

DESCENT

by
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2010

PROLOGUE

Don't fall, don't stumble, don't trip, the cadence in her head echoed with each step. Her head was spinning, her heart racing in direct competition with her shaking legs as she climbed to the top of the winner's platform. The crowd chanted her name as she finally arrived at her destination.

This was more than about winning. Much, much more. It was the achievement of everything she had worked a lifetime for. Millions of beads of sweat, thousands of hours of practice, and untold sacrifices to get to this point. She was the best in the world. She had proven it. To herself, her critics, and her adversaries.

She was finally here. She should be euphoric, ecstatic, on top of the world. This should be the happiest day of her life. But all she felt was empty. Hundreds of people surrounded her, but she was alone, totally alone when it really mattered.

She scanned the crowd searching for the only person that mattered. She recognized many familiar faces, but none contained the crystal clear eyes that she desperately wanted to see.

Her name was called and she stepped forward.

CHAPTER ONE

Yeah, baby," Shannon shouted into the cool, crisp morning air. The sun was at her back and the dew on the pine trees to her right had evaporated under the warm rays of the first day of June. Gripping her handlebars tightly and bending her knees, she pulled her lithe body and ultra-light carbon frame bike up and over the root snaking diagonally across the trail. Her thighs worked in tandem with the shocks on the front and rear of her custom-made bicycle and she landed on the hard dirt path with barely an impact.

She dodged a low-hanging branch and flew down the mountain, zigzagging around rocks, downed trees, and an occasional squirrel scampering across her path. The trail was a single track, no wider than one rider could traverse, one of her favorites. The trail was bound on one side by rocks and trees while the other dangerously dropped off the side of the mountain. She was in the middle of the San Bernardino Forest in central California careening down Big Bear Mountain and life didn't get much better than this.

At the base of the trail she skidded to a stop, turned around, and looked at the path she just descended. She pumped her fist into the air. "Gotcha this morning, girl. This time I beat you. It's about time." She faced the eight-thousand-foot mountain behind her. "I don't need another patch of road rash or bent frame." She took a long drink from her CamelBak, the water inside still cool.

Her monologue with the mountain complete, Shannon pedaled across the dirt parking lot to the chair lift that would take her back to the top of the mountain. It would be her fourth ride of the day and she

would push herself harder this time. The championship series was less than a month away. Eleven races over thirteen weeks in Canada and several countries in Europe including Andorra, Spain, and Switzerland, culminating with the twenty-four-hour mountain bike championship in Australia that would determine the world's best rider.

This time Shannon had to wait in line to board the Snow Summit Scenic Sky Chair. It was after ten and the tourists had arrived to ride the breathtaking Sky Chair to the top of Big Bear Mountain. Once at the summit everyone from walkers, recreational bikers, pro riders, and everything in between would find a trail to suit their skill level. If nothing else, they could have a light snack at the restaurant and eat on picnic tables overlooking the dark blue of Big Bear Lake.

Shannon's critical eye told her that the couple sliding onto the lift chair were going to neck the entire eighteen-minute ride, the elderly man behind them would head directly for one of the hiking trails, and she hoped the baby boomers in front of her stayed on the gentle North Shore bike path.

She stepped forward watching the lift operator assist riders onto the chair or hang their bikes on the hooks specially made for the summer riders. The woman had been working the lift on her earlier rides and Shannon had made good use of the time in line. The worker was cute in a baby butch kind of way with a rock-hard ass, well-defined muscles in her legs, and an equally impressive physique from the waist up. She looked vaguely familiar but Shannon couldn't put her finger on where she had seen her before. She hoped she hadn't *been with* her and didn't remember.

Jackie was stamped into the name tag pinned high on the prominent breasts and when she caught and held Shannon's eye they conveyed equal interest.

"Going up again?" Jackie asked none too subtly as her gaze ran up and down Shannon's body. Her tight bike shorts and tank top left little if anything to the imagination, but the look on Jackie's face said her imagination was working just fine. She reached for Shannon's bike to hang it on the hook.

Shannon held firm to her bike and Jackie's gaze once it finally stopped on her face. Her pulse sped up, her stomach tingled in that familiar way it did when she was attracted to someone, and she sensed

a liaison on the horizon. Out of the peripheral of her vision, Shannon noticed that the handlebar of her bike was just low enough to be in direct line with Jackie's crotch. Keeping eye contact, she edged the bike closer and when Jackie's eyes widened and grew dark, Shannon knew she hit her mark.

"Actually, I prefer going down. The faster the better." She arched an eyebrow as if to say, "I know you know what I mean."

Three chairs arrived and left the entry point before Jackie responded. Her voice was low and suggestive.

"I didn't doubt it for a minute." She looked around as if checking for her boss or anyone within earshot. "Speaking of minutes, I have a break in fifteen." She nodded in the direction of the top of the lift.

Why not, Shannon thought. It had been a few weeks since she had enjoyed the company of another woman and this one was certainly willing. It was obvious she wasn't looking for love. At least Shannon hoped she wasn't. It might be awkward afterward with Jackie working at the lift, but it wouldn't be the first time she ran into a previous lover. She knew what to do. She had plenty of experience in how to handle that situation.

"About a quarter mile east on 210N are two downed trees," Shannon replied referring to one of the trails identified by the markers along the path. She was rewarded with a sly wink and a look that promised much more than what she had come to the mountain for.

CHAPTER TWO

How many times are you going to lift that?"

"Just one more set."

"Caroline, you've already done at least five and that's only the ones I saw. Who knows how many I didn't. We've been here for two hours. You're going to hurt yourself."

Gritting her teeth, Caroline lifted the weight bar over her chest. She was on her back, her arms shaking, and she felt her left arm begin to lose strength. The bar started to shift dangerously.

"God damn it, Caroline," her best friend Fran Loming growled as she stepped forward to take the weight out of her hands and put it back in the bracket. "Now you're being stupid."

"Okay, okay, you win," Caroline said, sitting up.

"It's not about me winning. It's about you. You're pushing yourself too hard."

Caroline wiped the sweat from her face, giving herself a few extra seconds before she had to respond. Fran was only three days older than Caroline and was equally dedicated to her thrice weekly workout. They met their freshman year at Columbia, and after a few short months exchanged roommates and lived together for the remainder of their undergrad years and their advanced degree as well.

"I know, I know," Caroline replied with absolutely no intention of letting up on her training regime. If anything, she was going to step it up a notch.

"Why is it I don't believe you?"

Caroline didn't have to see the look on Fran's face to know she was probably rolling her eyes at her. "Because I'm committed to winning this year?" she asked over her shoulder as she approached the stationary bikes. She knew Fran would follow her.

"And why is this year any different? Do you expect me to believe that for the past ten years you've been screaming down mountains, negotiating hairpin turns, peeling more than an acre or two of skin off your bones, and almost killing yourself, more than once I might add, just for something to do on the weekend? And why in the hell are you getting on the bike?" Fran pointed at the stationary machine. "Doesn't your ass spend enough time in the saddle?"

Caroline could only shake her head. "Fran, it's not that bad. I haven't had a serious fall since the one in Arizona and that one wasn't my fault. That bitch Martin cut into my lane." Caroline stifled an involuntary shudder remembering the nasty thirty-foot spill she took down the side of the mountain. More than her pride had been wounded. She had broken her leg in three places and it had taken over twenty stitches to close the gash in her left arm. She was very lucky. If a large boulder had not stopped her fall, it would have been much worse.

"I don't care whose fault it was, and that's beside the point."

Caroline loved Fran, and at one time hoped there might be something more between them than just friends, but Fran was as straight as they came and Caroline didn't want to lose her as a friend. They had seen each other through numerous boyfriends, girlfriends, jobs, cars, and races. Fran was a recreational mountain bike rider, more interested in seeing nature than conquering it.

Fran looked at her with the exasperated expression that was, unfortunately, far too familiar to Caroline. "Come on, Fran, you know how much this championship means to me." Fran did, and Caroline didn't know why she asked such a stupid question. She had been training practically nonstop for the past twelve months, determined to be in top physical condition going into the world mountain bike championships. The last five months she'd ridden in several smaller races to get her body back into the groove of biking again.

The championship was run on some of the toughest downhill courses in the world. The scoring was similar to the Tour de France where riders earned points from not only winning a specific race but

also based on their race time and if they finished in the top three places. Every race was a different distance, technically more complex as the series continued, and grueling as they passed through several different time zones every two weeks.

"I know, I know, knucklehead. I want you to win almost more than you do. I'm tired of traipsing all over the world after you." Fran's attention was drawn to a buff thirtysomething walking by with more than a few hard muscles.

Caroline took advantage of her distraction to increase her pace for a quick sprint. Before she had a chance to finish, Fran was turning back to her. She slowed down, too tired to spar with her. Fran was an attorney and Caroline lost every argument. She climbed off the bike and took a swig of the blue liquid in her water bottle. "You love it and you know it. What was his name, Carlos or something or another? You know, the one in São Paulo? Or was it Belize?" Caroline snapped her fingers. "No, I remember it was—" She didn't get a chance to finish before Fran swatted her with her towel.

"Shut up. It was Julian in São Paulo and Gerhard in Amsterdam." They walked into the locker room shedding their sweat-soaked T-shirts. "You're just jealous," Fran said proudly. "Because I'm getting some and you're too busy training to have someone's hands on your butt instead of a bike seat."

Caroline opened her mouth to rebut her comment but closed it when she realized it was true. When was the last time someone had their hand on her ass? When was the last time she *wanted* someone's hand on her ass, or any other part for that matter?

Caroline wasn't a virgin, but she wasn't getting anywhere near the action Fran was. When she wasn't training, she was studying for her Ph.D. in astrophysics. Other than Fran, she had a few friends but most had given up on her ever going out with them. A wet shirt landed on her head drawing her attention back to the conversation.

"Hey, CD, you with me?" Fran asked using the nickname she insisted on calling Caroline after watching her race for the first time. Caroline was too hard a name to scream in encouragement, and her last name of Davis was too butch, so Fran settled on Caroline's initials instead.

"Yeah, I'm here." Caroline tossed the stinky garment back at

her. Suddenly feeling like she owed Fran more than simple thanks for sticking with her, she stripped down to her birthday suit and dashed toward the showers. "Last one out of the shower buys the drinks at Maloney's." She heard Fran shriek as she shut the curtain behind her.

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Fran was on her second Cape Cod when Caroline finished her third bottle of water. She was never much of a drinker and certainly not two weeks before the first race of the series. Maloney's was the only lesbian bar in Stockton, a little more than a wide spot in the road fifty miles due west of Colorado Springs. Caroline had been training there for the past six months getting acclimated to the high altitude as well as honing her skill on the dozens of downhill courses in the area.

Caroline glanced around the room. It was a typical bar with two pool tables in a room to the right and high tables scattered around a square dance floor where she had scooted her boots with a few local girls. Even though she was in training, Caroline wasn't dead and one of the first things she noticed when she moved to Stockton was that more than just the countryside was breathtaking.

"Go talk to her."

Fran nudged Caroline in the side. "What?"

"Go talk to her." Fran nodded toward a woman sitting at the end of the bar.

"Who?"

"Who, hell, Caroline. The woman over there you can't stop looking at." Fran lifted her head and nodded in the direction of the woman sitting three tables away. She had long blond hair, and what drew Caroline's attention were the firm, tanned limbs jetting out from cutoff jeans and a yellow tank top. God, she loved summer in the Rockies.

"Go on." Fran nudged her.

"I'm not leaving you here. *We* came to have a drink, not for *me* to pick up a woman." Caroline took another sip of her water. The woman was striking, Caroline thought as she glanced over quickly. "And for God's sake, Fran," Caroline looked at her watch, "it's three in the afternoon."

"You're here, she's here, who gives a shit what time it is? I'd

dump you in a heartbeat if I had someone like that looking at me like I was dessert.”

“What are you talking about?” Caroline looked up as the bartender placed another bottle of water in front of her.

“You know what I mean. I’ve dumped you on more than one occasion in just this situation when some guy caught my fancy. And she’s looking at you as much as you are looking at her and you both know it. I’m a big girl. I can find my way home. Now go.”

Fran elbowed her off the stool. Caroline had a decision to make. She could either go over and introduce herself or be harassed by Fran for weeks about this missed opportunity. The last thing she wanted was the latter and she wasn’t sure she was up to the former. It had been a long time since she had started a conversation with a total stranger and even longer since she had been touched by one. Fran was right; she did need a time-out from the nonstop training schedule she had been on. Maybe a little R&R would give her the break she needed before the long trek of events began. Once the first race began, it would be nothing but pressure and competition for the next twelve weeks. The woman looked her way, and even though Caroline was out of practice, there was no mistaking the look of invitation in the woman’s eyes. Caroline didn’t need to be asked twice.

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“Shit,” Shannon exclaimed into the neck of the woman in front of her. It was her favorite word when she couldn’t think of anything else, and the way her orgasm had just rocketed from the tip of her toes through the top of her head, there was nothing else she could think of. Jackie was every bit as adventurous as Shannon had hoped she would be.

A few minutes earlier when Jackie rounded the corner of the trail, Shannon stepped out from behind a wide pine tree and without saying a word they both disappeared into the thick forest. They had only gone about thirty yards when Shannon was grabbed from behind and pushed up against a large boulder. In an instant one hand was under her shirt, the other inside her bike shorts, and warm, wet lips were on her neck.

She was more than ready, having thought about taking the ride

operator out here in the open, under the bright sunshine. Outdoor sex was her favorite and the anticipation had her primed. Jackie had an exquisite mouth and talented fingers. She licked, sucked, and fondled Shannon until she exploded and fell limp, squeezed between Jackie and the hard rock. She let herself be taken away a second time and a third before stilling Jackie's hand with her own. Between the high altitude and the blazing orgasms, Shannon's head spun. She gave herself a few moments to enjoy the sensation then, catching up quickly, had Jackie's shirt over her head and her shorts down around her knees in seconds.

She reversed their positions pinning Jackie to the smooth face of the rock. She didn't waste any time on kissing her, but went straight for the luscious breasts that had tormented her thoughts during the eighteen-minute ride to the top of the mountain. She licked and sucked her way around one large breast, then the other without touching the erect nipples. Jackie grabbed her hair and pulled her closer.

Shannon concentrated on evading the tempting peak and slid down her body planting hard kisses and quick nips on the exposed flesh. She was tempted to linger and tease Jackie's clitoris, but when she realized that her entire pubis area was fully exposed, she could not stop the overwhelming desire to bury her tongue in the pale flesh.

Jackie willingly spread her legs allowing Shannon the access she wanted. She opened her eyes and looked up. Jackie's hands were on her own breasts, her head thrown back as if worshipping the sun riding high in the cloudless sky. Shannon's own desire sparked again as she devoured the scent and taste of Jackie. In a matter of minutes, Jackie grabbed the back of her head and shuddered against her mouth. Shannon tasted the orgasm and with her own trembling hand brought herself to climax again.