

Roped into Romance

(Short Story)

von Alison Kent

Lauren Hollister stood beside Macy Webb and followed her best friend's gaze up the exterior of the four-story, redbrick warehouse recently converted into four spacious lofts. The duo had been searching forever for the perfect place to live. But this didn't look promising. And Lauren said so.

"This doesn't look promising."

"Uh, hello? We're not going to be living in the chinks between the bricks." Macy reached up a hand to shade her eyes then walked down the sidewalk and cast a glance along the length of the building's back side. "Besides, the facade is being repaired. The scaffoldings are set up over here."

"Hmm. He did say not to judge this particular book by its cover." Hard not to, though, since Lauren's degree was in commercial art and she had a critical eye. She glanced at the face of her wristwatch. "He also said he'd meet us here at 3:30."

Her cursory building inspection complete, Macy walked back to Lauren's side, reached for her wrist and the watch. "It's 3:27. We're early. He's not late."

"Not yet," Lauren said just as a sleek black Jaguar purred around the corner and eased to a stop behind her SUV. She let out a long low whistle. "Okay. I'm impressed. On time and in style."

As the car door opened, Macy leaned closer. "I'm beginning to think you ain't seen nothin' yet, sister."

Lauren's, "*What are you talking about?*" died on her lips as Anton Neville stepped from the car.

The architect was six foot one or two at least, and had a body to die for. For some reason — his voice? his demeanor? — Lauren had assumed from their phone call that he was older. Her father's age maybe. But he wasn't. He couldn't have been more than 30 and he was absolutely gorgeous.

His long legs ate up the distance between his car and the sidewalk, long legs displayed to advantage in a pair of tobacco-colored dress pants that were very Versace. His shirt was a lighter shade of camel and his tie a flashy brown print. He was head-to-toe delicious...the head part having snagged Lauren's attention first. Anton Neville was not your average blonde. Both his build and his complexion declared him a swimmer. And then there was the way the sun had bleached his hair. It was long, though not unconventionally so. It was just that she'd never seen curls that were so 100 percent male.

Windblown ringlets fell over his forehead, his collar, and his ears. The look was the sexiest thing she'd ever seen, especially when she added in the barely-more-than-

stubble length of beard and mustache. But when he took off his Ray-Ban sunglasses...oh, God, she was a goner.

"Anton Neville." Blue eyes flashing, he held out a hand.

Macy accepted first. "Macy Webb. Thanks for meeting us."

And then it was Lauren's turn. "Lauren Hollister," she said as his large hand swallowed her palm and long artist's fingers. She swore his touch had set her belly on fire.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting long." He slowly pulled his hand from Lauren's and, balling her fingers into a fist that she tucked into her pocket, she said, "No, not at all. You're right on time."

"Good." He gestured for them to go ahead, flipping through his ring of keys. "Then let's go check this puppy out."

As they made their way up the length of broken pavement to the door, Macy cast a questioning glance at Lauren and mouthed, "You're right on time?" Lauren simply elbowed Macy in the rib cage.

"Our contractors have done their best to utilize as many of the original fixtures as possible," Anton was saying, now leading the way down the high-ceilinged hallway that ran the length of the building. He stopped halfway. "Including the freight elevator."

Lauren and Macy looked on as he used his security key, releasing a huge red button that protruded from the cinder-block wall. One smack from Anton's broad palm and the heavy steel door rolled up. When he gestured for them to enter, they did, taking the trip to the fourth floor along with the freight car's rattletrap creaks and groans. This still didn't look promising. And so Lauren continued to think until the lift ground to a stop and Anton, again using his security key, shoved the door upward along its overhead tracks and yanked back on the loft's metal privacy grate.

At her first sight of the hardwood floor, Lauren changed her mind. She turned and met Macy's wide eyes, seeing the astonished reflection of her own baby blues in her best friend's whiskey-colored gaze.

"I don't believe this place." Lauren slipped off her clogs before walking on bare feet into the loft. "Talk about not judging a book by its cover. Crumbling bricks be damned. This floor is absolutely the best."

"It smells," Macy said, stepping out of her wedged sandals, "like real wood."

"It is real wood." Anton left on his Italian leather loafers. "One hundred percent maple plank. Urethane finish. Definitely shoe-proof. And the building's facade is being repaired. One brick at a time."

"I don't care," Lauren said, shaking her head. "I mean, I do care. About the bricks. Not about the floor being shoe-proof. Well, I care about that, too. But I want to experience this with my skin."

Macy had already slapped her barefooted way into the center of the loft's main room.

"It's a hardwood floor, Lauren. It's not a grassy meadow. It's not Berber carpet.

There's not a lot to experience with your skin."

"Maybe not with *your* skin." Lauren closed her eyes, held her shoes wrapped in her arms close to her chest, and flexed her toes against the wood. No one, her best friend included, had ever understood how her body assimilated touch.

Her sensitivity had often been a curse. Childhood immunizations? The worst.

Eyebrow tweezing? Yikes! Bikini waxes? Forget about it! But, oh, could her sensory feedback be a blessing. The right man and...

Shivering, Lauren opened her eyes — and looked straight into Anton Neville's. They gleamed with speculation. And his irises, wow. That shade of near navy was incredibly rare. She knew he wasn't wearing contacts. Just like she knew, if she had her way, he wasn't going to be wearing anything soon.

"Like I said. The best." She flexed her toes again and hoped he bought it. Then took Macy by the hand. "We're going to take a look around."

Ankles crossed, hands shoved down in his pockets, Anton leaned back against the edge of the open elevator. "Take your time."

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Once she'd dragged Macy out of the main room to the far end of the building, Lauren nearly groaned. "All night wouldn't be enough time. Give me that man and give me forever."

"You are such a slut."

Lauren grinned, unoffended. She was a sensualist, not a slut. A discriminating one, and Macy knew it. Getting a rise out of each other was tough, but they both loved to try.

Having checked a far corner and claimed it as her bedroom, Macy returned to the main room and the area prepped for a kitchen build-out. "Hey. You remember those sculptures we saw in the Sixties Store?"

Lauren's eyes widened. "They would make *perfect* room dividers. You're brilliant, Mace. Five of them, at least. Right here between the kitchen and the center of the loft." Lauren's eyes widened further as she caught sight for the first time of the balcony doors.

"C'mon. Let's check out the view." Lauren headed that way. Pulling open the sliding glass door, she slipped on her clogs and stepped outside.

"This is so great! Can you imagine a little candlelight, a little wine? A lotta lovin' under the stars? Listening to the traffic below and trying not to get caught?" Lauren hugged her arms around her middle, whirled back to Macy, and said, "I can't wait to try it out!" Only it wasn't Macy standing in the open doorway behind Lauren.

It was Anton Neville.

And he said, "Neither can I."

Chapter Two

Anton Neville slumped back in his desk chair. Feet flat on the floor, he swiveled from side to side. He kept a grip on both armrests, kept his gaze on the door. It was after hours; the support staff had long since left for the night. But his partner was due any minute. And he wanted to be here to gloat.

Doug Storey, the second half of Neville and Storey, Architects, had made it his personal mission to wash the firm's hands of the loft property Anton had shown yesterday to Macy Webb and Lauren Hollister. And here, with Doug out of town, Anton had done little more than pour on the masculine charm to make the sale. Possible sale, he reminded himself. All the women had done was inspect the property. Twice. But it was the way they'd done their inspection, the decorating plans

they made as they walked, the looks they'd tossed back and forth, the whispers and the giggles.

Anton had been at this business long enough to know when he could sit back and let a property sell itself. But, for the loft, he'd been ready to wheel and deal his ass off. Still, this was the first time he'd ever considered offering himself as a sales incentive. And he was only half kidding. The other half seriously wondered what would've happened on that balcony had Macy Webb not walked into his tête-à-tête with Lauren Hollister.

He didn't think he'd ever hovered on the verge of anything so unprofessional in his entire career. Even if she'd made it more than clear she welcomed his attention, he knew better than to mix business with what he knew would be an unimaginable pleasure.

Lauren Hollister was a willowy thing, with pale baby blue eyes that promised all the tricks of the female trade. Her body was perfect, beautifully lush curves filling out a slender frame. Dark blond waves fell to the center of her back. And, yeah. He could see himself wrapping that silky mane around his wrist and holding on for the ride.

"Hey, Neville. You make us a million while I was gone?"

Anton looked up from his musings as his partner walked through the door. The grin that spread over his face felt like the wicked celebration it was. "Close enough. I sold the loft."

Doug stopped in his tracks, strands of blond hair falling into his face. He shook them back, tossed his satchel to the office sofa, slammed his hands to his hips. "The downtown loft. The fourth floor. The warehouse. Are you friggin' kidding me?"

Anton shrugged. "Maybe not."

"Ha!" Doug dropped down on the sofa. "You mean you *showed* it, not *sold* it. I'm not paying off any bet until that place goes to closing."

"They want it. You know the look."

"Hmm." Squaring an ankle on the opposite knee, Doug laced his hands behind his head and leaned back. "They had it outfitted before they even left, didn't they? Curtains, throw pillows, area rugs."

"Not these two." Anton couldn't get the picture of Lauren Hollister out of his mind. Her low-slung blue jeans. Her black metallic sheer lace top over a skinny black tank.

"Lava lamp bubble sculptures. Hanging panels of hammered brass."

"Gay?"

"Female. Two." Anton held up two fingers.

"Gay?" Doug repeated.

"Not these two," Anton repeated, getting to his feet just as his phone rang. He glanced at the display. The number seemed vaguely familiar. He punched the speakerphone button. "Neville."

"Anton Neville? This is Lauren Hollister. From yesterday? The balcony?"

Anton jerked the receiver from the cradle, ignoring his partner's arched brow and mouthed, "*The balcony?*" He flipped Doug the finger and turned his attention to the call. "Ms. Hollister. How nice to hear from you."

"I wasn't sure what time your office closed. I was hoping I might still be able to catch you. Is this a bad time?"

"No. Don't worry about it. I'm usually here this late." This time when Doug rolled his eyes and mouthed, "Bullshit," Anton turned his back on the other man and leaned against the desk.

"What can I do for you?"

"It's about the loft."

He'd figured that much. And the way she said it he figured it was bad news. "Have you and Ms. Webb reached a decision?"

"Are you kidding? We love it — *ouch!*" she cried, mumbling unintelligibly from behind what Anton would guess was a hand over the mouthpiece. "What I mean is, would you have time to let me in to take a few measurements?"

"Sure." He turned back around and flipped open his Day-Timer, running a finger down his schedule. "I'm free in the morning at ten, or tomorrow afternoon around, say, two?"

"I was thinking about tonight."

Anton straightened where he stood. "Tonight?"

Doug mouthed, "*Tonight?*" before tumbling over onto the sofa and muffling his howls with a pillow pressed to his face.

"Tonight's not a problem. What time?"

"Will nine work for you?"

"Perfect. See you then." The call disconnected and Anton returned the receiver to the cradle just as Doug managed to push himself from the sofa to his feet.

He crossed the office, planted both hands on the surface of Anton's desk and leaned forward. "Let me guess. Blonde. Blue eyes. Twenty-something. Single. Not gay."

"Definitely not gay," Anton said, looking at the plain black face of the watch on his wrist.

Doug hung his head. "Does she have a friend?"

"Yeah." Anton stuffed his Day-Timer into his satchel, dug in his pocket for the keys to his Jag. "But she's not coming."

"Oh, and I suppose you will be."

Anton grinned. "You know me all too well, my man."

"I really hated calling so late, but I am so glad you were available." Tape measure and notebook tucked into her backpack, Lauren stepped from the elevator into the loft. The room was dark, darker than she'd expected, the only light thrown by the moon through the balcony's glass doors.

Leaving the grate open, Anton flipped a switch next to the elevator's call button. A row of track lighting above the door threw six spotlights along the hardwood floor. Nice atmosphere, Lauren thought. Not quite as seductive as the moon but, hey. She'd take what she could get. The fact that she'd managed to get *him* here was a miracle in itself.

"Like I told you earlier. It's not a problem."

He sounded sincere enough. But Lauren wanted to be sure about that. And about...other things. "I didn't ruin your plans for the evening, did I?"

"Nope." He shook his head, the illumination catching the highlights in his hair. "No plans to ruin."

Lauren so wanted to run her fingers through those curls. She didn't think she'd ever known a guy with hair so tempting to the touch. Smiling, she reached into her backpack for her pencil and spiral pad. "I didn't want your girlfriend coming after me for making a mess of her night."

Anton walked toward her then, his eyes glittering, his mouth drawn into a seductive smile. He stopped when he'd drawn within a scant foot. Close enough that her every breath caught his subtle scent. Her heart hammered like a piston in her chest.

He took hold of the strap of her overalls, rubbed his thumb in a circle over the copper catch. "No, Lauren. I don't have a girlfriend. Is that what you were wanting to know?"

Chapter Three

He didn't have a girlfriend! Lauren Hollister thought she might actually jump for joy. "Yes. That's exactly what I wanted to know."

She backed a short step away and tried to pretend her skin wasn't tingling where his fingers had grazed her shoulder. "It's a girl thing. We look out for one another. Make sure not to step on toes. Or on boyfriend toes. That sort of thing."

One of Anton's blond eyebrows arched. His mouth fought back a grin. "I see."

If he did, he would be the first. Men never did get the girlfriend thing. All the rules, and such. Still, she had to be careful. He could be one of those guys who knew a woman was lying simply by taking her pulse. Which he'd no doubt done with his hand so close to her heart. She never had been very good at deception. She was, instead, very good at the truth.

And that meant she might run into trouble convincing him she wasn't here to take his measure along with the kitchen's, or to see if her instincts were right. That, yes, her attraction to him was as much about what she saw when she looked into his eyes as when she looked at his body.

Call her foolish, but she swore she'd caught a glimpse of awareness that reached deeper than a sexual level. And that possibility, that complex attraction to both mind and matter was what she wanted to explore.

She flipped open her notebook and made her way to the space perfectly suited for the bubble sculptures on which she and Macy had their hearts set. "I knew I wasn't going to be able to sleep tonight until I found out if the sculptures are going to fit beneath the ductwork. We went by the store earlier today so I know exactly how tall they are."

While Lauren continued her decorative chatter, Anton had followed her across the main room. She'd counted each of his footsteps — she took one and a half to each of his — and now she felt his body heat behind her.

She had to talk herself out of stepping back into his solid male warmth when she so wanted to know what he felt like. Oh, but her imagination was running wild, wanting to experience more of him than she would have time to experience tonight.

"Let's see." She dug the measuring tape from her backpack, extended the strip of stiff metal far enough to reach the shiny ventilation system directly overhead. Then she let go of the casing. Gravity slowly pulled it to the floor where it landed with a light *thunk*. She looked back at Anton and smiled. "And voilà! Exactly...this tall."

Anton reached over her shoulder, his large hand taking hold of the metal strip. He nodded toward the floor. "I'll do this part. You get down there and do yours."

Lauren released the measuring tape and turned beneath his outstretched arm. She had a devil of a time keeping a straight face. Anton wasn't having much better luck ignoring his own timely double entendre. "Just...go. Do. Before I get my other foot stuck in my mouth."

With a wink, she dropped to her knees at his feet. Once she noted the distance between floor and ceiling, she sat back on her heels and jotted dimensions into her notebook. "A perfect fit. You can let go now."

She made to stand. He made to reach for the tape casing. It was one of those badly timed movie moments where their faces ended up inches apart. She could so easily have kissed him. His lips were so beautifully full and she just knew that the stubble beneath his lower lip would tickle.

Imagining the feel of his mouth had kept her tossing and turning a good part of last night. But, as tempting as she found his mouth — and his everything else, she knew what anticipation added to the sensual equation.

She also was quite sure he would be worth the wait.

And so she gave him nothing more than a smile before she got back to her feet. He handed her the tape, closing his fingers around her smaller hand. "Did you get what you needed?"

"Well, that is certainly a leading question. But, to answer you honestly? No. I didn't. Do you mind?" Pulling out the tape while pulling her hand from his hold, she moved away, motioning for him to step back. "Right there. Stop. How far apart are we?" Looking at her like she was crazy before looking down at the tape in his hand, he answered, "Fifteen feet."

"Hmm." Lauren walked toward him, feeding the tape back into the case. "The base of each sculpture is three feet, so that's perfect. Now all we have to figure out is if we can afford to buy five."

"You've made up your mind then? About the loft?"

"We're getting there. Arguing over a few details still."

"And taking measurements just in case?"

"Yes. And no." Lauren took a deep breath. Here came the honesty part. "I was also hoping you'd let me buy you dinner."

She didn't know why she was nervous. Other than the obvious reason that she rarely invited a virtual stranger to eat. A stranger to whom she found herself so viscerally attracted at that. And so she held her breath.

Finally, after what seemed like eternal minutes spent staring into her eyes, his glittering even in the room's dim light, Anton answered. "I don't think I can do that. But I would love to buy dinner for you."

Exhaling at last, Lauren grinned. She knew not to look a gift horse in the mouth. Or to trample a male ego. "Great. I'd say I'd get my things —" she shrugged and held up her backpack "— but this is it."

"Vietnamese okay?"

"Perfect. I'm famished."

They headed for the elevator. Lauren stepped inside. Anton cut off the loft's lighting, pulled the grate closed and locked it up tight, then yanked down the overhead door, leaving them with only a single bare bulb by which to see.

The freight car was a box of moving shadows. Lauren watched every one play with Anton's face until nerves launched from her belly on butterfly wings. She wondered what he'd do if she took that one long step toward him and —

The elevator jolted, jerked. A bloodcurdling screech of metal on metal. The bare bulb swung from its wire mooring. Lauren grabbed onto the side railing to keep herself from tumbling to the floor. The car shuddered, groaned, stopped. She held her breath for a few more interminable seconds before giving a little laugh. "This is a joke, right?"

"If it is, it's on both of us." Anton spent several minutes messing with the elevator's control panel. Then he pulled out his cell phone and swore up and down at the weak signal. Lauren swore harder when she realized she'd left her phone in the car after calling [Macy](#) on the way to the loft.

He did manage to get through to his office, where he left his partner a voicemail.

"[Doug's](#) a fanatic about checking messages. Unless you want me to try 911?"

She did. She didn't. "What do you think?"

Anton glanced at his watch. "Give him an hour first?"

"Okay." It made sense. This wasn't a life-threatening situation. Though her heartbeat seemed to know it could be a life-changing one. "Then, I guess, we wait?"
"We wait."

Chapter Four

Anton Neville watched Lauren Hollister slide down the elevator wall until her butt hit the floor. She was wearing a pair of overalls. Micro-mini overalls, if there were such a thing. Which there had to be because he was looking at the evidence.

Damn but her legs were long.

"You know, you'll never sell this place if you don't get this thing fixed," she said.

He moved his gaze to her face. Her eyes were resigned to the wait. Resigned, but definitely not defeated. He liked seeing that spunk. "Does that mean you're backing out of the deal?"

Lauren scrunched up her nose, stuck out her tongue, and sighed. Then she sighed again and settled in for the duration, tucking her backpack up under the bend of her knees.

Damn but her legs were long.

With nowhere to pace, Anton figured he might as well take a load off, as well. He sank to the floor, stretched out his legs, and leaned back on the wall opposite the one against which Lauren had collapsed. Their feet met in the middle and she tapped his sole.

"You're going to ruin your pants."

He kept his foot pressed to the bottom of hers. "I know a good dry cleaner."

"You'd do better knowing a good tailor."

"I know one of those, too."

"At least you don't know a good girlfriend. I would be in so much trouble if you did."

"Why? This wasn't exactly a calculated move to get us alone." He knew it wasn't. She knew it wasn't. But she sure had a guilty look on her face.

"This is breaking every rule ever written. A girl does not strand herself with another girl's man." She punctuated that last statement by banging her head on the wall at her back.

And then Anton realized he didn't know for sure whether or not he was getting close to trespassing himself. "What about you? Am I going to need to be watching my back when we get out of here?"

She shook her head. "Macy's aim's not that good."

"Macy?" Uh-uh. No way he had called that one wrong!

"Never mind. No. I'm not seeing anyone right now." She dropped her head back in one last thump.

Then she smiled to herself, a private inside joke that had her shaking her head and tilting it to the side as she gave him a considering look. "And I've learned my lesson. Next time I *want* to see someone, I'll call. I'll be direct. I'll do my interior decorating on my own time."

Anton wasn't sure, but he thought she'd just said she wanted to see him. His pulse began to do its own thumping. His temperature started to rise. He pointed in the general direction of the loft. "So, all that business about measuring for sculptures..." She nodded. "I really was measuring for sculptures. But I also meant it when I said I was hoping you'd let me buy you dinner."

Anton had a sudden wish to smash Doug's voice mailbox. "No can do. My rule. No matter who does the asking, I always buy on the first date."

Lauren's pursed lips slowly parted as, in a tone both low and lightly suggestive, she asked, "Is this a date?"

"It could be." He nodded toward her backpack. "If you have anything to eat in that bag of yours that I can pay you for."

Her eyes grew both wide and bright and Anton felt a strange stirring in his gut. An unease that told him he was asking for the sort of trouble that had a good chance of turning his well-ordered life upside down.

"Hey, we're in luck. One for each of us. And my treat. None of that macho sexist crap," she added when he reached for his wallet. "We'll call this a first date warm-up if it'll make you happier."

From the front compartment, she produced two high-carb energy bars and tossed him one. Then she unzipped the main part of the pack and pulled out a bottle of water. "But the water we'll have to share."

The thought of sharing her things, of how many of his things he wouldn't mind if she shared, finally sent him across the elevator car to her side. He sat next to her, his hip at her hip.

She offered him the bottle. He pulled up on the sports cap and drank, keeping his gaze locked on hers as he handed it back, as she brought the same spout to her mouth, as she grinned before drinking, giving him a glimpse of the tip of her tongue. He forced himself not to groan when his entire body wanted to scream.

"What was it you said yesterday? A little wine? A little candlelight?" he asked.

He cast a glance up toward the bare bulb, looked back in time to see her running the drinking spout back and forth over her lower lip. He couldn't stop the sound that seemed to roll straight out of his groin. He reached for the bottle, pulled it from her hand and set it on the floor.

She looked from the water bottle back to his face. And then she gave him a soft smile.

"That, a lotta lovin', and trying not to get caught."

His mouth descended to hers. And she was waiting. She didn't feign surprise or pretend he'd caught her off guard. She was waiting, and she responded with more than her lips and her tongue, threading her fingers into his hair and holding him close. He swore she smiled. Her lips slanted over his, even while lifting upward. Nothing had ever aroused him so quickly. Like the head of a match, he burst into flame.

And this was only a kiss. He moved his hand to the back of her neck, holding her close while he nipped at her lips, while he tasted her mouth, while he slipped his tongue up the length of hers and told her with the kiss what he wanted to do to her body. To penetrate her slowly, to slide his sex into hers the way he'd taken her mouth. He wanted to feel her skin with his skin. Her mouth was soft, and the hair trapped beneath his palm slid over her nape like pure silk. His imagination already had her undressed and naked beneath him.

This time when he groaned, he knew she felt the echo in her mouth. And when she whimpered in return, the sound turned him inside out. He pulled his mouth free, his hand holding the back of her head as he stared into her eyes. So bright and so blue and so beautifully beguiled. She'd caught her lower lip between her teeth, then bathed it with her tongue, whether savoring his taste or healing the skin roughened by his whiskers, he didn't know.

He didn't care.

He wanted her. He wanted her more than he'd ever wanted any other woman.

And he wanted her now.

Chapter Five

Lauren Hollister hadn't known a man could kiss the way Anton Neville kissed. His hair was the texture of the softest silk, gossamer curls in her hands. His hand at her nape was insistent, his mouth on hers demanding. And she'd thought she'd known exactly what to expect from a man.

But she didn't. She'd never been looked at the way he was looking at her now. His eyes already had her undressed and she reveled in the exposure. She returned the look because she wanted to see his body, as well. To touch him. To explore and discover what spots made him shudder, which ones made him groan. Whether he liked gentle strokes of fingers or sharp nips of teeth.

She pulled his head down to hers to get her fill of his taste. He allowed her one kiss and then he shook his head, telling her with his eyes that kissing wasn't enough. He wanted more. He wanted it all. When his hand moved from her neck to the shoulder strap of her overalls, she let her head fall back against the wall, let her hands fall to her lap. Her chest lifted and fell as she struggled to breathe.

She watched his fingers work free first one loop then the second, separating the hardware from the tack button and lowering the bib so that her overalls bunched at her hips. She wore a simple skinny white T-shirt beneath and had to stop herself from pulling it off over her head. As much as she wanted to have his hands on her body, she wanted to enjoy the anticipation. And she knew without a doubt that Anton wanted to unwrap her himself.

He did, lifting her shirt hem above her bare breasts. Lauren shivered, her nipples pebbling. Anton covered her with his hands, then with his mouth, leaning down to curl his tongue around first one taut peak then the other. His hair slid over her skin like skeins of silk; his hands skated over her rib cage, the heels of his palms pressing the sides of her breasts.

She wasn't sure anything had ever so thoroughly roused her skin's sensitivity, or that any man's touch had ever felt so right, so loving. None of this made any sense. She hardly knew him, yet felt as if she'd known him forever. And when his hands made their way to her thighs, she let him have his way. He looked up from beneath long blond lashes, his eyes flashing, the corners of his mouth lifted in a suggestive grin. "Spread your legs," he said and she did, opening to his determined search for her body's secrets. He pressed fingertips into her bare inner thighs, opening her further until he could easily slip a hand beneath the leg of her overalls. Lauren pulled in a sharp breath. His hand was hot where he skimmed her most intimate skin.

"Are you okay?" he asked and all she could say was, "Oh, yeah."

At that, he chuckled, a sexy half laugh, half moan that told of his struggle for self-control. This time it was her turn to ask of him, "Are you okay?"

"Baby, you have no idea." And then he brushed the backs of his knuckles over the crotch of her tiny bikini panties, leaning forward to murmur against her lips, "I'll stop. Just say the word."

"Don't stop." Her body was coming apart and he'd barely done more than tease her with the promise of his touch. She had never, never, never felt so close to falling from contact that was only a whisper. But she was, and this was what she wanted. She told him so with her lashes that slowly lowered, with her hungry tongue she caught with her teeth after begging, "Please. Don't stop."

But he did, pulling his hand free as he scooted to sit cross-legged in front of her and lift her legs over his. She stared into his eyes, heavy-lidded and aroused. He was as affected as she was, as taken by storm. Like her, he hadn't expected the intensity of this tryst.

And, though she'd immediately known he was special, she hadn't considered anything as crazy as love at first sight. She couldn't. For so many reasons, she couldn't. She pushed the thoughts aside and focused on this moment, this man. Concentrating on his hands sliding up her inner thighs, on his thumbs flirting with the hem of her shorts before slipping beneath to flirt with both sides of her lace-edged panties.

He used one hand to pull the wisp of fabric away from her body, giving his other hand room to slip beneath, to touch her intimately, his fingers teasing through her folds, over her tight bud of nerves, before he circled the mouth of her sex and eased a finger inside.

Lauren gasped but refused to look away from his face. Even as he began to stroke, to simulate the motion she wanted from his body, even as he moved his thumb to tease at the hard knot of sensation aching for release, she maintained the contact with his eyes. Only when he lowered his head and returned his attention to her breasts did she sag against the wall and allow passion to take over. No man had ever been so focused on her pleasure.

His tongue lapped and his thumb played and his fingers worked in and out of her sex until she couldn't stand it anymore. She cried out, she shuddered, she ground her body down into his loving hand. He continued the rhythm, seeing to her finish and easing her slowly back down. Only then did he leave her body, adjusting her panties and tugging her shirt back into place.

She waited for a moment, smiling, expecting him to reach for his belt and the fastenings of his pants so she could return the favor. But he only ran a caressing hand down her face to her neck and leaned forward for a too brief kiss. Lauren frowned. This wasn't right.

"What about you?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I'm fine. I wanted to do this for you."

No. This was all wrong. She wasn't going to let him think that she didn't want to give back. And so she got to her feet, pushed her overalls down over her hips and kicked them off. Anton's eyes flared as, sitting beneath her, he took in her legs, her bare belly, the tiny slip of sheer mesh that served as her panties.

"Thank you. Now, please. Let me." She held out her hand and, when he took it, she urged him to his feet and went to work loosening his tie and the buttons of his shirt. He stopped her hands, holding them to his chest in his much larger fists. He captured her attention with a strange look of resignation before saying, "You don't owe me, or need to pay me back. I don't expect that from any woman."

For several long seconds, all Lauren could do was blink before she managed to wrench her hands free from his and shove them at her hips. "What? Was this some kind of test? You wanted to see how far I'd actually go? If I was all talk and no action? Is that it?"

He didn't answer. He only continued to study her face until she wanted to pull out her hair in frustration and scream. Why did men have to have such double standards? Why couldn't they believe that good girls could love sex, too?

She asked her next question with all the calm she could muster. It wasn't much considering she was close to seething inside.

"Well, tell me then. Did I pass?"

Chapter Six

Anton groaned. He had a gorgeous, responsive woman staring up at him as though he were some kind of devil, when all he'd been trying to do was let her off the hook. He'd known too many females who took the pleasure he gave them, then offered him the same as an afterthought, as a token payment, always out of obligation and never from the heart. He was getting older and more discriminating. He wanted a woman to want *him*, not to feel obliged to leave him a tip in exchange for services rendered. But he was afraid he'd just made a big mistake with Lauren Hollister. Rather than the glow of her previous expression replete with satisfaction, she now looked ready to bite his head off. He didn't get it. He didn't get this woman at all. But, then, he didn't really know her, yet, did he?

"No, Lauren. This wasn't a test." How was he supposed to explain this from his point of view without leaving her insulted? "It was unexpected and it was amazing. You're amazing. I loved seeing you come."

She was still breathing fire. "Oh, so you'd rather watch, is that it?"

He tried to hold back a smile. "I do like to watch. But I'd much rather do."

A faint blush crept up her neck. "You just don't want to do me. I'm too easy. You like more of a challenge. Where have I heard *that* before?"

He tossed his head back and roared. "You are not too easy, but you *are* making me crazy. I want to make love to you more than anything and I'm about to tie my hands behind my back to keep them to myself. If that's not a challenge, I don't know what is."

"Then, why —"

He backed her up, planted his hands flat against the elevator wall above her shoulders as he looked down into her upturned face. He had a number of logistical reasons, not the least of which was the lack of a single comfortable amenity, but he gave her the most obvious. "I don't have a condom."

She blinked, registering his response before her mouth broke into a self-satisfied grin. Reaching down for her backpack, she rummaged inside and produced a foil packet he wished he'd had 10 minutes ago.

"Why didn't you say so?" she asked just as his cell phone started to ring.

This time it was Lauren who growled before hanging her head. Anton knew the mood would not be easily recaptured. As much as he wanted to bury himself in her warmly receptive body, he reached for the phone instead. "Neville."

"Hey, buddy. Wanna go double or nothing?" his partner, Doug Storey, asked. "You are never going to dump that dump at this rate."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Anton answered, keeping an eye on Lauren as she slipped back into her overalls and swiped the elevator dirt off her backside. "Where the hell are you, anyway?"

"Downstairs with the elevator crew and your Ms. Hollister's roommate." Doug lowered his voice. "You two might want to get your story straight. Looks like you'll be outta there in a few."

"Thanks, bud." Anton ended the call, returned the phone to his pocket and took great pleasure in watching Lauren run a brush through her hair. Then she straightened her clothing, smoothing down her T-shirt, as well as the legs of her shorts. Once she'd finished, he held out his hand.

"You want my hairbrush?" she asked.

He shook his head. The elevator jerked to a start and he knew he didn't have much time. "I want the condom."

She swung the backpack strap up onto one shoulder. One eyebrow lifted as she gave him a haughty look. "What, you don't have a supply of your own at home?" "I do." He wanted to make it clear that her assumptions had been wrong. That he didn't think her too easy. Her expression told him she wasn't convinced. But the problem was more complicated than he could get into with only two floors left to descend.

The rest of what he wanted to say would have to wait. The elevator groaned and creaked and finally hit the ground floor. Anton continued to hold out his hand. Lauren continued to consider him with her worldly eyes. Finally, just as the overhead door began rolling up along its tracks, she slapped the condom into his palm.

He closed his fingers around hers and around the foil packet, only letting her go when she insisted. The condom he tucked into his pocket, holding it tight in his fist. "I'm going to hold on to this. And I'm going to call you and invite you to dinner. A real dinner. A real date. Next time, and there will be a next time, I don't want to be caught with my pants...up."

"Why do I ever believe a man when he tells me he's going to call?" Three days had passed since Lauren and Anton's elevator adventure and she was not a happy camper as she paced back and forth in her best friend's gIRL-gEAR office.

Macy Webb sat cross-legged behind her desk in a chair that seemed to swallow her diminutive form. She'd been working on copy for her gIRL gUIDE column when Lauren took over the office with her ranting and raving about men.

"C'mon, Lauren. It's been three days, not three weeks. And not the three months you're acting like. If he calls, he calls. If you can't wait, call him. It's not a crime, you know."

Lauren stopped pacing and collapsed into one of Macy's visitor's chairs. She rubbed her fingers to the headache building in her temples. "I can't call him. I can't explain. But I think he's sorta old-fashioned about wanting to be the one to do the calling and the paying. Stuff like that."

Macy leaned across her desk. "Yoo-hoo. Lauren? Since when do you do old-fashioned? Waiting for *the man* to call? Letting *the man* pay? Don't you think you're borrowing trouble here when there are about a bazillion men out there who wouldn't think twice about you calling or paying? Especially the paying part."

Lauren sighed, dropped her head back against the headrest and stared up at the ceiling. Macy was probably right. Lauren knew she wouldn't be able to deal with having a man call all the relationship shots.

Anton Neville seemed the type who got off on being in charge. He'd certainly been in charge of their elevator date, hadn't he? What kind of guy said no to sex, anyway? And why was she even thinking about seeing a guy who did, again?

Chapter Seven

"I'm sorry it took so long to get back to you. All hell's broken loose at the office. Doug and I have hit a streak of bad contractor luck lately. Not to mention clients who can't make up their minds."

Sitting across from Anton Neville in the restaurant known to serve Houston's best Vietnamese cuisine, Lauren Hollister listened to his architectural woes. The last part, about clients being unable to make up their minds, had her rolling her eyes.

"Is that what this is? A business dinner to talk about the loft? You're wanting to know what Macy and I have decided?" She didn't know why she'd gotten her hopes up otherwise. But she had. She liked him a lot and hated that they might actually be facing a problem as out-of-date as equality of the sexes.

Anton laid his chopsticks on his plate, propped his elbows on the edge of the table and laced his fingers, looking at her over his joined hands. His blue eyes were brighter than she remembered from the dim elevator and lit with an intensity that would've stolen her appetite if she'd thought it was intended for her. But she didn't.

"If this was a business dinner, this conversation would be business specific," he said.

"As in, what build-outs you've decided on. If you want us to arrange them, if you plan to hire your own contractors. Or if you've even decided whether you want the loft at all."

"So, that wasn't a dig? That comment about clients making up their minds? Because we have. We do want the loft." Why, oh why did he have to look even yummier than her spring rolls? All dressed up in the dark browns and greens that did such amazing things to his coloring?

"Good." He picked up his chopsticks and dug into his steamed rice. "Now, can we get back to the date? I promised you a good time and I intend to see that it happens."

Yeah, *his* idea of a good time, Lauren silently groused. He wanted to call, he wanted to pay. He wanted to coordinate the when, where, and how of any sexual encounter. And now he wanted to be in charge of what they talked about. Typical overbearing man. She had a feeling that she was going to miss out on experiencing his good qualities because his bad ones so got on her nerves.

True, some women did like sitting high atop a pedestal, safe from problems, decisions, and sin. He couldn't know that she hated looking down at the action. That she thought duking it out eye-to-eye was a much more honorable way to live.

Not to mention a helluva lot more fun. "Did you bring our condom?"

"As a matter of fact, I did." His lips drew taut, almost into a grimace as he dug his wallet from the back pocket of his chocolate-colored pants. "Did you want it back?"

Still holding her chopsticks, Lauren slumped back hard in her chair, her hand on the napkin draped over her crossed legs. "Oh. Now you've changed your mind."

Anton leaned into the forearm he'd braced on the table and reached for his beer. He took a drink from the longneck, keeping his gaze locked with Lauren's as he did.

"Can I ask you something Lauren? Do you want to be here with me? Or did you feel indebted to go out with me because of what went on in the elevator?"

Indebted was the last thing she felt. But she could understand where he was coming from, considering the way she was acting. Time to stop dancing around the ring and take it on the chin. Returning her chopsticks to the table, she smoothed down her simple salmon-colored skirt.

She tried to smile but, since the feeling failed to reach her heart, was afraid she wasn't very convincing. "I'm sorry. I just don't think this is going to work."

Anton blew out a huff, as if he'd been anticipating her decision. "You're calling this off before we've even gotten to know each other?"

She was calling it off before she was in over her head and ended up being hurt. "I think I make you uncomfortable. And that makes me uncomfortable."

He frowned. "Why would you make me uncomfortable?"

"Because I am who I am. I say what I think. I go after what I want. I play by my rules and I'm afraid that might cause me to inadvertently step on your more traditional toes." There. She didn't think she could be more honest without telling him he needed to loosen up.

"My toes are traditional?" he asked, a small quirk to the corner of his mouth. This time her response was genuine. She felt her own smile work the muscles of her face. His smile she felt other places and she held the feeling close. She wanted to feel so much more, but they seemed to be coming from two disparate places. "Since I haven't seen them yet, I can't say for sure. But I'm leaning in that direction."

"What do you want me to do with this?" He held the condom he'd pulled from his wallet between two fingers.

Lauren felt a flush heat her cheeks. She might be the more free-spirited of the two, but even she didn't want an entire restaurant wondering if they were in for a show. She took the foil packet from his hand and tucked it down in the low-draped cowl bodice of her sleeveless white blouse. "I'll hang on to it. Just in case."

One blond eyebrow went up. "Just in case you change your mind?"

She shook her head. "In case you come to your senses and realize that you don't have to be the one on top to have a good time."

Lauren and Macy finalized the deal on the loft not long after. Doug Storey represented the firm of Neville and Storey, Architects at the closing. He explained that neither he nor Anton usually handled the financial end of any property they sold. But the loft space had been an anomaly since they'd acquired it and they'd sworn to see its sale through to the end.

Lauren couldn't have cared less who showed up. She and Macy had found the perfect place to live and nothing else mattered. And Lauren told her best friend that very thing.

"Oh, that's a bunch of crap, Lauren," Macy said, her head next to Lauren's as they lay side by side on the hardwood floor of the loft's main room. Feet pointing opposite directions, they stared up at the exposed piping Lauren had decided to paint red, purple and green. "You wanted Anton there and you know it. You may not have said so, but you wore a business suit to the closing, for chrissakes."

"It was an important occasion and I dressed accordingly."

"You dressed like you thought Mr. Uptight would want you to dress."

"That's not true. He is not uptight. He's just...traditional."

Macy snorted. "Traditional, my ass. He's a stick in the mud. Face it."

Anton Neville was anything but a stick in the mud. He was a veritable god. Seeing to her pleasure? Without expecting anything in return? Had she ever known a man so unselfish? So considerate? So incredibly kind and thoughtful? And did she mention *hot*?

Lauren groaned. She'd been so worried about her precious equality that she'd told him it wasn't going to work before they'd gotten to know each other.

Now she was afraid she'd thrown away the best thing to ever happen in her life.

Chapter Eight

"So, you're going to go? After all that bitching about your date with the man, after the way he dumped on you at the closing, you're still going to go?"

Macy Webb stood in Lauren Hollister's bedroom doorway, watching as Lauren settled on a periwinkle suede fringed skirt and a silver silk corset that left the biggest part of her assets bare. She left her legs bare, as well, and slipped her feet into a pair of easily slipped-out-of periwinkle blue mules.

"And that's what you're going to wear?" Both of Macy's eyebrows went up. "What happened to conventional and old-fashioned?"

They'd closed on the loft yesterday. And they needed to get busy packing. But Anton Neville had called and asked Lauren to meet him at the loft. Alone. Tonight. At nine. Lauren turned side to side and examined her reflection in the full-length mirror. With this outfit and her hair in a wispy knot on top of her head, she looked hot, if she did say so herself.

"Yes, this is what I'm going to wear. Anton Neville can take conventional and old-fashioned and shove it. He wants to see me? He's going to see me."

"A whole lot of you, in that outfit," Macy added.

"What's wrong with that? I'm a fun, fearless female. Screw him if he doesn't like it."

Lauren only hoped she could keep up the charade. Her insides were melting like butter and she was afraid if he came too close she'd pour herself all over him.

Equality be damned. He was sexy as hell, both his mind and his body. The combination was an incredible turn-on. More than that, however, the combination had captured her heart. She only hoped she hadn't messed things up forever the day she'd walked away.

Macy gave a quick nod. "Looking like that? I'd say screwing is a definite possibility."

Anton stood on the loft's balcony, leaning against the railing as he watched the taillights of the traffic four stories below. He was waiting for Lauren and he wasn't sure he wouldn't still be waiting come morning. She'd vaguely agreed to meet him, as long as nothing else came up, or so she'd said.

He still had a key and he'd let himself in. He didn't think Lauren would mind, *if* she showed up and *if* she hadn't already written him off. He wanted to give this a go. If he had to rein in his insistence on having things his way, he'd give it his best shot.

Lauren Hollister was too special not to work out a compromise.

He heard the newly installed elevator motor engage and his heart flipped in his chest.

He glanced quickly around the balcony, where he'd set up a chaise longue with a coverlet and pillows. On the table beside, candles still burned. The wine was chilled.

He wondered if Lauren had brought the condom. He had others, of course, but there was something about that particular one....

"Anton?" she called.

Even the way she said his name was enough to make him weak in the knees. "Out here. On the balcony."

He'd left the sliding glass doors open and now he leaned his backside against the railing and turned to face the darkened loft. He heard her footsteps as she made her way across the floor. He couldn't see her, but he knew she could see him. He wasn't sure he'd ever had so much trouble drawing a breath.

His heart thumped furiously in his chest. And when she finally reached the doorway, a vision of glittering silvers and blues, he knew he was in more trouble than he'd ever imagined possible.

"Hi," she said and stepped outside into his world.

She glanced around and, even with nothing more than the light from the moon, he knew she could see the romantic stage he'd set. She grinned and Anton held his breath, hoping she wasn't about to laugh at his plans for seduction.

She did laugh, but it was the purest sound of joy, a filling of her soul with the moment, and happiness spilling like bubbling champagne and... God, but he needed to be committed, writing poetry in his mind instead of talking to the flesh-and-blood woman holding his heart in her hand.

"I can't believe you. I can't believe this." She pressed her fingers to her lips as she circled the chaise longue, plumping the pillows and running her palm over the coverlet.

He remained standing with his arms crossed and his ankles crossed because he still wasn't sure if her disbelief was a good thing or bad. But then she made her way back to where he stood.

She took him by the hand, guided him to the chaise and, with a palm planted in the center of his chest, forced him to sit. "You did good. The candles and the wine. There's even traffic down below. And there's always the possibility of getting caught. We're only missing one thing."

"The condom," he stated, his palms growing damp.

Nodding, she planted her hands at her waist. "Find it and you get that whole lotta lovin'."

Hands shaking, he started with the tiny silver hooks holding the corset together. The front separated and fell to the ground, revealing nothing but bare skin from her tiny waist to her beautifully long neck.

Pressing his lips between her breasts and breathing deep of her softly scented skin, he skimmed his hands around her hips, finding the skirt's rear zipper and easing it down. One smooth tug and it fell to her feet, leaving her standing in a wisp of sheer silver mesh.

The condom was caught between the elastic and her skin.

He stripped her free of both, leaving her standing bare before him. He took a deep breath, struggling for control, even as Lauren urged him to his feet.

"My turn." She tugged his shirt from his pants, releasing the buttons from bottom to top as he got busy with his cuffs. By the time he was out of his shirt and his shoes, he was so hard he thought he might burst. And then Lauren went to work on his belt and his pants.

"Careful," he whispered, as she eased his zipper over his erection. At the bold touch of her fingertips, he released a gut-deep groan, groaning again as she shoved his pants and his briefs to his ankles. He kicked them aside and she dropped to sit on the lounge, patting the seat for the condom and smiling when she found her prize. Taking his penis into her mouth, playing the ridge of his head with her tongue, she used nimble fingers to rip into the foil packet. Anton gritted his teeth and threaded his fingers into her hair. When she sheathed him, he was more than ready.

He lowered them both down to the cushion, covering her with his body. She opened her legs, taking his weight and accepting him deep inside. He shuddered. She shuddered. Her warmth enveloped him; her wetness welcomed him and he knew he'd found a place to call home.

"I want to ask you something," he said, knowing they had so much to talk about, so much to settle. Knowing, too, that time would come but, for now, this was what mattered.

"Anything."

"Do you believe in love at first sight?"

She lifted her hand and cupped his face. "Yes. I do. And, yes. I did."

Her words slowly brought their sensuous dance to a stop. He turned his lips toward her palm for a kiss, his eyes maintaining contact with hers that shimmered by the light of the moon and the softly glowing candles. Reaching for the coverlet, he pulled it up until they lay enveloped in a cocoon of warmth and romance.

He didn't think making love had ever felt so right. Had ever resonated with so much emotion. Her heart snared his, as did her eyes. And her body held him tightly in her intimate embrace.

He began to move again, trying to take his time. But holding back quickly became impossible. His body ached with the need for release. Lauren's eyes gave him permission to come, promising she'd stay with him every second of the ride.

He picked up the pace, harder, faster, meeting each upward thrust of her hips with a powerful downward stroke. Seconds later, she cried out, a soft gasp, a sweetly unexpected catch of breath as she shuddered beneath him.

Her completion sent him over the edge. His body clenched and he groaned, his climax exploding through him in one final driving burst. He buried his face in her hair, holding his weight on his elbows braced above her head, feeling for the first time in his life like he'd never recover. And loving the feeling of being in love.

Finally, he raised his head and looked down into her smiling eyes. "So, about that love at first sight thing? Are you sure?"

Lauren gave a quick little nod. "I wouldn't be down here naked beneath your godlike body otherwise." When he raised an eyebrow, she added a small shrug and said, "Hey, it sounded good anyway."

"Uh-huh. I thought so." He brushed hair back from her forehead, loving her sense of humor yet knowing this one thing, at least for him, couldn't wait. "I can be as cynical as anyone, Lauren, and I've always believed in love. I just never expected to be hit —"

"Shh." She placed her fingers to his lips. "I promise. Next time I won't hit you."

"That's what I wanted to know. About next time. That there will be one." He knew she had to feel his heart racing, his chest pressed to hers as it was.

"Maybe one or two." And then she smiled. A smile that touched him where a woman had never touched him before. Where he knew no other woman would touch him again.

"One or two? Is that all?"

"Or however many times we can squeeze into the next 40 years," she added, pulling his head down for the sweetest imaginable kiss.

The End