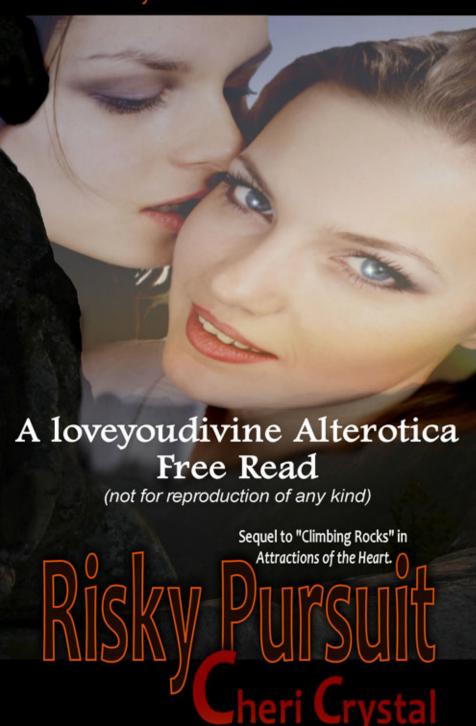
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CHERI CRYSTAL



To all the esteemed members on my literary lists who have read my stories throughout the years and provided much positive and appreciated feedback. Sharing and critiquing our work makes the often solitary pursuit of writing and collaborative an enriching event that strengthens our community. To my colleagues, friends and fans at Radclyffe-writings, where

I found my first audience—you all rock!



(Sequel to "Climbing Rocks" in Attractions of the Heart)

In a nightshirt and soft, fuzzy slippers, amidst the lingering aroma of bacon and scrambled eggs, I padded over to give my girlfriend a travel mug of strong French roast, light and sweet, and to see her off. She had just placed one booted foot on a fallen log we had chopped in half lengthwise, sanded and lacquered. The hand-made bench was set in a narrow alcove by the entrance hall and she was strategically positioned, which gave me a great view of her sleek physique. My gaze zeroed in on her butt the moment I spotted it. She secured the laces of her boots with double knots while I imagined taking her back to bed. After twenty years of being together, my knees still grew weak watching her get ready

for work. What can I say? The vision of my woman in her park ranger uniform turned me on, and being hot-blooded, I wanted to rip it off just as much.

I let out a long suffering sigh and she turned to reward me with a promissory smile. She was the epitome of the great outdoors. I loved everything about nature and about her. She was so at home, adept, equipped, and at peace in the elements. And fearless—my exact opposite.

"Honey, have you seen my hat?"

I pulled myself back from reliving each miraculous moment of the day we met and how my guardian angel had suddenly appeared when I needed her most.

"Oh, your hat? Let me look around."

I searched all the usual places—the hat rack, the hall closet, the dining room table. *Ah ha! The couch*, I thought, heading toward the living room. Last night, impatient as always to get my Lacey-fix, I had stripped her of out of her work clothes the moment she stepped over the threshold.

My steps quickened, but I abruptly stopped beneath the arched entryway of the living room. Sprawled out and lounging on the throw rug was the culprit.

"Barrett! What did mommy say about lying on mama's hat?"

Moving a stubborn Siberian Husky was no small feat, and outsmarting him was next to impossible, but knowing his weakness for pleasing Lacey, made the task easier. My voice softened

and rose to cajole the territorial beast. "Barrett, baby, bring mama's hat." It was a good thing he was cute. My irritation faded when he did me a huge favor by getting up, despite holding the booty in his teeth. I cringed. He reached Lacey first.

Thank God the hat, now littered with remnants of hair and doggie-drool, held its shape under forty-five pounds of flesh covered in two coats of grey and white fur. "You're lucky mama is such a sucker for you," I scolded, when I joined Barrett, who was receiving love pats from my girl. I'd have thrown a shit-fit had he pulled that stunt with me.

Lacey vigorously rubbed both sides of his neck, dusted off her hat, and placed it atop her crown of shining gold. Her hair retained a natural luster since the day we met on Moro Rock in Sequoia National Park. Back then, I may have been immobilized from my intense fear of heights, and she had saved me from ending up a potato crisp before lightning struck, but I wasn't too dizzy to miss what a stunning beauty she was at first sight.

She opened her arms, and I leaned in for a see-you-tonight kiss, hoping to make it last as long as possible before she was off to protect the forest and its inhabitants from foes. I hated to let go.

"You have your frisky smile on," she murmured.

"I can't help it when you do that."

She shifted her stance to gaze into my eyes, and my heart skipped a beat. "Do what?"

"That. The way you look at me that makes me melt. You're

the most gorgeous, generous, and loving woman on earth, and you're mine. I can't help it if you make me want you all the time."

Her creamy skin flushed as her grin widened. "Good, because I want you more." She lifted my hair away from my face, lacing her fingers like a wide-tooth comb in the long strands before bestowing her signature soft kiss on my lips. Barrett nuzzled his wet nose between us, determined not to be left out of the family hug.

"Hey, no butting in," I whined, but Barrett continued wagging his tail, and as usual paid me no mind.

"Barrett, place." Lacey pointed, and he scooted over to his bed, sitting obediently and awaiting another love tap from his master of the universe.

"You amaze me. Are there secret powers in here?" I rooted around her shirt pocket, while enjoying a free feel of her breasts.

"I'm on to you, Sabrina." She grinned, and I stole a quick kiss. "Hold that thought 'til later, or I'll be late."

"I'll miss you all day long." I pouted. "I wish you didn't have to work weekends."

"Me too. But you'll have the whole day to yourself. Our anniversary is coming up soon. Why don't you research vacation destinations to celebrate twenty-one of the best years of my life?"

"You mean *our* lives. Hey, we always climb Moro Rock and pop a bottle of Champagne."

"We can do that again, but I was thinking more along the lines of something, I don't know, more risky."

I took a step back. Just contemplating daring feats others find exhilarating elevated my fear factor quadruple fold. "Perhaps you don't remember how scared shitless I am of heights. Isn't climbing somewhere shy of 6,725 feet risky enough?"

Lacey pulled me back into her embrace. "I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks, but please don't suggest jumping out of airplanes or
hang gliding because it's not happening in this lifetime, or ever."

"Actually, I was thinking more along the lines of a new pursuit. What would you say to mind-blowing sex, both of us as naked as the day we were born, right there on top of old Moro Rock?"

I searched her flawless skin and brilliant blue eyes for any signs of fatigue. "Have you been working too hard?

She chuckled. "I love my little worrier, but I'm fine. Wouldn't it be a hoot to go up there, and at the first sign that we're alone, we do it? I don't know anyone who has ever had sex on Moro Rock. Do you?"

"Uh, no! And the reasons are crystal clear to me." I held up my hand for emphasis, my fingers spread and ready for the countdown as I ticked off each one. "One, they may be afraid of falling off while in the throes of passion. Two, they may get caught in a compromising position by a band of hikers. Three, being naked that high up could result in sun poisoning on their privates. Four, well, I can't think of four just yet, but I'm sure it'll come to me. And five, they're not stupid enough to try."

Lacey was actually laughing, a full-blown belly laugh, but I

bit back a smile and held my ground. Her laughter filled the hall as I displayed my tight fist.

"Go ahead, and poke fun at my phobias, but are you serious? You're a park ranger, a *respected* park ranger who has her picture in the papers, on television. What if one of your workers or colleagues or your boss decides to do a random check and sees us? Or an unsuspecting tourist gets a free x-rated, girl-ongirl peep show?"

"We could take Barrett. He'd alert us if the coast isn't clear."

"Great! Just great." I shook my head. Had she lost her mind? "What about surveillance cameras? Huh?"

"They are crap and break down more than they work. Maintenance takes their sweet time repairing stuff. Relax. Think about it. It'll be really hot if we pull it off."

"I think you're crazy. It's a good thing I love your adventurous side."

"I love all your sides." She ran her hands along the planes of my torso. My nipples hardened and my center clenched when she cupped my butt. I was ready to go to the ends of the earth if she'd move her hands around to the front and just enter me now. "Stop doing that or you will not only be late, but you may not make it in at all."

"We can start a new hobby. Each year we'll choose another National Park where we make wild, passionate love under the heavens." She sighed as if living the fantasy. "I'm game if you are."

"I'll see. Now scoot, before I rip your uniform off and render you senseless."

Lacey gave me a last lingering kiss and left Barrett and me watching her from the doorway.

"Barrett, your mama has gone muy loca."

Barrett just wagged his white-tipped tail and panted. Typical.

Before Lacey and I met, I never imagined having sex on a mountain, much less climbing up there to even try. Was there anything I wouldn't do for my best girl? I guess not. This time, her backpack was stuffed with a few added supplies, plus treats for our trusty watch dog. While trying to sneak in the tiramisu I'd made as a surprise, I pulled out some camping gear.

"How are we going to have enough time to blow up a mattress, toast to our everlasting love and get naked?" I worked on keeping my exasperation at bay, but quite frankly, making love atop a giant rock was ludicrous, if not uncomfortable. I added, "I must be nuts to agree to this."

"Let's just see how it goes. We don't have to do it if the conditions aren't right."

"What? And have you pouting because I chickened out?" I dropped the suntan lotion in her backpack. "No way, Jose!" I hrmpfff'ed and stalked off to use the bathroom one last time,

calling out, "Last time," before she could comment that I had made six trips already. I took care of business, and ran back down the stairs, before heading to the kitchen. Maybe I was stalling, but wouldn't you?

Each year, I'm amazed I can still do it. Lacey had taught me not to look down and convinced me to concentrate on her soothing tone. I marveled at her unwavering confidence in my abilities with her solemn promises to protect me. Only then was I able to take baby steps all the way to the top.

"Sabrina! It'll be our next anniversary if you don't hurry up." I could tell Lacey was already by the front door.

"Hold your horses, you." Barrett nudged my thigh with his nose, "I'm getting extra water for Barrett."

"He won't need a gallon. Come on." She stalked into the kitchen and zipped up my fleece jacket. "There, much better."

"You're just afraid someone will sneak a peek at my cleavage."

"That tee is too big. The v-neck is almost down to your navel."

"That's an exaggeration and you know it. Everyone will be too interested in the Sierra Nevada to pay me any mind."

She flashed an appreciative smile. "I doubt it."

"And if you keep that up, I may have to take you before we leave the house."

"Okay, not another word from me." She buttoned her lips.

"Yeah, right."

Lacey whistled to Barrett. "Here, boy. We're going to the

top, and you're coming too." Barrett jumped around as if she had given him a world of treats in an unlimited supply. It was uncanny how much more he danced for her than for anyone else. I felt so much like Barrett at that moment. My heart burst with love for every ounce of energy she possessed, her goodness unequaled by many, and how loved, safe, wanted, needed and complete she made me. My fears were forgotten for the moment.

"I never thought we'd need a chaperone for sex, but our husky here is going to sit by the landing and deter anyone from coming any closer." She did one last check around the house and at our equipment, noting that I had to tie my hiking boots better, which I did. I was relieved she hadn't noticed the dessert.

"How are we going to get him to discourage visitors?"

"You'll see."

"You're going to keep me in suspense, too? Aren't I being the best sport already?"

"Yes, and you're going to be duly rewarded." The moment she kissed me, I wanted to suck in her lips and never let go, but I had to know her secret. Still, no hints were forthcoming.

We drove the jeep to the base of the mountain. I helped Lacey gather the gear, and we were off for a whole new adventure.

"Shall we?"

I loved her toothy smile. "Yes. Lead the way."

Barrett followed without being asked.

I took a long, deep breath, held it, and let it out slowly. Lacey

reached for my hand, and I felt a few of the muscle fibers in my neck relax first. I did a mini-mental pep talk, put one foot in front of the other and off we went. There wasn't a cloud in the sky when a few visitors nodded in our direction before going back to their cars.

"Alrighty then, we're off."

I put on my bravest smile. She chattered away while I worked harder than necessary keeping up.

Lacey chanted as she climbed, "I think I can, I think I can," until I threatened to strangle her, only I caught her lips in a noisy kiss instead. We were at the halfway mark, and I fought my fear, until I could finally replace panic by coming up with endless gift ideas. What could my girlfriend have in mind to celebrate the day we met? I had seen inside her bag, and except for the deflated mattress, all the usual rock climbing stuff was all there. What if she had planted a present somewhere on the summit? I grew anxious imagining a search way up high, and worse still; I worried about being caught with my pants down.

She deepened our kiss. "You taste divine," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

A tingle started in my tongue and didn't stop there as the heat pulsated all the way down to my core. "I want you."

"We're almost there, my love."

"Good." I briefly glanced over the railing and involuntarily shivered.

"Don't look down."

"I'm not."

We stopped to give Barrett water and had a few sips, as well. When we continued, I peered into her eyes as a last ditch effort of making it another step.

"I hate that it still bothers me."

"Think pleasant thoughts."

"Why don't we talk about my surprise?"

"It won't be a surprise then."

"One teeny, tiny hint, pretty please."

"You'll soon see. Come on. I'm going to seduce you, love you and fuck you until your lusty screams bounce off each giant tree."

If my smile was any broader, I could have swallowed a huge chunk of Moro Rock; her self-satisfied grin held all the promise I needed to hasten my pace.

Barrett was busy poking his nose in a crack in the rocks, scratching the wall with his claws. I hit my leg for emphasis. "Hurry up."

"Come on, boy. Mommy is getting excited," Lacey teased.

"Like you're not," I protested, despite feeling her energy radiate right through me.

"Watch the last step."

"Wow, we're here already?"

"I think we set a record."

I looked around. It really wasn't as scary as I had feared. There was plenty of surface area so as not to risk falling over the

side. "I wonder why there's nobody here. It's usually packed on a beautiful day."

She shrugged. "Maybe the goddess is on our side."

"Maybe, but it's weird."

"Do you have to stand so far away?"

I stepped closer. "To my knight in shining armor. My greatest gift. My love of life. My angel. My—"

"My sweetness," Lacey finished. "My love knows no bounds. I am the richest woman alive because I have you. I love you with all my heart."

"Me too."

Lacey commanded Barrett to keep watch. "Be a good, brave bear and protect our den. Okay, boy?" She handed him a special t-bone that would last him for hours and set a water bowl by the steps.

"So, that's your trick."

"It's not a trick. I figured he'd need something to eat. It's not like he's used to climbing this high."

"Neither am I, but you're not feeding me."

"Who said I'm not?"

She whipped out a blindfold and before I knew what hit me, all was dark. "Hey, what the—"

"Be patient, my love, and you'll have your surprise."

"How do you plan to get it up here?"

"You'll see."

"How can I see anything with this thing on?"

She brought me over to a rock and made me sit. Perhaps it was best that I was blindfolded after all. "Just give me a sec to inflate the bed." I concentrated on the hissing sound of air as it filled the mattress. It amazed me how many sounds I identified while in total darkness, like the Steller Jay's harsh call. I could hear Barrett's heavy, even breathing. Great. Our watchdog is sleeping on the job.

"Barrett," I called, and he came over in a rush. I buried my nose in his fur. "Good boy. Mommy loves you, too."

Lacey came around from behind, lifted me from my perch, and cupped my breasts. I automatically rested the back of my head on her chest. We rarely made love in the dark because I never tired of memorizing every inch of her, delighting in all the finery of her skin. Her fingers slowly undid the buttons of my shirt and unzipped my fly. She reached beneath my tank and squeezed my nipples. I sucked in my breath, covered her hands with mine, and willed her to reach lower still. She complied, lingering for a moment on my bare stomach, and then finally working beneath my briefs and into the depths of my desire. She pushed my pants and briefs to my knees. I lost my bearings and practically came on the spot, until I remembered where we were.

"Oh my God, Lace! What if someone comes up here right now?"

She placed light kisses above and below the cotton obstructing my view.

"Don't worry so much. Barrett has us covered." She turned

me around and removed my shirt. I didn't utter a sound save a soft moan when she lifted my tank.

"My boots," I begged.

"In time. In time."

How could she be this methodical when I was on the brink of bursting into orgasmic orbit? I didn't have far to go, and just being on top of Moro Rock, I was almost there. How she managed the slow, steady pace filled me with envy. And longing. And frustration. But finally, the excitement of anticipation won out.

My pulse soared, my stomach did wheelies, and my legs buckled. She helped me sit atop the mattress and removed my shoes. She didn't stop until I was completely naked. I found it titillating being this exposed in public. I even dared anyone to come and see what I had here. In fact, one of my fantasies was to come for a crowd. I chuckled. Like I'd ever really want that to happen.

"You're shaking. I'll get you a blanket," she said.

"No, I want you to be my blanket. Please lay with me."

"I intend to." She cuddled closer. "Is this good?"

"Naked, please."

"Oh, right." The mattress bounced around as she got to her feet. I heard every last remnant of clothing being removed from her body.

"I have to see you in the sun."

"Not yet. I intend to love every part of you and watch while you experience it with all of your senses except for sight. You'll be amazed at what you can feel this way."

"Is this the surprise?"

She chuckled in a way that made it even harder to wait for my treat.

Lacey was right, of course. We made love like it was the first time. The blindfold made it easy to forget about being blown off a mountain without a 'shute. My other senses were more aware of my surroundings; the fine scent of pine, the "Shaack, shaack, shaack," of the Jay, and the feel of skin-on-skin. I climbed to new heights. I couldn't imagine there was much higher that I could safely go. It turned out that Barrett didn't bark once.

Lacey helped me dress and fed me bits of our customary picnic. I sniffed and then took a first bite of hollowed-out crusty bread filled with Brie, walnuts and apricot preserves. "Yum, this smells as delicious as it tastes," I said, realizing I usually missed many of the details my nose captured.

She prodded through her bag for a corkscrew. "What have we here?" I heard her tap plastic and instantly knew she'd found the Tupperware container with my tiramisu. "Is this my favorite dessert?"

"Yes."

"You're full of surprises, too. Thank you." She popped the cork of the champagne and handed me a glass.

I sniffed and the bubbles popped on my nose in a sweet wetness that tickled. Lacey moved closer to remove the blindfold. I barely had to squint. "It's lovely up here, with the sky in various shades of red, purple and blue."

"It sure is." She looked exquisite, and knowing my girl well, I had a feeling something seriously monumental was up. My belly did a flip. My hands shook from nerves. She removed the glass from my tight grip and placed it beside hers. I thought I'd faint when she lifted my butt off the mattress. We stood death still, my gaze locked solid with hers.

I heard the slightest intake of her breath. Lacey was all that I loved, craved and cared about. At first, I couldn't speak, but then I blurted, "I love you, Lacey. Please promise you'll never leave me, ever."

"And I love you, but what are you talking about? I have no intention of leaving. However, there's something I need to say."

If I squeezed my eyes shut to block it out, then I'd cry for real and that wouldn't help. Instead, I searched her face for a clue, anything to put me out of my pain. All I witnessed was the endless love I always saw. She was still the Lacey I knew and worshiped with all my heart.

When she reached for our champagne, I relaxed a bit, but not by much. I gulped and coughed on the bubbles I'd inhaled into my lungs. A few tears escaped as she patted my back until the choking subsided. She refilled our glasses and warned, "Sip it, Sabrina. Please just sip." I returned her smile. We raised our glasses. She spoke first, which was good, because I didn't trust my voice.

"To my love of life," she toasted, "Sabrina Ava Maria Alverez, who I hope to someday make my wife."

I regained some of my composure. It was our ritual toast that meant everything was going to be all right. My mood became jovial once more. I breathed a sigh of relief at having survived yet another panic attack. "To you, Lacey Jane Anderson, for showing me the true meaning of love. You make me happy every day and in every way."

"Sabrina." She clasped my hand in hers and gazed into my eyes. "Will you marry me?"

Tears sprang unbidden and streaked my cheeks as I flew into her arms. When my glass fell from my grasp and shattered, I forgot to worry, for a change. I showered her face and neck with wet kisses until we were both laughing hysterically like two lovesick kids deliriously happy they were about to embark on their greatest adventure.

"Is that a yes?" she asked.

It took a while for me to get back my voice. I managed a tearful, "Yes," through another flood of happy tears. "When?" I swiped at my face, suddenly wanting our wedding all planned out: yesterday. "We have to go where it's legal. We have to get clothing. We need a clergy, a justice of the peace, and witnesses."I practically sang out the list. "We'll need flowers, invitations, food, music, clothes, oh, I said that already.

"Honey, you crack me up, but slow down. So, will you be my cherished wife?"

"Yes! Oh, yes! Let's drink to it." I glanced down. "Oh no, I broke my glass."

"We can share mine." That first sip was lush. This had to be the best anniversary thus far, and yet, I truly believed better times were still ahead.

Barrett started barking his fool head off.

"You can give mama away, Barrett. Would you like that or would you rather be the ring bearer?"

"I think he should be the flower girl," Lacey said, and we laughed at his expense, but he was still too busy barking.

"It's a good thing we dressed when we did," I said, with a smug smile and a wink.

Lacey walked over to the summit entrance and removed the rope. When she turned toward me, her smile dazzled, and along with the setting sun, the breathtaking view brightened my world. "It seems we have company," she announced and moved aside to let the others in.

I gasped. Truly shocked, shaken, awed, and every other exclamation of surprise imaginable, when our dear friend, Toni and her girlfriend stepped up first, followed by my mom, my siblings, Lacey's parents, her coworkers, and even a few of my closet friends, all bearing gifts.

I stood with my mouth open in what was canyon-like proportions.

"Congratulations, *felicidades*," sang the most marvelous chorus I'd ever heard. My mom huffed and puffed, but she managed a pat and peck on my cheek before hugging her future daughter-in-law.

"What do you say we get married tonight, and then later we can make it legal in the Canadian Rockies—in Banff, like you've always wanted?" Lacey asked.

I looked over the edge and for once, it was inviting me, daring me to come closer to get a better view. With Lacey and Barrett guarding the fort, what did I have to worry about besides making them happy?

"I say yes." I hugged her and then embraced each of our guests in turn. I was going to marry Lacey and have everything I ever wanted.

Toni, an Episcopal priest, officiated our wedding right there on the top of Moro Rock.

The End



ABOUT THE AUTHOR.

Cheri Crystal reviews lesbian fiction when she's not busy spending time with her family, working in healthcare, and writing her own lesbian adventures and erotic romances. She enjoys all types of intellectual and physical activities and considers herself lucky that she can immerse herself in the literary community at every spare opportunity. Cheri has many published stories in anthologies and online with www.loveyoudivine.com. She's written two novels and is working on a third. Her first solo anthology, Attractions of the Heart, came out in October 2009 and was launched in Provincetown during the 25th Annual Celebration of Women's Week. It was an exciting and rewarding experience she'll never forget.

Visit Cheri's Website: http://www.chericrystal.com or Contact her at cheri@chericrystal.com She'd love to hear from you.

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Attractions of the Heart (print anthology)