

## Strokes of Pleasure

### Chapter One

“Why do I feel like you’ve been working out in secret?” Slade stared at his best bud. She wasn’t even breaking a sweat. They’d been working out together since high school. Mila was as competitive as they came, but there seemed to be new determination about her. He couldn’t quite put a finger on it.

“You think I’d subject myself to this kind of torture without you?” Mila snorted. “I’m not a masochist, for crying out loud.”

He motioned toward his truck. “Smoothies at North Street?”

She hummed her approval. “I’d do just about anything for a strawberry banana smoothie right now.”

Slade laughed as he hit the unlock button on his key fob. “It’s on me. I still feel bad for standing you up last Friday.”

Mila shrugged and climbed into the passenger side. “No big. I ended up going out anyway.”

Slade shoved the key into the ignition and revved the engine before her words sank in. “Out? With who?”

Mila lifted her leg and massaged her calf muscle. “Just a guy.”

She was dating? How’d he miss that? “New boyfriend?” *And why did it bother him? Buddies, remember? It’s none of your business.*

“A guy I met at work,” she replied, dropping her leg. She reached up to adjust her lopsided ponytail and Slade forced his attention back to the road. Mila had waist-length black hair. She’d gotten angry once, threatening to chop it off. He’d begged and pleaded for her to leave the scissors

alone. She'd relented. Slade liked her shiny, pin-straight hair, even if he rarely saw it down. Ah, but those few times he'd had that pleasure stayed in his memories.

"A guy. That's all I get?" He asked, reaching over to poke her in the ribs. "Come on, spill."

"His name is Nash. He's the new guy. Started a few weeks ago." She waved a hand in the air. "Nothing more to it."

Slade clutched the steering wheel tighter. "You into him?"

Her gaze narrowed on him. "What's with the fifty questions, Mr. Nosey?"

"Just curious," he muttered. "I tell you about my dates. It's only fair."

"Yeah, well, I don't kiss and tell."

*Kiss?* Mila's plump lips pressed to another man's mouth. Slade stifled a curse. "Whatever," he grumbled. "He'd better treat you right. That's all."

She chuckled. "You going to beat him up if he doesn't?"

The urge to land a right jab to the guy filled him. Not a bad idea. "Maybe."

She was quiet a moment. Curious, Slade took his attention off the road to stare at her. She was watching him. A frown marring her pretty oval-shaped face. She tapped at her thigh with her index finger and said, "You're acting weird."

*Change the topic, dumbass.* "So, tomorrow I think maybe we should go running at Pike's Peak. You up for it?"

"Sure. But I'm going to smoke you."

He rolled his eyes, pulling into the parking lot of North Street. "We'll see who beats who, little miss show-off."

After he parked and killed the engine, Slade turned her way. She wore a hot pink workout bra beneath a loose-fitting white t-shirt and black leggings. Mila wasn't stick thin. She had curves.

The kind he'd never paid much attention to before. Now, as he watched her tapping at her phone, he wondered what she'd look like beneath the lycra. But this was Mila. And their friendship went deep. He'd seen her at her worst. Like the time she'd gotten sick on bad sushi. Or when she'd fallen for the cheating douche back in college and she'd cried for a week straight. Yeah, their friendship was solid. Like brick-wall solid. And yet he couldn't stop imagining kissing her. Sex would mess up everything. Wreck their tight bond all to hell. And she meant more to him than a few minutes between the sheets. Now, if only he could convince his dick of that.

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Mila's mind swirled with questions. What was up with Slade? If she didn't know better she'd think he was jealous. But she did know better. She may as well be a guy for all Slade noticed. He'd never once put the moves on her. She was grateful for that. Mostly. Sure, she'd had the occasional fantasy or two where Slade played a starring role. His close-cropped black hair and facial scruff were only part of his appeal. The muscular biceps, hard-as-a-rock abs, and sexy green eyes didn't hurt any. His wicked sense of humor and big heart completed the package.

She followed him into the smoothie place, staring at his butt. The black gym shorts were loose, but it didn't matter. She knew exactly how firm Slade was. They'd play wrestled on plenty of occasions. They'd touched and teased each other often. As friends, she reminded her inner hussy. Only friends.

When they entered the air-conditioned building, Mila sighed in relief. She'd put in extra effort during their workout session. Of course, it was all for nothing because her curves seemed to just get curvier. She might be sweating, but her body was bound and determined to hold onto the inches. Another reason Slade never noticed her as a woman. His girlfriends were the one hundred and fifteen pounders that giggled. And almost exclusively blonde. As she glanced down the front

of her body, Mila muttered a curse. Yep, Fantasy Slade would have to suffice.

He nudged her shoulder with a gentle fist. “Like I said, I’m buying.”

She tucked her purse higher on her shoulder. “You won’t hear me complain.” She pointed over her shoulder. “I’ll grab a table.”

He nodded and went to order. She found a table near the window and took a seat, watching Slade chat up the waitress on the other side of the counter. He was such a flirt and half the time Mila suspected he wasn’t even aware of doing it. When the woman giggled, Mila looked away. She didn’t feel like watching the show. Her phone rang and she yanked it out of her purse, staring at the screen. Nash. She hit the “send” button.

“Hey, I thought you were away for the weekend?” He’d gone away for training and swore he’d call the minute he returned.

“Hi, beautiful,” he murmured. “I got back early and wondered if you had plans tonight?”

“Oh, uh,” she stalled when she saw Slade striding toward the table. His scowl puzzled her, the two large smoothies in his hands forgotten.

“Mila?” Nash asked, pulling her out of her thoughts.

“Sorry,” she replied. “Um, yeah, I’m free.”

“Awesome! I can pick you up at 7:00. Sound good?”

“7:00?” A date. With Nash. And why wasn’t she excited? The guy was pretty darn handsome with his neatly trimmed sandy-blond hair and six-foot-two model-perfect physique. She could do worse.

“You still there, Mila?”

“Oh, sorry. Sure, 7:00 works.”

They said their goodbyes and hung up. Slade slammed her smoothie onto the table, before

sliding into the booth across from her. "Date tonight?"

"Yes." She unwrapped her straw and took a sip, mostly to give herself something to do more than anything else.

"Nash?" he asked, his smoothie untouched. His hands were fisted on the table in front of him and the scowl deepened.

Tired of the attitude, Mila blurted out, "Why the sudden interest in my dating life?" Before he could answer, she went on, "you've never given a crap before."

His gaze never wavered from hers. "I'm just worried about you."

She snorted. "Worried?"

Without bothering with the straw, Nash grabbed his cup and brought it to his mouth, gulping down a good portion of his mango pineapple. "You said yourself he was new," he shot back. "What do you even know about this guy?"

"Uh, I know he has a master's degree. He's smart, has a great sense of humor, and he's pretty hot."

He curled his lip. "That's it? Family life? Background?"

She poked him on the forearm for being so annoying. "It was one date, Slade. I didn't interrogate him or give him a polygraph."

He snagged a napkin from the holder and swiped it over his mouth. "Where's he taking you?"

She watched him, her curiosity over his grumpy attitude pushing her to say, "No clue. Last weekend we went to that new seafood place on Hart's Lake. Very romantic and great food. And they had a live band, too."

"Cute," he muttered. "Not very original, but cute."

Pissed that he was ruining the enchanting evening she'd shared with Nash, Mila continued. "And afterward I invited him in for drinks. Like me, he's not a fan of wine, but he does enjoy a good whiskey sour."

He glanced away. "Sounds like the perfect guy."

His attitude had her blurting out, "And he doesn't seem to mind that I'm not model-thin."

His head snapped around before pinning her with a cold stare. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She pointed toward the cashier. "You clearly have a type. Lucky for me, Nash likes his women with a little more meat on their bones."

"I've never thought you were..." he paused, his face going a little blotchy. "Well, you know."

"Fat," she helpfully supplied, feeling more and more frustrated by the conversation.

Slade shoved his smoothie aside, then he took hold of her chin in a firm grip. "You're not fat. Don't do that, Mila."

"I'm speaking the truth." She jerked backward, nearly giving herself whiplash. "I'm bigger than average. Always have been."

"And there's nothing wrong with that." He looked down her body, then his gaze met hers once more, the anger in his eyes gone. Replaced by something she couldn't quite pinpoint. "You're perfect just the way you are," he ground out.

*Then why haven't you ever hit on me?* The words were on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn't say them aloud. Instead, she went back to finishing her smoothie. It was late afternoon and she needed to get home. Turns out she had a date. Maybe with the right guy. Or maybe the right guy was sitting right across from her. Too bad he was too thick-headed to figure it out.

Strokes of Pleasure by Anne Rainey