.

“No!”

The roar came from behind Megan. She twirled around in his arms.

“You don't get to do that with him.” Des's protest bellowed through the room. “Not after what you just did with me.”

“Des.” Megan's cry ripped through Alex's heart. She pulled away from him and stepped into the other man's embrace.

Des's fury and Megan's response to it rendered Alex momentarily immobile. Shaken, he gawked as Des crushed his lips over Megan's. Even more astounding was Megan's response. She gave an animalistic moan and kissed him right back.

Holy fuck, this is not happening.

Yes, it was. The woman he loved kissed the man she loved.

Fuck. Fuck, double fuck and cluster fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

Alex acted on instinct. He wound his arms around Megan's waist and tugged her away from Des, pulling her across the room, her back plastered to his front. She went with him willingly.

Des glowered at him.

“Fuck you,” Alex spat at him and spun Megan around. “You. Are. Mine!” That was all he said before he claimed her back, kissing her so thoroughly she couldn't possibly doubt his words.

“I am. I'm yours.” Megan's hands were on his back, shoving his T-shirt up. Her fingers clawed at his flesh. He'd have scratch marks there tomorrow, but he didn't give a shit. Her hands belonged on his body, his flesh. Not Des's.

He kissed her harder, and she clutched him tighter, digging her nails in deeper.

She tore at his shirt. “Off,” she demanded. “Get it off.”

This was Megan at her sexual peak. She was hunger and lust all wrapped up in one, and Alex would never, could never, deny her.

He ripped off the offending material.

The action cost him. By the time his shirt landed on the floor, Megan was gone. She'd stepped freely back into Des's arms and was kissing him, groaning into the fucker's mouth. Buttons flew across the room as she ripped at his shirt.

Bastard.

Des didn't have to break the kiss to get his shirt off. He just shrugged it over his shoulders.

If Alex followed through on his gut impulse now and yanked Megan out of Des's hold, he'd hurt her. His need for her and his fury at Des would compel him to act with brute force. No matter how fucking mad he was with jealousy, he would not harm Megan. Not for anything. Ever.

Even if she had voluntarily kissed another man. Not just any other man—the one she'd professed to love for four fucking years.

Shoving back every natural instinct he had to haul Megan away from Des, he took two careful, shaky steps forward. He'd give her the choice. He'd let her decide. His groin pushed against Megan's butt and his chest pillowed her back. No anger, no aggression. He would not harm her.

"I'm right behind you, baby," he whispered. "Just turn around and you'll find me."

Megan stilled.

"That's it, sweetness. Look at me. Turn around and look at me."

Slowly, so slowly Alex thought she'd never bloody finish, Megan released Des and turned to him. She stared up into his eyes. Her pupils were huge, dilated with desire. The tears from minutes ago had all dried. And there, swirling in the midst of her startling green eyes was a determination Alex had never seen before.

"Al!" Her smile left him dazed and gulping for air.

"Yeah, baby. It's me." His heart pummeled his ribs.

"Alex." She sounded out his name, articulating every letter, telling him clearly she was not mistaking him for Des in any way. "I love you."

So why the fuck are you letting him touch you? "I love you too, baby."

"I know." Her smile grew. "Kiss me," she said, and he did, tunneling his fingers in her hair.

He kissed her with every bit of love he felt, until she purred in his arms and writhed against his aching cock. It was almost perfect. Almost. Except for the man behind her. The shirtless, seething man who stared daggers at Alex.

How could Alex possibly sport a massive fucking erection when the biggest threat in his life, his good friend and mortal enemy, stood less than a meter away, plotting ways to murder him and grab his girl?

Megan rubbed against him, caressing his chest with her breasts and grinding her pussy on his cock, making the ache and the desire all the more unbearable. Soft noises escaped her throat, gluttonous groans and mesmerizing moans.

When he could bear the tension no more, Alex raised his head and, without releasing Megan, looked at Des. "She's mine."

Des's expression blackened.

"Al, wait—" Megan began.

He couldn't. He wouldn't stop now, not even for her. This needed to be said. "You had four years to claim her," Alex notified Des. "You didn't. I'm not giving her up now."

Megan nipped her way up his neck until her mouth found his. "Good," she whispered. "I never want you to give me up."

She kissed him. Slipped her tongue in his mouth and demanded a response. Alex was a goner. He responded, kissing her back even as he silently challenged Des with his gaze. But he could not possibly keep his eyes open when her hand landed on his pants, closing over his erection. His cock jumped at the contact and he groaned out loud.

"I'm here too, Meggy-mine."

The whisper wasn't meant for him, but damn it, he heard Des's words loud and clear. The asshole was employing the same tactics Alex had used just minutes ago.

Megan did not release his lips, but her tongue ceased its sinful exploration of his mouth.

"I've been here all along," Des said. "Just too damn blind to see what was in front of me."

Fuck! The very thing Alex had dreaded was now a reality.

Her lips parted from his, making him ache.

"If you want Alex, tell me now," Des said. "I'll walk away. I'll leave you alone."

Alex glared at him through narrowed eyes. Fucking hero. Alex would never have the courage to walk away from her.

Des's mouth was beside Megan's ear, his hand on her neck. "I love you, Meggy, but if you want Alex, I'll step aside."

Hit the erotic jackpot.

Sin City

© 2010 Lacey Alexander

Hot in the City, Book 2

Diana Marsh is trying to change her wicked ways. She's even dating a guy everyone agrees is prime husband material—conservative and boring, everything her family could wish for. There's only one secret vice left to eliminate: Marc Davenport, the super sexy co-worker she's been flirting with online. A business trip to Las Vegas is her opportunity to do just that, to sow the last of her wild oats with Marc before retiring behind the white picket fence. And where better than the ultra-erotic playground of Sin City?

A new job awaits Marc in France, and a casual fling with Diana is the perfect send-off—together they indulge in every conceivable hot and scintillating fantasy the town has to offer. Even if her resolve to turn off her sensual nature bothers Marc, he reminds himself that their naughty games are only temporary and she's a determined woman with a plan.

However, when the two are ripped apart without warning, all bets are off. To Marc, Diana's wild side is too beautiful to be contained. Too beautiful, he suddenly realizes, to let him walk away without playing to win.

Warning: Contains a full deck of erotic delights and a heroine who's holding all the cards—three of a kind and everything's wild. Who says the house always wins?

Enjoy the following excerpt for Sin City:

Diana Marsh had just switched off the light next to her bed when the phone rang. She reached out in the darkness and put the receiver to her ear. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's me." Marc Davenport, her work associate and long-distance friend. Or was he more than a friend?

Their office-to-office work calls had gotten longer and more flirtatious recently, and hearing his voice made her smile in the dark. "Hey."

"You sound sleepy—were you asleep? Damn, what time is it there? I totally forgot about the time difference."

"It's—" she switched on the light and sought out her bedside clock, "—just after eleven, but that's okay. I only went to bed a few minutes ago." In fact, she'd decided to turn in after she'd given up on him calling, thinking maybe he'd decided it was a bad idea.

"Are you sure, sweetheart?"

So simple, one little word—*sweetheart*. Despite herself, just the sound of the endearment, delivered in his rich baritone, made her breasts ache a little, her pussy tingle with a hint of awareness. “Yeah, I’m sure. I want to talk.”

It was a first for them—a call outside the office. But the workload had been light today and a phone call to ask her opinion on the wording of an entry in the fall catalog had turned into a phone call about a hundred other things: movies they’d seen lately, music they listened to, Marc’s hopes of moving to Europe for a while, and even the guy Diana was currently seeing—although she’d tried to steer away from that topic quickly. Before they’d finally hung up, Marc had said, “Hey, why don’t I call you later tonight? We can talk some more.”

She’d agreed, thinking it was safe, harmless. Just a little fun, just talking with a friend—a friend that sent frissons of heat echoing through her veins more and more lately.

But she couldn’t think about that—in fact, she had to *stop* those feelings before they got out of control.

Because Diana was done being the black sheep of the family, finished being the Class A Bad Girl she’d been her whole life. She was cleaning up her act, playing it safe for a change.

Surely a late night call from a...*friend* wouldn’t interfere with that?

“I thought maybe you’d forgotten,” she said, “or decided not to call.”

“No way, sweetheart—you know I love to hear your pretty voice. I’d have called earlier, but I just got home.”

“I hope you weren’t at the office all this time.” Marc worked at the company’s corporate headquarters in Las Vegas, where she calculated the time to be after eight.

“No, nothing like that. I just went out with some guys after work. A long happy hour.”

“Sounds fun.” Diana didn’t *do* happy hour anymore and the pleasure-seeking part of her soul experienced a small bout of envy.

“I wouldn’t have called, though, if I’d known you’d already put on your jammies and gotten all tucked in to bed.”

She laughed. “I’m not exactly four years old, you know. I don’t have a strict bedtime.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m very aware you’re not a little girl.”

“And just what does *that* mean?” she asked in a playful tone. Despite talking on the phone a couple of times a week for the past year, not to mention sending lots of e-mail—some of it work-related, some of it chatty—she and Marc had never met.

“I’ve seen your picture on the company website, sweetheart,” he admitted. She’d seen his, too, and found him utterly hot—the best-looking thing in a suit and tie she’d ever laid eyes on.

“And?”

“And...” She could almost hear his playful grin. “I liked what I saw. A lot.”

“What did you like so much?”

“Your gorgeous brown hair with just a hint of auburn, your hazel eyes and creamy skin, and that sexy pinstripe suit you were wearing.”

She let out a small giggle. “You can’t even see my suit below the shoulders in that picture. And besides, I didn’t know pinstripes were sexy.”

“What can I say? Professional women get me hot.”

Diana didn’t reply, just sat up in bed a little and let *herself* get hot at the knowledge that she wasn’t the only one caught up in a bit of lust here.

“Just please tell me,” he said, “that the skirt is as short as I like to imagine it is.”

She let her voice go a little husky. “Uh, yeah, it is. I’m a short skirt kinda girl.”

“Mmm, I like the sound of that.”

But I’m a good girl, too, she reminded herself. Marc had the ability to make her forget herself, the self she intended to be from now on.

“So what kind of pajama girl are you? What are you wearing right now?”

She sucked in her breath—this was starting to get steamy. And was about to get even steamier, she had a feeling. “The white baby-doll tank and panty set from the catalog,” she said, unduly gratified to know he’d be able to picture the skimpy outfit with ease. They were employed by Adrianna, Inc., a maker of fine lingerie and loungewear, and Marc worked on the team that designed and produced the quarterly catalogs.

“Damn, honey—any chance you’re on a cell phone that can send me a picture?”

She laughed. “Even if I was, what makes you think I’d send you one of me in my little nighties?”

His chuckle was rich and full-bodied. “Well, maybe you wouldn’t, not yet. But I bet I could talk you into it.”

“How?”

“That’s for me to know,” he said, then shifted the subject back to her baby-doll tank set. “So, tell me, does the ultra-soft cotton we describe in the catalog feel as good against your skin as we promise?”

She smiled to herself. “Mmm-hmm. Very soft and silky, just like the copy says.”

“And do your nipples show through the white?”

Her breath caught and her cunt turned restless, tickly. “I’ll...have to check on that,” she said, aware her voice had come out more whispery than she’d intended. Getting up, she walked to her dresser and glanced in the mirror. Two dark, sexy shadows puckered against the fabric; her breasts turned heavy. Returning to the bed, she picked up the phone, bit her lip slightly, then answered. “Yes, quite clearly, in fact.”

“Mmm, I bet you’ve got very pretty breasts.”

She wished he could see the come-hither smile she knew she wore. “Well, if I do say so myself...”

He offered a light laugh before getting sexy again. “Are your nipples hard?”

Another quick wave of heat. “Um, yeah. They definitely are.”

“And your pubic hair? Does it show through the white cotton, too?”

What a wicked boy, she thought. And what a wicked girl she was, as well. For the moment, she’d given up trying to fight it. “I don’t *have* any pubic hair. I keep it waxed off.”

A slightly stunned silence met her ear and she enjoyed it immensely. “All of it?”

“Yeah.”

“God, sweetheart, you just made my dick hard.”

Her voice came breathy, hot. “And you just made my pussy wet.”

Another tense silence—but this one was pure heat, shared across a distance of over two thousand miles.

“Touch it for me,” he whispered. “Will you do that?”

“On one condition.”

“Name it.”

“Wrap your hand around your cock for *me*.”



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