



Loose Id

Spurs & Mistletoe

Santa In Spurs



Maggie Casper

Praise for the writing of Maggie Casper

Spurs & Mistletoe: Santa in Spurs

Maggie Casper's *Santa in Spurs* recalls an old-fashioned western romance while delivering a hot, sexy story. I really enjoyed reading about a woman who was totally in charge of her life, but allowed the man of her dreams to control her in the bedroom. This is a great BDSM that will tie you in knots.

-- Liz Andrews, author of *Redemption: Lily's Surrender* with Lena Matthews (Loose Id)

Santa in Spurs sizzles with sexual and emotional tension. Maggie Casper's deliciously dominant hero will have you squirming in your seat as he weaves his spell around the spunky cowgirl heroine.

-- Silvia Violet, author of *Cup of Revelation* (Loose Id)

Start with one cowgirl who likes her kink, toss in a cowboy who enjoys role-play, add the holiday season, a few bulls, a dance, and a Santa suit. Then toss gently with free-spirited love-making, tie with rope and silk scarves, and voila... you have one of the best gifts you'll receive this year from the magnificent Maggie Casper.

-- Lyn Cash, author of *Kinky Kruising: Mistress Mine* (Loose Id)

One word: H-O-T. Maggie Casper does it again with *Santa in Spurs*. Nathan is as sexy as he is dominant. Lauren is a woman who knows what she wants and isn't afraid to grab it with both hands. Sizzling sex and a tight emotional bond round out this rodeo tale sure to keep you warm on a cold winter night.

-- Beth Williamson, author of *Spurs & Mistletoe: The Harder They Fall* (Loose Id)

SPURS & MISTLETOE: SANTA IN SPURS

Maggie Casper

LooseId
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This book is rated:



For substantial explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (BDSM).

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Spurs & Mistletoe: Santa in Spurs

Maggie Casper

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Editor: Ansley Velarde
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Dedication

To Lena Matthews and Beth Williamson. Thank you for making this project an enjoyable one. I had a blast working with the two of you. Thanks for the fun, ladies!

Chapter One

The high grasses bordering the road waved as Lauren sped by. “I need to get laid.” She pulled the phone away from her ear when Alexa’s hoot of laughter threatened to burst her eardrum.

“You mean to tell me you didn’t catch yourself a wild cowboy to ride at the last rodeo?”

It was Lauren’s turn to laugh. “Well, that was Plan A but there’s just something about getting mowed down by a fifteen hundred pound bull that changes your plans real quick-like. Plan B consisted of a night in the hospital with not a single nude cowboy in sight.”

“Good grief, Lauren, are you okay?”

Lauren smiled at the genuine concern in Alexa’s voice. They’d been best friends since grade school.

“Except for being sore as hell, I’m fine.”

“Glad to hear it. But I guess that means you won’t be getting any down and dirty sex anytime soon?”

It was a sentiment Lauren’s body vigorously protested. The bone-deep ache, accompanied by the numerous cuts, scrapes and bruises occupying her body, were a vivid reminder of why she’d decided it was time to return home. For good.

Lauren rubbed a particularly nasty spot on her right thigh. Scowling, she said, “A strong willed, well-hung cowboy who likes a bit of rope play is exactly what I need. I’m giving up rodeoing; I won’t give up my kink too.”

“Evidently you’ve gone stark raving mad, girlfriend. What you need is a keeper and some rest.” Alexa’s voice had taken on a firm tone. It was the strict, no nonsense schoolmarmish voice she reserved for her most stubborn students.

Lauren was just about to give some type of sarcastic retort when Alexa squealed in her ear again.

“Did I hear you right? You’re giving up fighting bulls for a living? No freaking way! I never thought I’d see the day.”

Shaking her head at Alexa’s excitement, Lauren answered, “Now, don’t go getting your panties in a bunch. I’m done traveling. I’ll still participate in anything close to home, but other than that, I plan to help Dad on the ranch. He isn’t getting any younger, ya know.”

Lauren’s smile widened when a fit of giggles met her ear. “He could still take both of us on with one hand tied behind his back, so don’t give me that nonsense.”

“You’re right. So, why are you still home? You need to get your ass over to the ranch. You know I’m going to need barbeque backup.”

“Can’t make it out tonight, sweetie, but I’ll stop by in the morning.”

After agreeing to breakfast and coffee, Lauren hung up the phone and concentrated on the road ahead of her. She was so anxious to get home, she could taste it. Lauren’s body ached all the way to the bone, adding to the overall need to be back home, to feel the softness of her own bed beneath her.

Seeing the smile on her father’s face when she announced she was home for good and would only be partaking in local rodeos was also a huge bonus. Damn, how she loved her dad. Bill O’Shea was a bear of a man who’d never once stood in the way of Lauren’s desire to bullfight. Where most fathers would have ranted, raved, and threatened, Bill only taught. He

taught her what she needed to know to stay safe, not only in the ring but out. He was a hell of a man.

Lauren knew without being told that everyone from miles around would be at the ranch. A welcome home party was just the excuse her rascally father would need to barbeque. Lauren chuckled at the thought then pressed her foot further onto the gas pedal.

Slowing down only for one last turn off the highway and onto the dirt road leading to O'Shea Haven, Lauren's excitement increased. The cloud of dust trailing her would signal her arrival at the ranch. For a brief moment, though, Lauren couldn't help but feel melancholy. It was always there, especially when arriving home after being away for months. The loss of her mother was a constant ache, but was nothing like the she'd endured as a child of ten.

Brushing away sad thoughts, Lauren concentrated on the cow-dotted land before her. O'Shea land, and now more than anything, Lauren wanted to be part of it. She needed to be there for her father in more ways than lending a helping hand during branding season, or when the rodeo traveled through town.

Lauren wanted to be there daily, to take on her fair share of the hard work and responsibility. And now, after being gone for the better part of eleven years, she was going to do just that.

The sight to greet her as she topped the rise just before entering the ranch yard warmed her heart. Kids scurried to and from a round pen where a tiny body was perched atop a pony being led by a man so large it could only be her father. The grass-covered front yard, as well as the wraparound porch, was covered with mingling people.

Lauren had no desire to concentrate on the rest of the people, not when it was the man standing dead center of the round pen who had caught her eye.

Pulling her rattletrap truck to a halt, Lauren threw it in park, killed the engine, then jumped from the cab as fast as her battered body could move. The aches and pains that had

kept her company during her overnight hospital stay and during the long ride home seemed to melt away as the distance between she and her father narrowed.

“Lauren’s home!” Her father’s booming voice thundered across the yard as he gathered the small child from the pony’s back. He handed the child and pony off to another adult before making his way toward her.

“Hey, Daddy.” Lauren knew there were tears in her voice. Homecoming was one of the few times in life she allowed her tough-as-nails persona to slip.

“Whoo weee, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes,” he said, lifting her as he turned in a circle.

Lauren’s excited smile quickly changed to a grimace as pain stole the air from her lungs.

Her father must have noticed the rigidity blanketing her body because he stopped and slowly lowered her feet to the ground. Worried green eyes identical to her own stared back at her as he levered her body away from his until she was at an arm’s reach.

“How bad?”

No longer overwhelmed by discomfort, Lauren gave her father a wide smile before hugging him close. “Not bad at all and yet bad enough that I’ll be sticking close to home from now on.”

His elation was evident. “Hot damn, darlin’. We’ve got ourselves an honest to goodness homecoming and it ain’t soon enough, if you ask me. Falls just in line with some plans I’ve been making of my own.”

Lauren wasn’t sure what he meant by his comment, but whatever it was, she wouldn’t find out until he was ready to share the secret. Patience was definitely a virtue her father had mastered. Too bad she couldn’t say the same about herself.

“Come say hi to everyone, Laurie, and then you can go on up for a hot bath and some rest.”

Lauren nodded her head. Swallowing the burn of tears at her father's use of her nickname, Lauren strode arm in arm with her father to the busy throng of people milling about.

The hair on the back of her neck stood at attention. Every nerve ending in her body suddenly seemed ultra aware, forcing upon her sensations so strong she couldn't help but turn around to see who or what was behind her.

Wicked brown eyes stared back from across the grassy expanse of the ranch yard. The man was sex personified and seemed to know it. His mouth curved sensually at the corners when Lauren's gaze raked him from head to toe.

With a quirk of his brow he seemed to be asking if she liked what she saw. If the answer to the silent question had anything to do with damp panties and an aching core, then the answer would be a resounding yes.

It took everything Lauren had left in her to tear her gaze from his. Being the strong woman she was, Lauren knew that in her current physical and emotional state, she'd be no match for the man.

The best thing to do, Lauren thought as she made her way through the crowd on her father's arm, would be to make a quick exit and hope with everything in her that she'd meet the man at a later date, one where she felt more together.

It didn't dawn on Lauren's sensually befuddled mind to protest as her father led her across the yard to where the sexy stranger stood. He wielded a spatula in one hand and a plate of hamburger patties in the other. As they drew closer, he turned and placed the plate on the table beside him then wiped his hands on a towel as if preparing to touch her with his long, blunt-tipped fingers.

The delicious thought of feeling his hands on her heated flesh made Lauren shiver with awareness. The idea of his fingers buried deep within her caused a sudden release of moisture from her pussy. Her already damp panties now clung to her.

Lauren wouldn't even imagine being bound to his bed -- or better yet, bound at his feet, ready for whatever he had to offer. To do so would surely leave her struggling for control. Aching and in need.

When they reached the stranger her father stopped.

"Laurie, I'd like you to meet Nathan Mills. Nathan, this is my baby girl, Lauren."

Lauren couldn't seem to pull her gaze from the deep dark brown of his eyes. He was beautiful, handsome in a polished way that had never before beckoned to her.

"Pleased to meet you." His voice was smooth and dark. She wanted to drink his rumbling words. To taste his lips as her tongue delved into the warm recess of his mouth.

Mesmerized, she simply placed her hand in his outstretched palm. "The pleasure is all mine." The words came easy.

When her father turned to talk to someone behind him, Lauren wasn't sure what to do. Nathan Mills was an overwhelming presence. Giving a slight tug, she attempted to free her hand from his grasp.

He didn't release her. Instead, he leaned in close. "It will be."

"What?"

"Your pleasure." Two words. Two simple words, was all it took to send a shiver of delight down the length of her spine. Lauren was positive he meant exactly what he said. It was written across his face as clear as day.

* * * * *

Wide green cat eyes stared back at him. Her pupils were dilated. The soft flesh at her wrist gave away the rapid beat of her pulse. She was a sensual creature and Nathan had no doubt he would find out firsthand just how sensual she was.

Would she enjoy his love for bondage?

Would his need to see the globes of her ass turn a beautiful shade of rose scare her?

There was something about her wide-legged stance, about the slight tilt of her chin that warned of stubbornness. The way she was poured so compactly into her petite frame intrigued him. Soon he would have her. The need to taste her was high on his list. Nathan saw the same need mirrored across her features and decided to tease her a bit before he gave her what her body craved.

Once he had a taste of her there would be no turning back. Something about the feel of her against the palm of his hand warned him she might very well be the woman he'd been waiting his whole life for. The thought of her pouty lips whispering words of love just before she took his length into her mouth brought Nathan to full arousal. She would look so beautiful collared.

His thoughts were interrupted when Bill O'Shea turned back toward them. He candidly eyed them both, taking notice of Lauren's hand still clasped tightly within his own. Nathan didn't want to let her go but it was too early yet to publicly stake his claim.

The wily old reprobate winked at him then turned his full gaze back on Lauren before announcing, "Good. Good to see the two of you getting along, since you'll be spending so much time together."

His words seemed to snap Lauren out of her trance. Her gaze flickered from her father and then to him before she settled back on her father. "Excuse me?"

"Nathan here owns High Impact PR. He's the head honcho for rodeo promotions now, and since the Rancho Viejo Rodeo Days are right around the corner, he came out to have a look around. The rest of the board members and I figured you'd be the perfect person to show him the ropes."

Nathan watched as her eyes narrowed. She seemed to be weighing his words as if she could tell he was up to something.

"Come on, darlin'. You know you've got more know-how than the rest of the others put together."

Her shoulders seemed to slump with defeat, exhaustion, or quite possibly both. “Okay, Daddy, I’ll do what I can.”

“That’s my girl.”

Big Bill gathered his daughter close, a huge arm settled gently around her. He stuck his hand out, leaving Nathan no choice but to clasp it in a solid farewell shake when what he really wanted to do was carry the man’s daughter back to his hotel room, where he could disrobe her slowly before massaging every rigid inch of her body, starting with the frown lines marring her brow.

“Give me a call in the morning when you’re back on your feet and we’ll get started.” Nathan watched for her reaction.

Never before had he been so quickly taken by a woman. His normal playtime was a few heated games in the dungeon of his favorite fetish club, not caring who might show up to watch -- and even on occasion, join in. He wasn’t the type to get himself snared into a relationship, not with his sexual appetites. Being with a “vanilla” woman did nothing for him, and most were too scared to try anything new. Nathan had learned at a young age to stick with his own type when it came to his sexual preferences; those who knew the rules and knew how to play the game.

Never before had he been so instantly taken with a woman. Especially when he had no idea if she would agree to the delicious things he had planned for her body. There was something about Lauren that could change everything.

Not only was his attraction to her intense, but the thought of sharing her made him angry as hell. Nathan would see to it from this day on that Lauren O’Shea wasn’t touched or so much as approached by another man if he had anything more than business in mind.

“And if she doesn’t like it that’s just too damned bad,” Nathan vowed.

As soon as the last burger was cooked, Nathan made his excuses and said his goodbyes. He couldn't get Lauren's curvy body out of his mind as he made his way across the dusty driveway toward his car.

The sun was just setting when he pulled up to the motel. It wasn't the Hilton but it would do. Nathan made his way to the room he would call home for the next two weeks. There was no getting Lauren out of his mind. Her luminescent green eyes were hard to forget, as was the petite frame of her curvy body.

She was a woman from the gentle curve of her t-shirt-covered breasts right down to the tips of her tiny cowboy boots. Remembering what she had worn made Nathan long to see her in a dress.

Making his way across the room, Nathan undressed as he continued on with wicked thoughts of Lauren and her hot little body. Once completely nude, he headed toward the shower. The warm spray did little to relax his taut muscles. Instead, as he soaped his highly aroused body, he pictured Lauren's pink lips fastened securely around the head of his cock.

Would she eagerly await his orders before proceeding, just as he expected of her?

Once she was used to his touch and he'd won her trust, Nathan would bind her arms behind her back at the elbow, leaving him in control. He could then bury a hand in her hair, coaxing her closer as he gently caressed her face with the fingers of his other hand.

The feel of her lips stretched around the head of his shaft would be a huge turn on to his already heightened senses. The thought of Lauren taking the length of his shaft deep into the dark recess of her mouth sent heat tearing down his spine and into the base of his shaft. Nathan's hand pumped his rigid length, just as he imagined Lauren's mouth would, until he came on a flood of sensation so great it almost buckled his knees.

Nathan stepped from the shower then dried off thoroughly before climbing between the cool sheets of the bed. Excitement coursed through his veins as he thought of what

possibilities the future held. With visions of a sexy, curvy Lauren catering to his every sexual whim, Nathan drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

Tossing and turning all night didn't make for a very bright and cheery morning, he thought, as he pulled out of the local restaurant with a steaming cup of coffee. He'd only just met the minx and already she was going to be the death of him.

His mind was anywhere but on business, and his damned cock wouldn't behave. If he so much as thought of Lauren and her damnable curves, his cock throbbed achingly to life.

Nathan knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that he would soon have her beneath him. And if they reacted as strongly toward each other at their next meeting as they had last night, it would happen sooner rather than later. Nathan would make sure of it.

Chapter Two

Morning sunlight filtered through Lauren's bedroom window, waking her long before she was ready to be up. Her wonderfully soft bed enticed her to stay snuggled deep within its comforting cocoon. But once awake, Lauren wasn't the type to stay in bed lazing around.

Besides, Alexa should be showing up any minute for coffee, and Lauren knew if she didn't get up and get dressed, her best friend would have no problem planting herself in the center of the bed, whether Lauren was nude or not.

With her body aching, she climbed out of bed and padded on silent feet to the bathroom. Once in the bathroom, Lauren peered at herself in the full-length mirror. The bruises dotting her body made her look as if she'd been hit by a truck just before it reversed and backed up over her again.

Well, it was no wonder. That last bit of trouncing she'd gotten might have killed a lesser woman. It was definitely a factor in her decision to return home and help her father on the ranch. God knew, at the age of twenty-nine, she was past the prime age for her chosen profession.

Lauren was asked often why she didn't barrel race or team pen. Why would a redheaded spitfire of a woman who stood no taller than shoulder height to most cowboys decide to bullfight? It was a question Lauren couldn't begin to answer.

Something about the adrenaline rush of pitting herself against some of the meanest bulls out there, as well as the knowledge that she might mean the difference between life and death to the rider -- *that* kept her going no matter how scary things got, no matter the bruises or broken bones she might suffer.

She couldn't know for sure, but in her mind, Lauren imagined a firefighter rushing toward the flames when every other person in their right mind was running from them might feel the same rush or excitement. It was a high no chemical could come close to.

The hot water of the shower helped work some of the knots out of her muscles, washing away her exhaustion as well. Lauren was excited to be home and couldn't wait to get started at O'Shea Haven. It was going to be great helping her dad out, but first, she needed to make it through the rodeo and whatever wicked plans Nathan had for her.

She could only imagine what they were. The man had a commanding presence, one Lauren was excited to go up against. He was frightening on a sensual level. The type of man who would devour a woman whole and still insist on more. The thought of being devoured by Nathan's sinfully sensuous mouth was enough to send heat spiraling through her body.

A waterproof vibrator sure would have come in handy, Lauren thought to herself as she fought to tamp down the arousal coursing through her system. With no time to be sidetracked, Lauren did her best to shake off thoughts of Nathan and what those thoughts did to her system.

Lauren got out of the shower, hastily dried herself off, then threw on her oldest, most comfortable jeans and a shirt. With no more than a quick brush of her hair she was ready for whatever the day had in store for her.

First on her list was to call Nathan and set up a meeting. "Mills here."

His voice was husky. Lauren thought it sounded as if he might still be asleep. “Didn’t wake you, I hope.”

“Lauren?” The way he said her name, so refined, so slow and sensuous, sent a wave of sensation coursing through her body. Oh, how she’d love to hear him say it just that way in her ear as he buried his cock deep within her moist depths.

“Uh, yeah.” She shook herself out of her lust-induced stupor. “I was calling to see what time you wanted to meet?”

“Ahh, a woman who knows how to follow orders.”

Say something, stupid! the voice in her head screamed. *Don’t let a virtual stranger talk to you like that.*

And why not? His voice held dark promises. Ones that Lauren’s body wanted to find out about firsthand. His chuckle brought her attention back to their conversation.

“I’ll be at the rodeo grounds in an hour. See you then.”

Lauren stared at the phone for a minute before hanging it up. She was just stepping out of her room when Alexa’s voice blared up the hallway. “You’ve got five minutes, Lauren, and then I’m coming to get you.”

Lauren chuckled as she made her way down the hall of the moderately sized ranch house. “Sheesh, Alexa, you could wake the dead with all your screeching.”

Her friend didn’t waste time before running to her. Lauren knew Alexa was a huggy-kissy type of person, and it normally didn’t bother her, but the thought of being squeezed to death just now did nothing for her.

Holding her hands up as if to ward Alexa off, Lauren said, “Just give me a kiss for now and we’ll even up later.”

Alexa clucked her tongue and shook her head before air-kissing both of Lauren’s cheeks. “Sit down and I’ll pour us some coffee.” Lauren loved Alexa even more at that moment. She didn’t lecture or fuss and she didn’t ask specifics. Lauren knew it was because

Alexa had an aversion to blood or anything even remotely gory but it was nice not to be hounded all the same.

Lauren didn't argue with Alexa. Instead, she made her way to the kitchen table where she gingerly lowered herself onto one of the straight-back chairs.

"So, how was the barbeque last night?"

The mere thought of her first meeting with Nathan sent a shiver up Lauren's spine. "Same as usual. Everyone gossiping and eating, except this time there was a new man there."

"A man? Spill it."

Alexa could be loads of fun when she wanted to, while at the same time she was as tenacious as a pit bull. Lauren didn't mind, though. Talking with Alexa always seemed to clear things up for her.

"Well, he's gorgeous and he owns the PR company in charge of promoting the rodeo or whatever it is they do. He's arrogant and polished and I wanted to screw him the minute I saw him."

Alexa lifted a perfectly arched brow. "And what stopped you?"

"Besides the fact I'm almost too sore to wipe my own ass? There's something about this guy that's different. Something tells me I won't have to ask him to play the type of games that turn me on. From the look in his eye, I'd say he knows all about rope play, and for him, it isn't a game at all."

Lauren wasn't sure she was ready for anything so serious. Until a couple of weeks ago she'd planned to rodeo forever, to travel the circuit and never settle down. She said as much to Alexa.

"Well I'll be damned. Big, bad Lauren O'Shea is afraid of a man. Who'd a thunk it?" Alexa was being a smart ass. Lauren knew it and yet, she couldn't help but take the bait.

"I'm not afraid of a damned thing."

“Then why not screw him and enjoy it while you can, the same as you always do? Should be even easier with a weak suit than the rough cowboys you usually wrestle with.”

Lauren laughed at Alexa’s choice of words. Wrestling was her code word for fucking.

She rolled her eyes in exasperation when Alexa just sat there tapping a manicured finger on the tabletop. “That’s just it. This guy might be a suit but there isn’t anything weak about him, and there is no doubt in my mind if we wrestled I’d be the one pinned.”

“Perfect.” Alexa tossed her long blonde hair over her shoulder and purred the word seductively.

“With any other man I would have thought so, too, but this one isn’t playing, Alexa.”

Even saying the words out loud didn’t seem to matter. Just thinking about him and their brief meeting left her tingling all over. Her damp panties were a reminder of just how much control the man could have over her. All he would have to do is crook his finger and give her that single-dimpled smile, and she’d come to him on her hands and knees if he asked.

“Not sure how you got all of that out of one meeting but even so, I say go for it. I mean, what do you have to lose?”

Put that way, Lauren couldn’t argue the point. “We’ll see if my first impression was off. I’m supposed to meet him in town in ...” Her words trailed off as she looked at her watch. “... ten minutes ago.”

“Well shoot, girl. What are you waiting for?” Alexa snatched their coffee mugs from the table and put them in the kitchen sink. They were heading for the front door when she finally asked, “Meeting for what?”

“Daddy and the rodeo board thought I was just the perfect person to show him the ropes.”

Alexa snickered at Lauren’s choice of words. “Call me with details this evening. I’ll be dying of curiosity until then.”

“Will do,” Lauren promised as she climbed into her pickup truck and followed Alexa down the dirt road and onto the highway.

The trip to the rodeo grounds seemed to go by faster than normal. But then again, Lauren had spent the whole time daydreaming about a three-piece suit and the body beneath it.

* * * * *

Nathan checked his watch for about the tenth time then cursed a blue streak. He wasn't used to being kept waiting, in business or in pleasure. The fact that Lauren O'Shea could have him tied in knots after only one meeting and then be late when he was anxious to get a glimpse of her had his mood turning black in no time.

By the time she was climbing from her truck, Nathan wanted to put her facedown over his knee and teach her a lesson with the flat of his hand. He watched her saunter toward the office, smiling and talking to everyone along the way.

“Is there a private office I can use to discuss things with Miss O'Shea now that she's here?” Nathan asked the gray haired secretary sitting behind her desk eyeing him warily.

“Why, yes, sir, there sure is.” She swiveled her chair and motioned down the hallway. “Last one on the right is free until this afternoon.”

Nathan nodded his understanding. He had a hard time not chuckling when the woman hastily excused herself from the office trailer.

“I have some errands to run. I'll be back in an hour,” she said, as Lauren made her way through the door. Lauren no sooner stepped over the threshold than Nathan gathered her hand in his, threading their fingers together so she had no way to escape.

Nathan wanted to chuckle when she squeaked out a greeting to the wide-eyed secretary before he closed the front door and locked it. Without a word, he dragged Lauren

down the hall and into the vacant office, where he shut the door with a snap before locking it.

“What in the hell was that all about?” Lauren asked the question between clenched teeth as she furiously tugged her hand from his.

“You’re late.” The words came out as a growl.

Nathan knew he was overstepping his bounds with Lauren, who was pretty much a stranger. If things were going to work out between them, which he had every intention of making sure they did, they were going to have to set some ground rules. He might be jumping the gun but Nathan knew Lauren was the one for him -- the only one, and he wasn’t willing to take the chance of losing her. He intended to start as he meant to go on. She deserved to know the real him right from the beginning. The good right along with the bad.

“Sorry, I was having coffee with a friend.”

Nathan closed in on Lauren, moving closer and closer, until they were toe to toe. He leaned down and inhaled, drawing her womanly scent deep into his lungs.

“Not good enough,” he said, then nipped her bottom lip.

Lauren yelped and tried to move out of his grasp. “Don’t.” His single worded command caused her to still.

“Do you know who I am, dammit? I’m not some ...”

Nathan cut her off with a kiss, his mouth slanting over hers. Her taste flooded his senses. The heat of her body seared him to the core. When she no longer struggled against him, Nathan broke the kiss.

“I know damned well who you are. You’re mine. The sooner you realize it, the easier it’ll be for the both of us.”

Nathan meant every word of what he said. Her eyes narrowed, and just knowing he would have a fight on his hands made him ache. His cock thickened and lengthened in anticipation.

“You’re an arrogant suit, you know that?”

A smile tugged at the corner of her kiss-swollen lips. The little vixen wasn’t afraid of him. The impact of her reaction hit him full force. Nathan knew he had to taste her. Now.

He circled her waist and lifted her to the table. She gasped when he plopped her down onto its surface. Nathan reached for the hem of her shirt then swiftly pulled it over her head.

The moment he saw the numerous bruises marring her pale skin, he almost lost it. He balled her cotton shirt in his fist. “Who did this to you?”

She was black and blue all over, and although the bruises seemed to be fading, they had to be extremely painful. Sex was the last thing on Nathan’s mind as he reached for her jeans.

“Lift,” he ordered when he had them unfastened. When she sat there staring at him, her head cocked to the side as if she wasn’t sure what to think, he looked her in the eye. “Now, Lauren.”

She reluctantly did as he bid but Nathan knew it cost her. His eyes narrowed on her legs. One particularly nasty spot on her thigh wasn’t only bruised but cut and scraped until the tender skin was a livid red. Rage boiled through his system at the thought of someone causing so much pain to another person.

Nathan wanted to curse until he was out of breath. Instead, he kept his hands light, fearing he might cause Lauren even more pain. He’d just as soon gnaw his hand off than hurt her physically, but he’d get some answers if he had to keep her there until midnight to accomplish it.

“Answer me!” His voice thundered through the room but the finger he placed beneath her chin was soothing. Gentle.

“No one did anything to me, Nathan. This is just what happens when you get between a bull and his target.”

What in the hell was she talking about? His brain wasn’t grasping anything beyond the fact that no one had purposefully harmed her.

“It was an accident?” Nathan was finally able to ask.

“Yeah, an accident.”

There had to be more to it than that, but the way she touched his chest then walked her fingers enticingly down to his waist made him lose his train of thought. She sat there pretty as you please in nothing more than her bra and panties and touched him with her tiny hands, teasing him. Torturing him. Never before could Nathan remember white cotton being such a huge turn on.

With steady fingers, Nathan went through the motions of removing her panties. The scent of her arousal immediately permeated the air, thrusting his already heightened senses into overdrive. When Lauren was completely bare from the waist down, Nathan set out to make her body hum with pleasure.

“Put your hands beside you on the table, baby.” Nathan punctuated the command by placing his hands over hers and wrapping her fingers around the edge of the table.

The position caused Lauren to lean slightly forward just the way he wanted her to. Her nipples pressed enticingly against the confines of her bra, calling to him, pouting for attention.

“Stay just like that, baby. And watch me. Watch me taste you. Watch while I take you with my tongue.”

Chill bumps raised along the flesh of her arms even as a shiver shook her small frame. His words had even more of an impact than he’d expected.

With expert fingers, Nathan opened the front clasp of her bra. When the fabric sprang apart, the soft cotton cups catching on the turgid peaks of her nipples, Lauren inhaled sharply.

Working a hand under each cup making sure to barely graze her sensitized flesh, he opened her bra, completely allowing her breasts to spill free. “Remember to stay where I put

you,” Nathan ordered as he continued to push her bra off her shoulders and down the rigid length of her arms.

Although bound by his words and not her bra, the extra confinement would help to open Lauren up for new experiences in the future. Nathan backed away just enough to clearly see her. Pink-tinged cheeks highlighted her features; the proud tilt of Lauren’s chin made him smile.

“Even more beautiful than I imagined.”

Nathan stepped back up to her. He lingered just out of reach before swooping in for a kiss so passionate they were both gasping for air before he was through.

Lowering himself to his knees, Nathan reveled in the deep shuddering breath Lauren took.

“Watch me.”

With a hand placed ever so gently on each battered leg, he proceeded to kiss each and every bruise no matter how large. Once finished, Nathan spread Lauren’s thighs until she was open to him.

Her pink folds glistened with moisture, the scent of her arousal drawing him like a starving man to a feast. Her eyes were wide, watching. Her bottom lip was tucked temptingly between her teeth.

The first heated swipe of his tongue sent her hips bucking against his mouth. One of Lauren’s hands lifted from the table to thread its way through his hair. Had she not been covered in bruises, that indiscretion would have earned her a swat. Although that wasn’t an option just yet, Nathan wasn’t about to let it go.

Untangling her hand from his hair, he placed it back on the table. “Right where I put you, Lauren, or I’ll tie you.”

Nathan’s rumbling threat caused her chest to rise and fall at a much more rapid pace. Her pupils were dilated so wide the green of her irises were barely visible. So, the thought

aroused her? Nathan would be sure they explored the possibilities later. Right now, he had something to finish.

Her eyes were trained on him, devouring their depths. This time when Nathan bent his head to her, he didn't move slowly. This time he set an arduous pace, lifting Lauren until she hung precariously on the precipice of a mind-blowing orgasm before backing her down and starting all over again. The taste of her arousal bloomed on his tongue, making Nathan want to savor every second of their journey together.

When Nathan finally pushed Lauren over the edge, he was gifted with the sound of her cries and the taste of her climax on his tongue. The way her body bowed tight against the waves of sensation bombarding her body only made Nathan want to push harder, to insist on a repeat.

Instead, he held Lauren briefly, allowing her the time she so evidently needed to gather her wits. When her pulse returned to a more normal pace, Nathan helped her dress then ushered her out of the office to begin the day as he had originally planned.

Chapter Three

The next few days crawled by at a snail's pace. Lauren worked the ranch by her dad's side, but mending fences and mucking out stalls did little to keep Nathan out of her mind. Hell, every time she so much as closed her eyes he was there, his wicked tongue and skilled fingers making her cry out in sensual delight.

Lauren wanted to call him so badly she shook with the need. The thought of feeling Nathan's hands on her, of being commanded by the macho jerk made her pussy damp and her hackles rise, all at the same time.

With a disgusted sign, she pitched the last shovelful of soiled straw into the wheelbarrow then turned and strode from the stall.

"He's messing with me," Lauren muttered to herself as she stalked across the ranch yard. "Forces me into an office, licks me until I scream, then goes about business as usual. I always knew suits weren't to be trusted."

Lauren didn't realize how far her muted tirade had taken her until she heard her father's voice. "Guess it ain't so bad as long as you don't answer yourself." He sat on the porch whittling away at a piece of wood, a smile splitting the tanned features of his handsome face.

Smiling in return, Lauren made her way up onto the porch, then lowered herself to the empty chair beside him. “Then it’s not okay, Daddy, because I’m not only answering myself, I’m arguing with myself.”

Her father’s booming laughter sent birds flying for safety. Sending her a sideways glance, he said, “Don’t worry yourself over it, Laurie. It’ll probably get worse before it gets better.” It wasn’t so much his words as the sparkle of mischief flashing in his eyes that worried her.

After removing her boots, Lauren excused herself then rose from the chair and headed toward the door. A clean getaway was not in the stars, though. Her father’s next words sent a surge of anticipation down her spine.

“Nathan Mills called while you were out working yourself to death. Said he’d meet you at the rodeo grounds at five this evening.”

Lauren nodded her head before opening the door and entering the house. Her throat had gone dry at the thought of seeing Nathan again. Doubt and irritation warred deep inside her, causing her stomach to flip flop uncomfortably.

Lauren so wanted to ignore the meeting Nathan set up. The nerve of the ass to think he could turn her on and off like the flick of a switch, to make her moan and shudder then just leave her hanging for days.

Never before had Lauren been so confused by a man. She wasn’t sure whether she wanted to scream and claw her face or rake her nails across Nathan’s back as he buried his cock deep within the warmth of her body. Damn, he was driving her crazy. Crazy with lust, crazy with feelings she’d be better off ignoring. Only, the emotions Nathan stirred inside her were virtually impossible to ignore, and the bastard knew it.

How she wished she could just tell him to go screw himself and get it over with. She could, of course, but to do so would be stupid. Lauren was horny beyond belief and ready for

a no-strings-attached tumble, and who better to tumble with than a man with talented fingers and an even more talented tongue?

“So, I’ll take whatever the man dishes out and ask for more, and when the rodeo is over, he’ll go home and I’ll stay here on the ranch. Simple.”

Lauren knew a lie when she heard it, even when it came from her own lips. Something in the back of her mind warned her it would be heartbreaking to watch Nathan walk away, but she decided to ignore the doubt once again worming its way through her. Everything would be fine. It had to be. Lauren repeated the words over and over as she showered and changed. Finishing in record time, she headed for the rodeo grounds.

The fact that there would be several people milling about the grounds in the early evening should have been reassuring but it wasn’t. Lauren wanted Nathan all to herself. She wanted to return the favor by teasing and sensually torturing him with her mouth and tongue. Then when his length thickened even further and he began to sweat, she’d climb on and take them both for the ride of their lives.

Just as Lauren had anticipated, there were quite a few people working around the rodeo grounds getting things ready. She hadn’t even gotten the door of her truck closed when she was accosted by one of the old-timers.

“Miss Laurie, Bill said you was on your way down here.”

“Well, here I am, Cecil. What can I help you with?” Cecil Rankin was as round as he was short, and although Lauren had grown up around the man, she hadn’t the slightest clue how old he was. He’d just always been there.

“Dan’s having another one of his gizzard spells and his wife has gone and made him go to the doc this time. They say he needs surgery so he won’t be able to play Santa for the toy drive this year.”

“I’ll give Dan a call and make sure everything is okay with him, but we’ll need another Santa.”

A worried look crossed Cecil's face. He held up his hands and began to back away. "Now, don't go you lookin' at me, Miss Laurie. I've got enough to do already and I've done asked around. No one is jumping at the chance."

As soon as he said the words, he turned on his booted heel and bolted. Lauren couldn't help but giggle. She couldn't remember ever seeing Cecil move so fast.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lauren spotted Nathan. He seemed distracted, probably talking business as he walked next to a woman Lauren didn't know. He hadn't noticed her yet and for that, Lauren counted her blessings. It gave her just a bit longer to prepare herself for another face to face with the wickedly sexual man.

Still smiling at Cecil's antics, her laughter grew louder when Nathan deftly sidestepped one cow patty only to step right in the center of another. Lauren tried valiantly to stifle her mirth not wanting to draw attention to herself.

When she finally got herself under control, the ensuing quiet made it possible for her to hear his string of muttered curses. The way he wrinkled his nose in revulsion as he pulled his foot from the steaming pile of cow shit sent Lauren into another fit of uncontrollable laughter. It also caught Nathan's attention.

He turned toward the attractive African American woman he was speaking to, who was now staring at her, and said something. She nodded in return before strolling away. She moved so gracefully. Nothing like the clomping about Lauren seemed to do. A streak of jealousy sparked briefly before Lauren squashed it. After all, there was nothing between she and Nathan.

There was no happy greeting or sexy words exchanged as Nathan stopped in front of her, anger and irritation evident in every nuance of his features. "If one more person laughs at me or calls me City Slicker, we're going to have a problem."

Lauren scratched her chin as if deep in thought, then smiled. "Stay out of shit piles and try to blend in and you might get by with only the old-timers harassing you."

Nathan, who'd been wiping the sole of what appeared to be a very expensive loafer on a patch of grass, stopped mid-swipe. He didn't say anything but Lauren knew he was thinking about her words. She could almost see the wheels turning.

"So, what was it you wanted to see me about?" Lauren asked.

The change in his demeanor was so sudden, Lauren blinked in surprise. His calm, although irritated manner, changed to the dark brooding look Lauren was starting to love. The one that made her insides melt and her nipples pebble.

When Nathan moved closer and then closer still, until he could run the pad of his thumb over her cheekbone, Lauren wanted to melt at his feet. The feel of his hand traveling to the back of her neck made every nerve ending in her body stand up and take notice.

She shivered when Nathan threaded his fingers in her hair and tugged her head back. The heat at the back of her neck felt so delicious.

Her gasp filled the air between them as did the heat of their extremely aroused bodies. There was no doubt in Lauren's mind as to the extent of Nathan's arousal. The large bulge nestled against her stomach was all the proof she needed.

If he kissed her she would be lost. The thought of losing herself and having it witnessed scared her to death.

Get a grip! the voice in her mind screamed, causing Lauren's head to pound. Her heart protested vehemently but Lauren wasn't ready to accept anything her heart had to say on the matter.

In self-preservation, Lauren did the only thing she could think to do. Fighting the arousal coursing through her veins, she scrunched up her nose and said, "I think we should find a hose and get your shoes cleaned off before heading inside."

The glaring reality of where they were must have taken Nathan by surprise as well because it took a couple of blinks before he finally loosened the hold he'd had on her hair. With his hands at his sides, Nathan followed Lauren to a water hose.

Although a stranger for the most part, Lauren knew Nathan wouldn't be content to remain that way. Not for the first time in her life, Lauren wondered if she was making the right decision.

* * * * *

Nathan watched Lauren as she made her way around him and into the trailer pulling double duty as rodeo headquarters. Her movements were jerky and telling. A triumphant smile curved his lips. Knowing how strongly his touch affected her would be a huge help in his plans to seduce her.

Once inside, she turned to him and waited. Nathan liked it when Lauren dropped her hell on wheels attitude and allowed him to take the lead, a position he always insisted upon. To do so showed a trust on her part that Lauren probably wasn't even aware existed.

Keeping Lauren O'Shea on her toes would prove to be a tough challenge, but Nathan knew he was more than up for it. With a smile on his face and a hand on her elbow, Nathan led her up the hall and to their office. The same office where he'd teased and tasted her until she'd writhed with pleasure.

The deep, shuddering breath she took as they entered the office confirmed his suspicions. She was just as aroused by their nearness and their mingling body heat as he was. Nathan stepped up behind her, rubbing his semi-hard shaft against her heated body. She went rigid, fighting whatever it was his closeness made her feel.

Nathan nipped the back of her neck then suckled the tender flesh gently. Her body relaxed against him, a hissed breath escaped her lips. With his arms wrapped around her from behind, Nathan leaned in close to whisper in her ear. "Don't worry, baby, we don't have much time here today due to a group scheduled to use this office." He flicked his tongue over the sensitive flesh just below her ear. "I'll drive us back to my room when we're finished here. When I make love to you tonight, it'll be in my room. My way."

Nathan allowed a commanding edge to enter his voice, and as he said the last words, he allowed his hand to wander down Lauren's abdomen to the apex of her thighs where he pressed teasingly. A sultry moan welled in her throat before leaving her slightly parted lips.

"Who said we're making love tonight?" The question left her mouth on a breathless whisper. She was going to fight until the very end, until she was begging for his tongue, his cock, until she was writhing beneath him in ecstasy.

"Tell me you don't want me, Lauren. Tell me you don't want me to touch your heat, to taste you and play with you before I finally slide every hard inch of my cock into your slick pussy. Tell me that and I'll leave you alone."

Many minutes passed before she finally broke the silence. "I can't." Her body shivered as she admitted she wouldn't stop him.

Nathan hated to ruin the moment by talking business but until they went over a few things, they couldn't return to his room and continue where they'd left off.

The next twenty minutes or so were spent going over promotional ideas Nathan had come up with for the Rancho Viejo Rodeo Days. Lauren seemed to like his ideas, something that pleased Nathan to no end.

"I think it's a great start." Her words were sincere even if she was standing as if he was going to just let her leave.

"I'm glad you think so. I've got one more thing to ask before we leave."

Lauren crooked a brow then sat back down. "Okay, shoot."

Nathan was sure he was going to sound like an idiot but he was going to ask anyway. "I need your help fitting in around here."

Lauren remained quiet although her lips curved the slightest bit. "What did you have in mind?"

"A shopping trip for some new clothes."

“No problem. I’ll get you the name of a few stores in town that should be able to set you up.”

“And your company,” Nathan added when he saw where the conversation was going.

“A favor, huh?”

Nathan wasn’t sure he liked the tone of her voice. Her eyes had gone bright and Nathan could almost see the wheels turning inside her head.

“Yes, a favor.”

“How about if we make a deal instead? An I-help-you-and-you-help-me, sort of thing.”

Nathan didn’t like the sound of the whole deal thing but was game to see what Lauren had in mind. Instead of asking, he inclined his head slightly, letting Lauren know she had his full attention.

“Our Santa quit and I need a new one. In spurs. So, I take you shopping for new duds and on the last day of the rodeo, you play Santa.”

“In spurs?” Nathan asked just to be sure he’d heard her correctly.

“Yes. In spurs. I’m not exactly sure how it all started but other than the red suit, our Santa wears boots, spurs and a cowboy hat. You game?” Her smile was radiant and cocky. The little devil thought she’d outsmarted him. Well, there was no way in hell he was going to pass up the possibility of spending a day with her, even if it was only shopping, and even if he did have to dress like Santa in spurs to accomplish it.

“Okay, but you’d better add spurs to the shopping list because I don’t happen to have a pair lying around.”

Lauren rose to her feet. The smile was gone from her face, replaced by the wary look of a cornered animal. “Okay?”

Nathan moved closer to Lauren, only stopping when she backed up a pace. He cocked his head to the side, not sure what to make of her retreat. Lauren must have understood the silent question.

She waved a hand toward him. "You agree to my plan like nothing then come at me like an animal stalking its prey. I've uh ... I've never been in a situation where I wasn't in the lead. Fun and no strings attached is the way I like things, Nathan."

There it was, all out in the open. Was she trying to warn him? Nathan knew he'd have to set her straight. He also knew that her mile-wide streak of stubbornness would get her in trouble before she managed to get it all clear in her mind. Nathan's palm tingled in eagerness.

"I don't mean to frighten you and I'll never hurt you, but when it comes to you, Lauren, I am an animal, an animal staking claim. You belong to me. No, don't say a word," Nathan commanded when Lauren opened her mouth to protest. "You've belonged to me since the first time I saw you. You know it as well as I do."

Nathan moved forward once again. He tried to will his body to calmness but there was just something about being in such close proximity to Lauren that made him almost mad with the need to feel her beneath him, to taste every inch of her glorious body.

When they were no more than a breath away from each other, Nathan stopped. "I'm all for fun but when it comes to the two of us, there will be all sorts of strings. Oh, and," he said, settling his mouth over hers for a soft, toe-curling kiss just before leading a stunned Lauren from the room. "When it comes to sex, I'm always in the lead."

The ride to the motel was short and quiet. After the brief argument over not taking separate vehicles, Nathan wasn't quite sure how things would turn out. He'd insisted on taking only one vehicle, so with a clenched jaw, Lauren had called her father to tell him where her truck was and that she wouldn't be home until much later, if at all. Nathan was a bit surprised when Lauren unabashedly told her father where she was going.

After that, things grew quiet. Lauren watched him but said nothing. When he reached over the center console to grasp her hand, the tension seemed to melt from her body. Nathan decided to break the tension and make Lauren dripping wet all at the same time.

Letting go of her hand, he curled his hand around her thigh. "Open your legs for me, sweetheart."

Lauren's eyes snapped to his and her cheeks flushed the prettiest shade of pink, but she did as he asked. For a brief second, he kept her gaze locked to his as he once again spoke.

"Lean back in the seat and play with your nipples for me."

Green eyes widened in alarm before she turned her head to look out the side window. "What if someone sees?"

"Over your shirt, Lauren. Play with yourself over your shirt."

The lazy circles Nathan was running up and down the crotch seam of Lauren's tight jeans was doing much to catch her attention. The rest of the too quick trip was a blur of heavy breathing and lusty moans. Nathan did everything in his power to get Lauren on the edge and keep her there. By the time they pulled up to the motel, Lauren was wound so tight Nathan had no doubt things were going to get hot.

He led her to the door with an arm around her waist. Her shaky legs and wandering hands made the trip an interesting one. Once inside, Nathan closed the door with a snap. After locking it, he lifted Lauren into his arms and strode to the bed. By the time the night was over, in Lauren's mind there would be no doubt who she belonged to. Nathan would see to it.

When Nathan reached the bed, he stood her on the floor beside it. After stripping her of her clothes, he lifted her again and settled her onto the center of it, where he proceeded to bind her hands to the headboard above her head with her own belt.

"But I want to touch you." Her pouty lips were so enticing Nathan couldn't help but lean in for a quick taste.

"I want that, too, but first, I want you to feel. I want you to experience everything I have to give."

Her breath quickened. The rise and fall of her chest caused her plump breasts to jiggle enticingly. Her next words damn near caused his knees to buckle. "I want to taste you, Nathan. Let me suck you and lick you. Please"

It took every ounce of Nathan's willpower not to untie her and do just that. Instead, he answered her. His husky voice a mere whisper. "Soon, baby. Soon."

Chapter Four

He was going to kill her with the sensual warmth of his tongue, Lauren was sure of it. Her body was strung tight; every nerve ending begged for attention. Shivering at the extent of her arousal, Lauren gyrated her hips, trying with all her might to maneuver his head to where she needed him. All it would take was a slight brush of his warm tongue on the sensitive bud of her clit and she'd be there.

The low rumble of his laughter vibrated against her heated core and almost sent her over the edge.

Almost, but not quite.

"Dammit!"

"Problem?" Nathan met her gaze from his spot between her thighs. His wicked eyes stared intently into her own.

Lauren moved again, lifting her hips to his mouth. She tugged gently at her hands but it was no use; she was bound too tightly to free herself with a mere tug.

Like you really want to be free, the voice inside her head chided silently. How many years had she waited for a man to truly take charge? Her body was a mass of quivering need, aroused beyond belief due to Nathan's commanding ways. The feel of his head between her

legs, his tongue tracing the crease where thigh and hip met, were only heightened by the bondage he'd placed her in.

Sighing her acceptance, Lauren wrapped her trembling fingers around the ties binding her and held on for what she was sure would be the ride of her life.

The minute she relaxed, Nathan gave her exactly what her body was starving for. With one long swipe of his tongue, Nathan brought her to the brink. The feel of his mouth closing around her clit before he suckled her hard and deep tore a keening cry of surprise and ecstasy from Lauren's lips.

Her body bucked and shivered as wave after wave of delight tore through her very soul. Lauren was still in the throes of her release when Nathan expertly sheathed himself then slid home. His length filled her to overflowing, until she was sure she would burst with the sheer pleasure of feeling his heat so deep inside.

It wasn't until he was staring into her face, his lips tracing the curve of her cheek that Lauren realized she was crying. Tears dampened the hair at her temples, and for a moment she was embarrassed by the unusual show of emotion.

"Was it that good or that bad?" His gaze raked her face, taking in every nuance of her expression as if trying to see what she was thinking. Feeling.

"How can you ask me that?"

His hands worked the binds tying her wrists loose only to replace them with his hands. Fingers entwined with hers, Nathan kept her arms above her head and her hands flat against the mattress.

"Because I care. Because the only tears I ever want to see spilling down your cheeks are happy tears."

He cares!

Lauren didn't want Nathan to care. She wanted a dominant man to make her every dream come true. But Lauren also wanted to keep her life as she knew it and her heart intact.

Loving someone to the extent she feared falling for Nathan wouldn't allow for either to happen. Because of that, Lauren had no choice but to bury her budding feelings and play the game to the best of her ability while keeping her heart safe.

"It's that good." Lauren hoped the smile curving her lips looked inviting and sensual and not the grimace it felt like.

Curving her fingers around his, Lauren thrust her hips beneath his, burying Nathan's length impossibly deeper within the warmth of her sheath. A breath hissed from his lips as he moved closer, coming in slowly for a kiss Lauren knew would set her aflame.

His breath was hot against her mouth. The prickle of his beard rasped her skin perfectly raking across sensitive skin until Lauren thought she would go crazy with need.

"Wrap your legs around me." The guttural command gave away just how close to the brink Nathan was.

Lauren wrapped her legs around his lean waist, locking her ankles against the small of Nathan's back. Their position caused their bodies to move closer than Lauren thought possible.

"Damn, baby. So good. So fucking good."

When Nathan quickened the pace, still holding her hands to the bed, Lauren could do nothing more than ride the wave of sensation and emotion tearing through her. His cock swelled and jerked just before his ragged cry of completion echoed through the room. Lauren followed close behind Nathan, feeling as though she'd be carried away with the tide, never to be seen or heard from again.

With reluctance in his heated gaze, Nathan pulled his softening length from her still quivering sheath then climbed from the bed. Lauren heard faint movement from the restroom but couldn't manage to keep her heavy-lidded eyes open long enough to see what he might have in store for her upon his return. Not even when the bed once again dipped beneath his weight did she stir.

Had Lauren been awake, she would have felt Nathan pull her limp form into the curve of his body, his hand splayed possessively across the swell of her abdomen. His whispered words of love would have scared her beyond belief and possibly made her flee, but instead she slumbered, not waking until the wee hours of the morning.

Lying still, Lauren listened intently trying to figure out what might have disturbed her sleep. The fact that she was in a strange bed didn't bother her. Hell, she'd spent all of her adult life traveling with one rodeo or another from place to place. No, it wasn't the strange bed. It wasn't even the way her body ached. After all, she was used to aches and pains.

A rumbling snore silenced Lauren's thoughts, bringing her fully awake in a millisecond. It was then she remembered what had taken place the night before.

Nathan chose that moment to adjust his still sleeping body. He was now on his stomach, blissfully unaware that she was intently studying him. The taut flesh covering his ass was much paler than that covering the rest of him. The dark smattering of hair dotting his legs invited her fingers to touch, so touch she did.

Adjusting her position, Lauren watched his face as she glided the fingers of one hand up the back of his thigh then grazed her nails across the slight swell of one butt cheek. His nose wrinkled as if the sensation tickled, then he smacked his lips. Lauren couldn't stifle her laughter.

His dark lashes fluttered briefly before they opened, exposing whiskey-brown eyes. In that brief instant, he was wide awake. No confused looks or startled stares, Nathan acted as if waking next to her was as normal as the sun rising each morning.

"Mornin', sunshine," she teased.

A smile curved Nathan's lips. The wickedness in his gaze stole Lauren's breath. When he rolled onto his back, pulling her with him, Lauren was sure she'd melt.

"And a good one it is."

Lauren was expecting a searing kiss or two but when she made to straddle his hips, to impale herself on the rigid length of the cock that was so clearly pressed against her hip, he stopped her.

“You said something about being out of town for a few days.” Lauren asked, hoping a bit of conversation would take his mind off of stopping her movement.

Nathan chuckled, removing her wandering hand from his body. “Nice try, but you can’t distract me with conversation or your touch.”

Patting her backside then setting her aside as if she weighed next to nothing, Nathan climbed from the bed and padded silently to the restroom. Before closing the door behind him, he turned. Caught in the act of staring at the flexing muscles of his ass, Lauren blushed.

“We’ve got some shopping to do today. How about we shower together and save time? And to answer your question, yes. I need a few days at the office before I can come back for the rodeo and all the festivities.”

His eyebrows wiggled suggestively, making Lauren giggle. Who would have ever thought an uptight suit could act silly? The self-made protective barrier around her heart weakened just a bit more.

* * * * *

Nathan wasn’t sure what to expect when they arrived at Lauren’s home. The drive out to the ranch had been a pleasant one. The brightness in her eyes as she talked about O’Shea Haven let Nathan know just how close Lauren was to not only her father but her roots. Knowing such information started his mind working. Things would have to change if he had any chance in hell of being a permanent fixture in her life, which he did.

Nathan spotted Lauren’s father the minute they pulled up to the house. He was making his way across the ranch yard toward the stables but stopped and turned when he heard the crunch of the car’s tires on the unpaved driveway.

“Mornin’, Daddy,” Lauren said as she climbed from the passenger seat, not bothering to wait for him to open the door. Bill O’Shea was a monster of a man, larger than most and quick on the uptake. Definitely not someone Nathan would want as an enemy.

“Good mornin’ to you, darlin’,” Bill said, pulling Lauren into his arms for a fatherly hug. He released her after bestowing a kiss on her forehead.

Nathan watched as Lauren backed away from her father, a radiant smile across her face. Her gaze shifted to Nathan, then back to her father, as if she wasn’t sure they could be trusted together.

“I’m going to dress. Nathan and I have some shopping to do. I’ll let Nathan explain.”

Nathan didn’t want to explain to anyone why he needed Lauren to take him shopping. He watched her cross the ranch yard. The confident sway of her hips turned him on beyond belief. Just remembering her taste made him hard as stone. God forbid he think too hard on the mind numbing blowjob she’d given him in the shower.

“Hurt her, and you and I’ll be having a talk.”

Bill O’Shea’s none too subtle words brought Nathan out of his lust-induced stupor. “That’s not something you’ll have to worry over, Bill. I plan to love her and marry her but I’ll never intentionally hurt her.”

The man’s green eyes widened at his declaration. “Marriage. What did Laurie have to say about that?”

“She doesn’t know yet.” Nathan mumbled the words grudgingly then did his best to ignore the man’s bellow of laughter. “She’s got this thing about keeping things simple, no strings attached.”

“I take it you don’t agree?”

“Hell no, I don’t agree! The damned stubborn woman belongs to me. There isn’t anything ‘simple’ or ‘no strings attached’ about it.”

“And you plan to change her mind how?” Bill’s crooked smile grated on Nathan’s nerves.

“I fell in love with her the minute I laid eyes on her, and I know she cares for me so I’m not giving her a choice in the matter.” There, he’d said it. His intentions toward the man’s daughter were out in the open. He expected sharp words or even a split lip. What he didn’t expect, however, was for the man to slap his back so hard it forced the air from his lungs.

“Wooooowheee, this ought to be fun.” Bill rubbed his palms together in anticipation. When he finally stopped laughing, he added. “If you aren’t careful, boy, you might just end up more bruised than my Laurie.” Once the words were out of his mouth, Bill started chuckling again.

Bill’s mention of Lauren’s fading bruises made him stiffen. Just seeing her body so abused still made him fighting mad.

“What type of accident caused all those bruises?” The words were out of Nathan’s mouth before he could wish them back.

Bill’s laughter stopped abruptly, his smile fading to a look of utter confusion. “If you don’t know then I’m thinking it’s Lauren you’ll be needing to talk to.”

Nathan could read between the lines, and he was worried. Lauren said her injuries were accidental. Nathan didn’t think she was lying but Bill’s reaction to his question made him wonder.

From the look on Bill’s face, it would do no good to insist upon another answer.

“I’ll do that,” Nathan finally said, knowing he had no other choice.

Bill nodded his head then turned toward the house when the squeak of the screen door caught their attention.

Lauren walked toward them in all her country girl splendor. She was wearing a soft yellow button-up blouse and an extremely tight pair of blue jeans. Her small feet were boot-clad, adding to the overall picture.

Each article of clothing hugged her trim body perfectly, outlining each and every one of her womanly curves. The gentle sway of her hips, combined with the way her breasts bobbed deliciously with her exuberant movements, made Nathan's mouth water.

In an instant he was rock hard and ready. Wicked memories of the night before only made matters worse. The feel of her beneath him, of her turgid nipples against his tongue seemed as real in his daydreams as it had been last night, making even the loose cut of his trousers uncomfortable.

The red, curly locks falling over her shoulders beckoned to him. Nathan wanted to thread his fingers through her hair, tugging just enough to position her for a soul-searing kiss. His feelings were getting out of hand, his desire spiraling out of control. There was nothing more important than making Lauren his. For life.

Binding her hands to the bed had been only the beginning of the things Nathan wanted to do to her luscious body. Not knowing whether she would be up for further bondage exploration worried Nathan. How would she take knowing he enjoyed so much more than light bondage? Would she balk if he pushed?

"Keep looking at me like that and you're going to embarrass Daddy."

Lauren stood in front of him, her green eyes sparkling and her generous pink lips turned at the corners into a beautiful smile. Nathan ignored her comment. Dipping his head, he brushed his lips against hers, keeping the kiss sweet, the complete opposite of what he really wanted to do.

"I think it's time we went shopping," he said after raising his head. "Bill. I'm sure we'll be seeing a lot of each other."

Nathan gave Lauren no time for questions. Hustling her into the car, he waved to Bill, who stood watching them, a broad smile splitting his face.

The drive into town was quiet. Nathan was a bit surprised when Lauren directed him to a feed and tack shop. He turned to ask why when she pointed to a small sign leaning in the window, claiming they also sold western wear.

“Best duds in town,” she said, opening the door to climb out.

Nathan met her at the front of the car just as a group of long-legged cowboys made their way out of the store. The way Lauren watched the group made Nathan jealous as hell. The possessive beast inside him gave no choice but to publicly claim Lauren as his woman. Turning her in his arms, he backed her against the car where he took her mouth in a possessive kiss, the way he’d wanted to do back at the ranch. There was nothing sweet about this kiss. Hot, yearning for more, his mouth possessed hers.

When Lauren was breathless, her arms wound around his neck, her body a mass of quivering need, Nathan pulled back. Her furrowed brows told him she knew exactly what he was doing.

“When I’m with you, I’ll be faithful. But I expect the same in return.”

Damn, she was a feisty one. “Deal,” Nathan said.

The next hour was spent buying everything from jeans, snap-front shirts, and hats to boots and spurs. The way she’d gone from rack to rack, collecting different styles and sizes made Nathan wonder if she’d done it before. When he asked, she just smiled and winked, causing the green-eyed monster to raise his possessive head again. This time, he dragged her into the privacy of a curtained-off fitting room and attacked her mouth, plundering its warm depths until she backed away, her eyes glazed, her lips soft and swollen, glistening with their mingled moisture.

Nathan enjoyed the experience immensely. Lauren’s zest for life made it even more special. When they finished loading all the boxes and bags into his car, Nathan drove to the

nearest diner where they ate as though they were starved. Nathan watched Lauren, studying her every move. He hated to ruin such a fine day but there were questions he needed answers to, questions that wouldn't wait any longer.

"Your bruises seem to be healing nicely."

Lauren's gaze left her plate. "Yes."

She didn't seem interested in adding to the conversation but Nathan wasn't about to let her off the hook. Something was nagging him, something he couldn't quite pinpoint. He needed to head back to the city for a couple of days before the rodeo began and he wanted to know what it was before he left or he would never get anything accomplished.

"Finished?" he asked when Lauren pushed her plate away.

Reluctantly she nodded her head.

"Good. You and I need to have a talk."

Chapter Five

Lauren swallowed past the nervous lump in her throat. She knew the time would come when she would have to tell Nathan what she did for a living. Before, when he'd asked about her injuries, Lauren had told the truth. She hadn't pressed to make him believe her, so she knew damned well there would be hell to pay when he finally understood exactly what it was she did for a living.

Why things had to be so irritatingly confusing, Lauren couldn't fathom. She also had no idea why she cared so much. It wasn't like theirs was a true relationship, one that would evolve into more, at least not where she was concerned.

Liar!

Lauren ignored the little devil on her shoulder. They were fuck buddies and that was all. If she wanted to dance with the bulls, she would, and no man would or could change her mind.

"What was it you wanted to talk about?" Lauren was sure it would kill her slowly to have to wait. Her nerves were already strung tight, not knowing for sure what it was Nathan wanted to talk to her about. Worrying and wondering would send her over the deep end for sure.

Nathan settled his unwavering gaze on her. “The black and blue marks marring your beautiful skin, for starters.” His gaze moved back to the road. “But now is not the time. After we’re back at my room will be soon enough.”

Lauren knew better than to try and sway him. Once Nathan had his mind set on something, there was no changing it.

They chatted amicably the whole way back to Nathan’s hotel room, but she knew that beneath the surface, Nathan was dead set on getting the truth. Although she knew it would bring an end to their fun, Lauren wasn’t the type to lie.

Things changed the minute they stepped foot into the room. Nathan was being too gentle, touching her as if she were glass and would break. His strained smile didn’t quite reach his eyes, and the politeness he was showing made her want to smack him upside the head. Worst of all, though, was the amount of control he exuded over every single movement, from walking across the room to pouring drinks. It was as if he knew something was a bit off, could feel it, and it was driving Lauren fucking insane.

Not one to beat around the bush, Lauren would rather have it out and get it over with. She was coiled so tightly she thought she might blow a gasket. She longed for her dominant lover, the man who’d insist on the truth and punish her for anything less. Where was the man who’d tied her to his bed and loved her body until she was numb with exhaustion?

The sound of metal clicking brought Lauren out of her reverie like a shot in the dark. She was still standing with her back to the door and hadn’t even noticed he’d moved much less that he was locking the deadbolt.

The knowledge made Lauren shiver from head to toe. Her arrogant, pigheaded lover was back. Or maybe, he’d never really left.

Let the games begin, the voice in her head taunted even as Lauren’s nipples peaked. The moisture collecting between her thighs, dampening her panties until they clung to her

folds. Her reaction reminded Lauren exactly how much her body craved Nathan's masterful touch. His accusing words blew her arousal all to hell.

"I don't know what in the hell it is you're trying to hide from me, Lauren, but I won't stand for it."

The fantasy of being dominated and the reality of it were two different things. Just because there happened to be a bed in the room didn't classify dominant bedroom play to Lauren, which caused many problems for the independent woman struggling with the release of power and jumbled emotions all at the same time.

With a stubborn tilt to her chin, Lauren faced Nathan. "I'm not hiding a damned thing from you."

He made a clucking noise, causing Lauren's hackles to rise even more.

"Watch it, sweetheart."

"I don't lie, so *you* watch it, you jackass."

Nathan's brows snapped together and nearly got lost in the lock of russet waves falling over his forehead. When he spoke, his voice was low, ominous. "I won't let you distract me with your nasty attitude, which we'll discuss later. Right now I want to know about your bruises. How did you get them? And don't give me any bullshit accident excuses."

Oh, hell, the damned ass was really pushing her buttons. Lauren took a deep breath, trying to release some of the tension coiling in her body, but it was absolutely no use.

"I didn't give you any bullshit accident excuses; you did that all on your own, Nathan. I gave you the truth when you asked. My only mistake was not making your stubborn ass listen."

His face changed from bland control to confusion in the blink of an eye. "You said something about getting between a bull and his target. What in the hell was I supposed to think?"

It was almost comical to watch him. Lauren was surprised she didn't see smoke billowing from his ears, he was thinking so hard. She remained silent, watching, waiting. It didn't take long for things to click. His features once again changed. His brows were no longer furrowed in confusion. In complete control, he gave not one clue as to what was going through his mind. And except for the tightness of his jaw and the hardness of his gaze, Lauren might have been clueless.

Nathan strode across the room until there was no more than a breath between them. Grasping her upper arms in a firm yet gentle grip, he hauled her the rest of the way to him until they were touching and Lauren could feel the warmth of his body against the sensitive tips of her cloth-covered breasts.

"Tell me again, and this time I'll be sure and pay attention."

She knew Nathan wouldn't hurt her, but the intense look in his eyes made her hesitate with her answer, for which she silently chastised herself.

He's not the boss of me. I'm a grown-ass woman for God's sake!

It was easy to think the words. They even seemed to boost her confidence for a brief moment. Until he gave her a slight shake, once again capturing her complete attention.

"Now," he growled.

Lauren licked her lips nervously then stared him dead in the eye. "It's exactly as I told you before." With her palms flat against Nathan's chest, she shoved. She knew she was only free of his hold because he allowed it, another thing that rankled.

Lauren backed up a few paces, needing more space. With her hands on her hips, she continued. "When you get between a bull and his intended target, you get bruised."

"Go on. You might as well spell it out for this city slicker because other than on TV, I've never seen a rodeo and I know you aren't talking about the same thing going through my mind."

“Tell me what’s going through your mind and I’ll tell you whether you’re wrong or right.” It would be so much easier than trying to force a description of her career through suddenly dry lips.

“Lauren.” It might only be a single word but it was more of a warning than Lauren had ever received from a man. Any man, including her father.

“Shit! Fine, then. I’m a bullfighter. One of only a handful of females, and damned good at it, I might add.” The words came tumbling out one over the other, making her short of breath.

“Bullfighter? Then maybe I was wrong. How can you be a bullfighter? Isn’t bullfighting a Spanish sport?”

Lauren couldn’t help but chuckle. “Can be, but not in this case. My job is to protect the rider.”

He was moving toward her but the moment the words left her mouth his body stilled. “Protect the rider ... you’re a fucking rodeo clown!”

Damn, how she hated that term. There was no way to piss Lauren O’Shea off faster than to throw her whole life into a barrel of laughs.

“Depends on how you look at it. The union I belong to doesn’t require us to dress up. For the most part, we wear comfortable clothes that are easy to move in with the logo of our sponsors on them. For small rodeos where I volunteer my time, I dress up. It’s fun for the families, and as long as I can do my job, it doesn’t really matter what I wear.”

“You protect the rider?” He sounded cynical, and the way his eyes traveled her petite frame let her know exactly what he was thinking.

Men were typical in that way. It was bad enough to be a woman in a man’s job, but to be a small woman made it even worse. She’d had to work twice as hard to prove herself, but prove herself she did and she’d be damned if any man, even her lover, would make light of all her hard work.

“At any cost,” she said, knowing damned well it would bring his temper, which was already at a low simmer and went to a rolling boil in no time.

“Not anymore, you don’t.” His voice was low, quiet.

Too quiet.

Lauren knew there would be no winner this round. They could argue until Doom’s Day and still not come to an agreement, so she decided not to say anything.

* * * * *

Every jerky movement told Nathan just how much she wanted to argue and yet she didn’t. “I mean it, Lauren.”

She moved toward him. Her body was eager for his touch, if the way she moved against him when finally reaching his side was any indication.

“I don’t want to argue tonight, Nathan. Not when you’re leaving tomorrow.”

Her sultry words slid over him like warm honey. She was using her curves to distract him, and doing a fine job of it. But Nathan had plans for her before things progressed too far.

He collected her close, his hands buried in the hair on either side of her head. She was completely in his control when he dipped his head for a wickedly electrifying kiss. When Lauren’s lips glistened, Nathan pulled back. With deft fingers he began to undress her and continued until she stood before him gloriously nude. Slipping his hands to her shoulders, Nathan applied gentle but steady pressure until Lauren lowered herself to her knees in front of him. Once she was settled, Nathan lowered himself to the edge of the bed where he awaited his pleasure.

No words of encouragement were needed. Lauren worried her bottom lip between her pearly white teeth, watching his face as she reached for the buckle of his belt. Cool air surrounded his heated cock but was quickly replaced by the warmth of Lauren’s hands.

Her touch was sure, and for a second Nathan thought he would unload like a teenage boy sinking into pussy for the first time. The exquisite feel of her tongue gliding around the crown of his shaft left Nathan all but breathless, causing all other thoughts flee.

He caressed her face, loving the way her lips felt stretched around the rigid length of his shaft. Her hair was like silk against the skin of his thighs. When she sucked him deep, the muscles in Nathan's legs tightened in response. Liquid heat pulled his balls tight against the base of his cock, hitting like lightning. Everything from that moment on, as he spilled his essence into the warmth of Lauren's mouth, was a blur.

When Nathan finally landed back on earth, it was to a smug Lauren still sitting at his feet, licking her lips like the sassy cat she was.

"Your lips on my cock are like Heaven on earth, sweetheart. Now come here; we've got a conversation to finish."

Nathan edged his voice with steel. Lauren's eyes widened but she wasted no time getting to her feet. Whether to argue or not, Nathan didn't know and didn't care. He wasted no time planting her facedown over his lap, which caused his still bared flaccid shaft to stir to life.

"What in the hell are you doing?" she screeched as her legs kicked wildly.

Nathan planted a firm hand at her lower back but Lauren continued to yell and scream, hollering curse words Nathan could only guess the meaning of.

Whack!

"That's enough." Nathan wanted to yell the words, but figured a low growl would accomplish much more.

Smack!

"You said you wanted to talk, dammit!"

“This is the way we’re going to talk until you keep your ass still and listen to me. Once you manage that,” Nathan snarled through more kicking and screaming, “then we’ll settle up your nasty mouth.”

“You fucking ass--” Nathan cut Lauren’s tirade off with a volley of sharp swats to the luscious curve of her now rosy-pink backside.

It wasn’t until Lauren stilled beneath his palm that Nathan slowed his hand. Rubbing and squeezing, he asked, “Are you ready to listen yet?”

No words were spoken, and if not for his keen perception, Nathan might have missed the nod of her head. Tracing the lower curve of her ass until his fingers came in contact with moist heat, Nathan played Lauren’s body.

“You may not be used to the idea just yet, but it doesn’t change the fact that you still belong to me. No,” he said, reminding her with fingers at her slick entrance just where she was, “you’ll stay right where you are until I’ve had my say.”

Her hips lifted, trying to lodge his finger where she wanted it. His impatient hellion wanted more. Knowing she’d loved every minute of her spanking even through all the hollering and cursing brought Nathan’s cock to a full, thick, raging erection.

“Now, you’ll have to find someone to cover for you this weekend because there is no way in hell you’re going to continue putting your life and health in jeopardy. I can’t believe you willingly put yourself in such danger. My God, the bruises ...”

Nathan couldn’t finish. Just remembering what she’d looked like, covered in purpling bruises the first time he’d removed her clothes to taste her, made him crazy.

Whack!

“And this is for your nasty mouth. I don’t care how you were raised; it’s no way for a lady to talk.”

By the time he was done with her ass, it was a brilliant shade of pink. Her body was glistening with a fine sheen of perspiration, her hair damp with it. The thing that most

caught his attention was the low, sensual moans leaving her lips with every downward stroke of his hand. Her body was ripe and ready, wet beyond belief.

“Oh, Nathan. Please.”

“Please what, sweetheart?”

“Please, just fuck ... Make love to me, Nathan. Please.”

Her voice was husky. The scent of Lauren’s wet sex, her undeniable arousal, filled the room, knotting Nathan’s insides with need. Hands shaking with the extent of his arousal, Nathan lifted Lauren from his lap. After positioning her over the edge of the bed he stood back to view his handy work.

He removed his clothes and sheathed his raging erection in record time. Within minutes his cock was seated deeply within the fold of Lauren’s pussy. Their loving was hard and swift, taking Nathan’s breath just as the hammering of his length into Lauren’s stole hers. It took every ounce of concentration, of his waning willpower to hold out until he felt her tight sheath rippling around his rigid length.

Her keening cry of release snapped his control, and soon he was following her, his eyes closed tightly as he powered into her, holding her hips in his steely grip as if his life depended on it.

Collapsing against Lauren’s back, Nathan struggled for breath. “You okay?” he asked. When he removed his length from her body, she shivered.

“Better than okay. I’ve never climaxed so freakin’ hard. It was ... wow! My ass is going to be sore for days.” Lauren rubbed the offended spot as Nathan lifted himself from the warmth of her body.

“A reminder while I’m gone.” Nathan said the words as he strode to the bathroom, missing it when Lauren stuck her tongue out at him.

Later that night, Nathan lay awake holding Lauren’s body curled close to his. He wasn’t normally one to snuggle or even stay all night, but all that had changed.

From the minute Nathan first spotted Lauren standing across the yard at O'Shea Haven, he'd known she was the one. The thought of love at first sight made the cynic in him scoff, but Nathan wasn't going to question fate. There was no turning back, no forgetting, for either of them.

Lauren might not be too keen on the idea, but Nathan had plans -- *big* plans -- and they all involved Lauren's love. There was no doubt in his mind that Lauren felt deeply for him. It was in the way she smiled while they talked, in her sea-green eyes as she followed his movements. Most of all, it was in the way her body submitted to his loving. She was his mate, his perfect match.

Nathan finally drifted off to sleep, thoughts of the future and beautiful green-eyed babies whirling around in his mind.

Chapter Six

As Lauren sat beside Nathan in his car, she thought it was probably a good thing he was going to be gone for a few days, because every inch of her body ached deliciously. Unfortunately, her heart immediately protested the fact that he was leaving. No matter how sore or tired she was, Lauren liked having Nathan close.

The only problem with having him around was the overwhelming amount of emotions he pulled from her, feelings Lauren fought to swiftly push aside.

Just remembering the things he'd done to her, things she'd never dreamt of allowing, had the ability to make her weak in the knees. Never before could Lauren remember being awakened in the predawn hours to a man with such wicked fingers.

Her mild mewl of protest as Nathan slipped his hand between her thighs stopped all movement.

"Sore, sweetheart?" His voice had been whisper-soft, husky with sleep, and so damned tempting that for a brief moment, Lauren wanted to hold him close and never let him go. A scary thought, one better left to those who could handle the possible negative outcome of loving someone so thoroughly.

"Only a little bit, but it's okay."

His finger had traced her hip, his mouth at the curve of her neck. “Not yet, but it will be.”

When Nathan had rolled her onto her stomach, Lauren remained where he’d put her. No words of protest had spilled from her mouth when he’d cuffed her hands at the small of her back. His tongue had bathed the length of her spine. Its warmth interspersed with thrilling nips and nibbles, Lauren had been beyond mere arousal by the time Nathan reached the cleft of her ass.

“If we were at my place, I’d have you over a padded bench with silver hoops specifically for tying your arms.” The warmth of his breath on her backside had been erotic as hell. “I’d have your legs tied starting at the thigh so even a twitch would be hard to accomplish.”

They had never really talked about their kinks, but Lauren knew there was a dark side to Nathan, one she hoped he’d eventually share with her. The thought had sent shivers up her spine.

“Like that thought, do you?”

Time had seemed to pass in a haze as Nathan had prepared her with fingers, lips and tongue. The things he’d done to her were so erotic, so far beyond what she’d ever allowed any other man to do to her that she could feel her face flame just thinking about it.

When he’d reached into the nightstand drawer, Lauren knew he planned to take her anally. Her body had shivered in response.

“If the answer is no, you’d better say the word now.”

Lauren remembered the fear, the anticipation as Nathan lubricated the virgin-tight entrance of her ass.

“You’re so sweet, so hot. Just relax and let me take care of you.”

The intense sensations had threatened to overwhelm as the flared head of his shaft worked passed the tight ring of muscle protecting the one place she'd never allowed a man. Tears threatened as the burn bordered on outright pain.

"Breathe." The guttural command had made Lauren aware of two things. The first was that Nathan was doing everything in his power to remain in control. Not an easy prospect if the slight tremor in his hands was any indication. The other was that she'd been holding her breath so long she felt dizzy.

Forcing the air from her lungs, Lauren had then taken a deep, cleansing breath and concentrated on the new sensations coursing through her body. Heat had spread throughout her core when Nathan finally lodged himself completely within her ultra-tight channel. When he'd stilled, refusing to budge even though Lauren had thought she might die if he didn't, he'd growled, "Stay still and get used to the feel of me because once I start moving, I won't be able to stop until I've filled you full."

His words had made her ache in a completely foreign way. Lauren couldn't help but wiggle, to insist he do something to fulfill the unspoken promise his body whispered to hers.

"Shit." Nathan had muttered the single word as she'd continued to move on the thick length of his shaft, searching for release.

When his hands finally gripped her hips to steady himself as he slowly pulled from the warmth of her body before powering home, Lauren thought had she would internally combust.

Her body had bowed so tight it was almost painful. His bellow of release preceded tiny jolts of pleasure as Nathan's cock jerked deep inside of her, releasing the warmth of his essence, sending her spiraling over a precipice so high Lauren wasn't sure she'd ever come down.

"We're here," Nathan announced pulling her from the wickedness of her memories. After shifting his car into park, he turned until he was facing her. The tight confines of his car making him seem even larger.

Lauren figured her cheeks were bright red flags of arousal and acute embarrassment at being caught in the middle of a naughty daydream.

"Thinking about me?" Nathan's question was followed by deep rumbling laughter.

Lauren plastered what she hoped was a fierce scowl on her face. "Nope."

Nathan chuckled again. "Sassy brat."

He leaned over the center console, taking her face in his warm hands. He studied her the way an artist would study a partially painted canvas, while circling his thumbs over her temples. "I'm going to miss you, sweetheart."

His words were sweet, sincere. They made Lauren's heart leap for joy while confusing her all at the same time. "I'll only be gone a couple of days. I'll call every chance I get."

"Okay." There was so much she wanted to say to him but a tiny whisper of doubt kept her from sharing how much she'd enjoyed their time together.

It would all come to an end as soon as the rodeo was over. Nathan would go back to the city and the women there because there was no doubt in Lauren's mind he'd left a string of bed buddies behind. For all she knew, he would hold one in his arms tonight. No, she couldn't let things get serious, because when Nathan left -- and he would leave -- she would be alone again. The thought was too much to bear. To hide the tears burning her eyes, Lauren leaned close. She brushed her lips over Nathan's, reveling in his warmth, his taste. When she attempted to move away, Nathan took control of the kiss. Pulling her in even closer, he plundered her mouth until she melted against him, then slowed the kiss. "I know it's early yet," Nathan said, holding her close, "but I think I've loved you since the first second I laid eyes on you."

Lauren couldn't help but stiffen in response to his words. It was hard enough to keep things uncomplicated when it was all about sex. Then she could try and ignore the whirls of emotion that always seemed to accompany them when they were together. But once the words were out, there was no taking them back. Lauren pulled back, unsure of what to say. How could he be so sure after such a short amount of time?

"Don't say a word. Don't even think about it, just know that deep in my heart, you're the one."

Nathan climbed from the car. When he reached the passenger side door, he opened it for Lauren, then walked her to the front door of her house.

"Now kiss me goodbye and be a good girl while I'm gone."

The kiss he bestowed upon her forehead was sensual in a way very different from the deep compassion he usually exuded. Lauren so wanted to believe that Nathan loved her, but to do so would be to leave herself wide open.

She watched as his low-slung sports car made the slow trek down the dirt road leading to the highway. He'd been gone only minutes, not even quite out of sight yet, and already Lauren wanted him back. She had a sneaking suspicion the next couple of days were going to be pure hell. And they were.

* * * * *

By the second day, she was so antsy and horny not even masturbating helped. And if that wasn't bad enough, the ache deep in her chest, in the vicinity of her heart, threatened to overcome her, turning her into a watering pot of a woman.

When she was dangling at the end of her rope, Lauren called Alexa.

"Meet me for lunch?" she'd begged of her best friend.

"I've always got a shoulder ready. Just name the time and place."

The two of them talked for a few more minutes before deciding on a place. Lauren hung up the phone already feeling better. After showering, she threw on some jeans and a t-shirt, donned her boots, and pulled her hair into a ponytail. There was just enough time before meeting Alexa to go riding.

The two of them talked about everything except her and Nathan until Lauren brought it up first.

She told Alexa about Nathan's words of love and her confusion and fear at hearing them. "He's going to freak when he finds out I'm still participating in the rodeo."

"Did he make you promise not to? Because I've never known you to go back on a promise, Lauren."

Lauren laughed. Nathan hadn't thought to make her promise but Lauren could almost bet he would next time. If there was a next time.

"What's that laugh for?"

"The arrogant beast didn't make me promise. He told me I wasn't going to do it. Told me. Me! Can you believe that?"

Alexa tossed her shiny mane of hair then dabbed the corner of her mouth in that girly way Lauren had never learned. "I might just have to change my ways and go to the rodeo this year, even though there is just something about horse crap and puffed up cowboys that does nothing for me."

"Depends on what about them is puffed up."

Lauren loved their banter. There was just something about Alexa that could always wring a smile out of her, even at the worst of times.

* * * * *

Nathan wasn't sure how he'd managed to make it through the days and nights spent in the city without Lauren. Although speaking to her nightly on the phone had been hot as hell, it wasn't enough. One specific conversation sang through his mind like a siren's call.

Her voice was tentative. Unsure. "The things you said to me the other night. Do you ... umm, is that really how you like to have sex?"

Nathan's heart pounded in his chest. Would his answer scare her? Would she find him sick or twisted? He fought the urge to sidestep the question. "Yes. Regular sex does very little for me, Lauren. The need to dominate is part of who I am."

"I figured that much," was her smart-ass retort. "I'm kinda the same."

Nathan's breath hissed from his lips. "How?"

"I like being tied up. Behind closed doors, with someone I trust. It's the only aspect of my life where I feel like I can give up control."

A heavy weight lifted from Nathan's shoulders with Lauren's softly spoken admission.

"I enjoy other things as well, sweetheart. Bondage is just the tip of the iceberg."

"Will you teach me some of the other things you like?"

The submissiveness of her question fanned the flames of Nathan's desire. There was so much he wanted to teach her. So much he'd insist she learn if only he could keep her forever.

"We can talk about it when I get back, Lauren. This isn't a conversation for the phone."

"Oh, okay." She sounded disappointed.

"I'll see you tomorrow morning, sweetheart."

"Night." Her voice was soft and breathy in his ear.

Nathan vowed then and there, with his rock hard shaft in the palm of his hand, that the next time he needed to make the trip, Lauren would be making it with him. Of course, with the wheels he'd set in motion, Nathan wouldn't have to return to the city very often.

With competent employees and state of the art technology, much of his job could be handled online and through conference calls. It was just the start of things to come.

Renting a house in Santa Estrella, the first item on his list of things to do, was being seen to. The property bordering O'Shea Haven was already in escrow, and as soon as he had the words of love he so longed to hear, Nathan would set up a meeting between Lauren and a contractor to get building plans underway.

Patience, Nathan reminded himself, often was a hard-won virtue.

The next morning, after checking his watch for the umpteenth time, Nathan sped around a semi going well under the speed limit. Not only was he going to miss the opening ceremonies for the rodeo, but he also needed to feel Lauren's warm flesh beneath his fingers, taste her mouth against his.

Getting through Los Angeles traffic was easier than maneuvering his car through trucks, trailers and throngs of people, not to mention the horses and their mess. By the time he found his way to the roped off employee parking area, thirty minutes had passed.

Nathan climbed from his car. The tight Wranglers hugged him a bit close, and only having been washed once, they were so stiff he wondered if that wasn't one of the reasons why cowboys walked funny.

The slight heels of his boots felt awkward, as did the hat now perched on his head. He felt like a fake and briefly wished he'd have worn his normal suit and tie. That thought kept running through his mind until he noticed the looks being thrown his way. A throaty "looking good, cowboy" from a top-heavy blonde added a bit of kick to his giddy up. Nathan laughed at the analogy rolling through his head. Maybe he could get the hang of this cowboy stuff after all.

Worming his way through the crowd, Nathan went to the office first, only to find it completely deserted and locked up tight.

Nathan followed the crowd, purchasing his ticket just as everyone else. With a ticket in his pocket and a stamp on his hand, he continued toward the grandstands. The place sure did look different on rodeo day, was his first thought as he took in the people filling the stands, as well as all the four-legged beasts that hasn't been there during his last visit.

He spotted TJ Maguire. Full of sass and spunk, she was neck deep running Bar T Rodeos, which was based out of the Sacramento area. It seemed to Nathan that every time he ran into TJ she was arguing with bronc rider Hank Beltane. "TJ. Hank," Nathan said when he was face to face with them.

"Hey, Nathan. Looks like you missed most of it. Made it just in time for the bull riding. No matter though, you can always catch the next show."

Nathan nodded then asked, "Seen Lauren?"

"Sure. Last time I saw her, she was 'round back gearin' up."

The words hit Nathan like a freight train. His feet couldn't move fast enough to get him behind the scenes. Too many people and shaking legs made traveling by foot nearly impossible.

If she participated in the rodeo, he was going to whip her ass until she couldn't sit for days.

If she makes it out with no more than bruises.

Nathan ignored the horrible little whisper. Maybe she was helping the cowboys gear up? That would be bad enough. Still enough to earn her the spanking of a lifetime, but it wouldn't be nearly as bad as if she planned to "protect the rider," as she'd so casually put it.

Behind the scenes was just as crowded as the general area, possibly more so. Ordered chaos would be Nathan's guess since he did see people with badges giving orders. His eyes scanned every nook and cranny but nowhere did he see Lauren. Nathan closed his eyes, praying silently she was helping out somewhere.

Country music blaring over the loudspeaker stopped, to be replaced by the announcer. Nathan moved forward to an empty spot along the railing in order to see why things had grown so quiet.

He felt a red haze settle over him when the man announced Lauren's name along with the other bullfighters. That haze lifted quickly, making Nathan's stomach heave in fear with the announcer's next words.

"All the way from Wyoming, Chad Burke. Chad drew the meanest bull we've got." A collective gasp was drawn from the audience as the bull in question threw the rider against the side of his holding pen. "So y'all are in for a treat." Thunderous applause rocked the stands as the gate was jerked open.

For the first time in his life, Nathan felt lightheaded. He gripped the rail until his knuckles turned white. Sweat beaded on his upper lip and ran from his forehead into his eyes, making them burn. But he couldn't so much as blink as the two-ton bull bucked and circled, its rider hanging tight.

"If she makes it out of this alive, I'm going to wring her neck." The men on either side of him looked at him strangely before they both turned their gazes back to the arena, chuckling.

Chapter Seven

Lauren concentrated on the bull and the rider. Except for what was going on in the arena, nothing else mattered. The bull bucked and spun, nearly dislodging its rider, yet Chad managed to hold on. Lauren was instantly impressed by the young man. If he didn't get himself injured or worse, and stuck with rodeoing, he would go far.

The eight-second buzzer sounded, causing the crowd to go wild. Lauren moved in closer, edging toward the bull to allow Chad a safe dismount. Only, the closer she got to them the more it became apparent that Chad was in trouble. His hand was caught up in the bull rope.

Seconds seemed to drag on forever until he was able to free himself. His dismount was hard and jarring as he hit the packed ground with a thud, but he was fine. Quicker than lightning, the young man jumped to his feet and ran for safety. The seemingly vicious bull snorted once before heading toward the exit gate just as he was supposed to. Lauren heaved a sigh of relief before focusing on the next rider and bull combo to shoot from the gate.

And so it went until all the riders had their turn out of the chute. Other than a couple of close calls, and some fancy footwork by her and the other bullfighters, nothing big had taken place.

Lauren's adrenaline was pumping; her body felt alive just as it always did after a show.

With a smile across her face, she made her way to the rail. After climbing through she was jerked by strong arms against a hard chest. A familiar scent rushed over her, heightening her senses.

Lauren tried to pull away but Nathan refused to release her. His arms trembled as he held her. It was the first indication Lauren had that something was wrong. She rubbed her hands over his back then along his upper arms. "Nathan?"

Her voice seemed to snap him out of whatever held his body so rigid. Nathan in turn thrust her from him, holding her at arm's length while his eyes traveled her body.

"I'm going to paddle you until you promise never to scare me again," he growled into her ear. His voice was angry, intimidating, the complete opposite of the sweet kiss he initiated.

Nathan's tongue traced her lips before moving to her jaw and then down to her neck.

"Nathan." The light touch of his lips was extremely arousing. Lauren felt moisture pool between her thighs, dampening her panties. Her anticipation grew. "Oh, Nathan."

Nathan set her away from him once again to look at her. His face was sickly green in color. His hands still trembled. Lauren could feel it as he traced her features with the tips of his shaky fingers.

Seeing him afraid left her awed, and for the first time, Lauren didn't doubt what he felt for her. The knowledge hit with quick intensity, leaving her weak in the knees.

"You do love me."

Nathan rolled his eyes before returning his mocking gaze to her. "I've been trying to tell you."

"I know, and I'm sorry."

His brown eyes narrowed on her, brows drawn together in an angry line. "Not nearly sorry enough."

Nathan jerked her back to him before grasping her ass in his hand. Squeezing her plump cheeks, he said "I'm sure I can think of something to make you very sorry, though. Something that will remind you to never worry me the way you just did."

Lauren leaned as far back as Nathan's hold would allow. Batting her eyelashes, she said, "I think it is going to be an interesting weekend, then, because I've got two more shows."

Laughter erupted around them. Until that point, Lauren hadn't paid any attention to where they were or who might be watching them. When she finally worked up the nerve to look away from Nathan, it was only to find a circle of people watching them -- including her father, who had a huge smile splitting his face.

Her groan was muffled into Nathan's shirt as he held her close, blocking her face from prying eyes. Lauren was grateful Nathan chose not to acknowledge her words about the last two shows of the weekend.

She had no doubt he'd heard her. His body was still stiff with anger; he'd merely chosen to save the argument for when they were in private. And if Lauren knew Nathan as well as she thought she did, there was going to be a hell of an argument.

"Show's over." Nathan's words brooked no argument; not that anyone looked like they planned to argue when he lifted her over his shoulder and carted her off. Not even her father, the traitor, had a word to say.

"I can walk," Lauren insisted from her upside down vantage point.

Instead of letting her down, though, Nathan swatted her denim-covered backside. "Hush," he growled.

When they reached his car, Nathan finally settled her back on her feet. Remaining silent, he opened the door and ushered her inside, where he reached over to buckle her seatbelt before swiftly closing the door. He entered the car, and without a word, drove them to the motel where he had rented a room.

Lauren was still in shock over the fact that Nathan loved her. Truly loved her. She was also a bit wary of his continued silence and the underlying current of anger. She could sense it, feel it as though he'd yelled the words at her. It made Lauren more nervous than she wanted to admit.

It wasn't that she was afraid of him. The thought of being spanked again actually did wonderful things to her body, like making her tingle from head to toe. What bothered Lauren was knowing she'd done something so horrendous he'd actually looked sick.

At the same time, she wasn't willing to just roll over to his every whim, at least not outside of the bedroom. Rodeoing was her life, or had been until just recently. It wasn't something she could just turn her back on.

"Now, what's this about two more shows?"

Damn, Nathan didn't sound as though he was in a very understanding mood. "I ..."
Lauren squeaked, then cleared her throat. "I have two more rounds to participate in. One tonight before the dance; the last one tomorrow morning."

Nathan said nothing until he'd parked the car and climbed out. Once they were both free of the confining vehicle, he stalked toward her. "Like hell you do. Do you know I almost had a fucking coronary watching you out there?"

Lauren understood where Nathan was coming from; really, she did. He had been raised in the city, not around cowboys the way she had. Lauren tried, to no avail, to remind herself of the fact.

"I've donated my time just like I do every year, Nathan. If I don't help out there won't be enough bullfighters to keep the riders safe."

"And who will keep you safe, dammit?" Nathan grasped her upper arms, drawing her to him with little effort. He pulled her close and held her tight, refusing to let go. His voice was a ragged whisper when he next spoke.

"Tell me, Lauren. Who will keep you safe?"

The emotion lacing his voice brought tears to Lauren's eyes. "Look at me, baby." When his brown eyes were focused solely on her Lauren rose to her tiptoes and kissed him lightly on the mouth.

"I'm flattered that you're worried -- ecstatic, really, because now I have no doubt that you love me. But I have to do this, Nathan. It's part of who I am."

He looked ready to argue so Lauren kissed him again. When he seemed calm, she tore her lips from his. "I've given up the profession, though, and if it'll make you happy, after this rodeo is over I'll never work in the arena again."

A shuddering breath left his chest. "You'd do that for me?"

"Of course," Lauren chided gently. "I'd do anything for the man I love."

Nathan's whole body stilled. "Say it again," he demanded. "Tell me." His insistent growl filled the room when Lauren didn't speak up fast enough.

"I'm done with no stings attached, Nathan. I love you and I want to be with you!"

Lauren threw herself at him, plastering her mouth to his, afraid to let go. Nathan kissed her hungrily before releasing her. "I never thought I'd hear you say the words, sweetheart. Now that I have, you're mine. Only mine. Always mine," he growled.

Lauren smiled prettily up at him, seducing him with her gaze. "So you're not mad that I'm still going to participate?"

"Oh, I'm mad, all right, but we'll wait until the weekend is over to settle up. I want your focus on your job, not on your ass."

* * * * *

Nathan helped prepare things for the toy drive scheduled for the next day's last round of riders. He'd offered to help with any and everything so he wouldn't be compelled to watch Lauren at work.

Every time another name was announced over the speaker system, or the crowds erupted in applause, or a collective gasp filtered through the stands, Nathan's heart skipped a beat. He couldn't wait for the day to be over so he could hold Lauren close and thank the stars above for keeping her safe. Working hard to keep his mind off of everything that was going on around him didn't seem to work as well as Nathan first thought it would.

His head snapped to attention as gasps of horror and murmurs of fear made their way through the stands. Nathan climbed atop the chair he had been seated on to give him a better view. When he spotted two men carrying a smaller form from the arena his heart stilled in his chest.

He searched the arena for Lauren but couldn't find her. Jumping down from the seat, Nathan took off toward the arena at a dead run. His heart was pounding painfully fast by the time he made it to the back arena gates. And still, he didn't see Lauren.

He'd just spun on his heel prepared to head to the first aid tent when he was stopped by Lauren's father. "It wasn't her." Bill had a knowing look in his eyes, one that should have embarrassed Nathan but didn't.

"Where is she?"

Bill nodded to the arena where Lauren was standing on a barrel working the crowd. Nathan watched her for a short time before he felt confident enough to take a deep breath. "Thank God," he said exhaling the pent-up fear pulsing through his body.

It was much later when Nathan was finally able to collect Lauren into his arms. Her green eyes sparkled with excitement, making Nathan shake his head.

"What's wrong?" Lauren asked as she rubbed her tiny body against his, arousing him in the midst of a mingling crowd. The minx.

"Nothing, except that every time the crowd gasped I lost ten years off my life. Your ass is going to be so sore come Sunday night."

She had the audacity to smile at him. “What else will you do to me?” Her husky words sent his blood pumping south. His cock was hard. Ready.

Leaning in low, until his mouth was right at ear level, he whispered, “I’m still planning it all but I’m having a few things delivered. Besides spanking your sassy ass, I thought I might show you some of my rope tricks. Of course, your ass being on fire might make it so you don’t appreciate my abilities nearly as much as you otherwise would have.”

Lauren turned her head and nipped his bottom lip, catching Nathan off guard, startling a chuckle from him.

“Promises, promises,” she breathed against his mouth.

Nathan roared with laughter before entwining his fingers with hers. “Brat.”

They walked to his car hand in hand then Nathan drove to the motel where they proceeded to love each other thoroughly before dressing for the dance.

By the time they arrived, the place was swinging. Couples crowded the dance floor and for the first time ever, Nathan gave silent thanks to his mother for her years of forced family gatherings where dancing always took place.

No sooner were they through the door than Nathan spirited Lauren off to dance. The thrum of a slow two-step filled the night air as Nathan collected Lauren close. “I hope the band keeps this pace all night long so I have a legitimate excuse to hold you in my arms.”

“It hasn’t even been an hour,” Lauren gasped as Nathan pressed his thigh more firmly between hers.

“Doesn’t matter. I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of you, sweetheart.”

Nathan’s wish didn’t come true. All too soon, the band sped up the beat. Nathan led Lauren from the dance floor and over to the bar where they ordered drinks.

“I’m going to see how long the line to the ladies room is. I’ll find you when I get back,” she said, motioning to the cluster of tables off to the side of the dance floor. Nathan nodded his head and watched as Lauren sauntered away. She sure did have a walk on her.

Nathan paid for their drinks then made his way across the room. It only took a minute before he spotted his assistant, Charlotte. All decked out in his new cowboy clothes, Nathan knew there was bound to be some amount of heckling. He thought to stop Charlotte before she got herself on a roll.

"If you say one word, I'll fire you on the spot." Nathan knew Charlotte wouldn't believe him the minute she twisted around and got a good look at him.

Her eyes twinkled merrily. Nathan could only guess at what was going on in her wicked little mind. Their friendship was a strong one so the back and forth bantering was all in fun.

"It's like that, is it?" Charlotte asked.

Only Nathan didn't hear because Lauren walked through the door at that very moment, stealing his breath.

"I'll be ..." Nathan's voice trailed behind him, his words cut off by the sensual sway of Lauren's hips as she strode toward him.

"You took too long," Nathan growled, leaning in for a kiss. His words made Lauren giggle and roll her eyes.

"Come on, sweetheart. There is someone I want you to meet." Nathan turned her back toward where Charlotte had been sitting only to notice she was being led out to the dance floor.

What the hell, Nathan thought as he moved toward the dance floor. Another slow dance with Lauren might drive him over the edge of sanity but it was a chance he was willing to take in order to hold her in his arms again.

Once on the dance floor, Nathan pulled her into the circle of his arms. They made their way around several times before he was able to maneuver them close enough to Charlotte and the cowboy she was dancing with.

Charlotte noticed them right away. A smile curved her mouth as she not so patiently waited for an introduction.

“Lauren, this is Charlotte, my assistant. Charlotte, Lauren.”

The two women murmured hellos. Once finished, Nathan pinned Charlotte with the same look she’d just bestowed upon him.

“Ty, this is my boss, Nathan. Nathan, this is Ty.

Nathan shook Ty’s hand, noticing how it seemed to take all the man’s concentration not to turn his gaze back to Charlotte. And if that wasn’t bad enough, Charlotte was all but drooling over him in return.

After shaking Ty’s hand, Nathan gathered Lauren close to his side then turned to look at her. He found himself stunned speechless to notice she had the exact same lust-filled look in her eyes, which were trained intently on him.

“It was nice to meet you, Ty. Charlotte, I’ll call you early next week.”

The couple resumed dancing, moving further away from where he and Lauren still stood.

“I think it’s time to leave.”

Nathan’s mind was set on touching and tasting every inch of Lauren’s body. His need was so strong, he wasn’t at all sure they’d make it back to the room before he had to sink his tongue into her wet folds.

“Lead the way, cowboy. I’m all yours.”

Chapter Eight

Lauren snuggled deeper into the soft mattress. Her body was deliciously sore, achy in all the right places. Never in a million years would she have imagined that being tied so thoroughly it was nearly impossible to twitch could be such a huge turn on. But it had been. She briefly wondered what other tricks Nathan had up his sleeve.

Now fully awake, she turned over in the bed only to realize Nathan wasn't there. Sitting upright in bed, the sheet now pooled around her hips, Lauren cocked her head, listening. The ringing of the phone damn near scared her out of her skin.

"Hello."

"You sound sexy in the morning, sweetheart."

Lauren frowned in confusion. "Nathan?"

A rich chuckle spilled through the phone line. "Were you expecting someone else?"

"I was expecting you to be here next to me." Even Lauren heard the pout in her voice.

"Ahhh, baby. I wanted to, believe me, but there is much to do today." There was a pause as Nathan spoke quietly to someone else. Then he said, "It's almost rodeo time so you'd better get up and get dressed. I'll be by in thirty minutes to pick you up."

Lauren took a startled glance at the clock on the bedside table then shrieked, “You let me sleep too long,” as she flung herself from the bed searching frantically for her clothes.

“I went by the ranch and got you some clothes. I’ll stop for breakfast along the way.”

After hanging up, Lauren dashed to the shower. There was no time to linger. She washed briskly before getting out and drying off.

With only a towel wrapped around her, Lauren was just about finished with her hair when the door to their room opened, allowing Nathan, who looked doubly delicious in his cowboy gear, to enter.

“Mmm, too bad we don’t have time to play,” he said as he nuzzled Lauren’s neck.

She couldn’t help but smile. Happiness like she’d never before known stole her breath and brought tears to her eyes.

“I still can’t believe you actually love me.”

Nathan’s lips curved. His eyes shone with emotion. “But you’re so easy to love, Lauren. How could you not know?”

With a hand at the nape of Nathan’s neck, Lauren pulled him down low then kissed his mouth. “Thank you. I love you too.”

Nathan groaned, his face buried in her neck. The soft whisper of his breath teased and tantalized her senses. Lauren loved the feel of him so close, so warm and hard against her.

It was impossible not to rub herself against him. The thigh Nathan had wedged between her legs was driving her crazy. “Nathan.” It was a whispered plea, one of need and love all rolled into one.

And yet, in the back of Lauren’s mind she couldn’t help but worry about the future. She was finally home, helping her father at O’Shea Haven, and didn’t want to leave. Thought of living in Los Angeles left her feeling claustrophobic and nauseous but she would move to be with Nathan if he asked. And that right there was the root of her problem. He hadn’t asked.

A stinging swat to her backside brought Lauren out of her stupor. “Enough, baby, now go and get dressed before we’re late.”

Lauren teasingly stuck her tongue out at Nathan then dashed to the safety of the bathroom when he came after her. Within minutes she was dressed and they were on their way to the rodeo grounds.

The tension coiling Nathan’s body was palpable as they strode, hand in hand, from his car to the office.

“Thank you.” Lauren felt the need to let Nathan know how much she appreciated his support even though he was dead-set against what she was doing.

“Don’t thank me yet, sweetheart. And don’t forget, I’ll be taking my new ulcer out on your pretty little ass.” Nathan gave her a show-stopping kiss then nudged her in the direction of the arena.

“You’re still dressing like Santa, aren’t you?” She couldn’t help but smile at the image.

Nathan grabbed his non-existent belly and gave a jolly “ho ho ho.” “I’ll be at the front gates as soon as I get changed. As far away from the arena as possible, which is perfect as far as I’m concerned.”

“Chicken.”

Lauren shivered when his eyes narrowed and he took the few steps to bring them back face to face -- or as close as possible, considering their height difference.

“We’ll see who the chicken is when you’re begging for mercy. Begging me to keep going. Begging me to quit. Hell, I’ll have your ass so hot and your pussy so wet you won’t know what you’re begging for.”

Lauren gulped past the wicked arousal threatening to choke her. Taking a few cowardly steps in retreat, she muttered, “Umm, gotta go. I’ll ... ah ... see you after the rodeo.”

After stumbling over the words, Lauren spun on her heel and all but ran toward the arena, Nathan’s boom of laughter following.

* * * * *

Nathan smiled at the kids, both the good ones and the hellions, as he played Santa at the entrance gates. As long as he stood in one place and didn't move around too much the spurs strapped to his boots didn't threaten to topple him. He wondered briefly how cowboys managed to walk in the darned things.

He was getting irritated. It seemed like it was taking twice as long for the last round of bull riding to finish as it had yesterday, and even from this distance he could still hear the gasps and applause.

Not to mention the fact that Hank and every other cowboy made it their job to stop by every now and then with graphic updates on Lauren's daring antics.

When the guests started leaving, Nathan made his way to one of the trailers that had been set up for rodeo business to change out of his costume. He opened the door and came face to face with Lauren.

"Ah, man! You already changed? But I wanted to see you."

"You'll see me, I'm sure of it. I swear every damned local TV and newspaper was here at one point in time today." Nathan's words were mumbled and low. His damn picture would probably be spread across the county by morning.

Lauren, who thought the news great, clapped her hands. "I'm so glad."

Nathan returned her smile with one of his own then pulled her close before spinning them so Lauren's back was to the trailer, her front plastered to him from chest to knees.

"How did things go?"

"No one was hurt and the crowd got a good show, so I'd say it went great. And you?"

Nathan thought about all the sticky-fingered kids who'd tugged his fake Santa beard and smiled. "The toy drive seemed to be a huge success. There are going to be a lot of happy kids come Christmas."

Lauren lifted up onto her toes, putting the rigid length of Nathan's denim-covered arousal right where she wanted it. "Thank you for everything." She breathed the words against his lips, before slowing sucking his lower lip into her mouth where she nipped and nibbled on it.

Nathan was sure her action would cause him to go up in flames. When she said, "Let's go back to the room," he wasn't sure he was going to be able to say no.

His body shook with need but there was so much he had planned for the day, so much he wanted to show Lauren to pass it all up for a bit of mattress dancing, no matter how wonderful it might be. Not this time, at least, not when their future was at stake.

"Not right now, sweetheart." Nathan struggled to get the offensive words out. "I've got something planned.

He ushered her to where his car was parked. Once there, he pulled a strip of soft black silk from his pocket. "Turn around." Nathan's huskily whispered command raised chill bumps along the tanned skin of Lauren's arms.

When Lauren did as Nathan bade, he tied the length of silk snugly around her head, being sure to cover her eyes completely so she couldn't see a thing.

"Where are you taking me?" Her voice was shaky yet she gave no words of protest as Nathan helped her into the passenger seat of his car.

He leaned across her body. Lauren started when he reached a hand under the hem of her shirt instead of buckling her seatbelt as she expected. Flicking the front clasp of her bra, he freed her breasts from their cotton confines.

"Take your bra off for me, baby."

Lauren hesitated, earning her a tweak to her nipple, which made her gasp then moan. "Now, Lauren." Nathan kept his voice hard while gripping her nipple snugly between his thumb and forefinger so she wouldn't forget. "Trust me, baby. I'll never let another see or hurt what belongs to me, but it is in your best interest not to make me repeat myself."

She seemed to be in a trance. A fine sheen of perspiration covered her face, making her blushing cheeks glow. And yet she didn't move to comply.

Stubborn minx, Nathan thought as he tightened his grip on the erect nub of her nipple.

"O ... okay." Her hands fumbled to remove her bra. When she was finished, bra in her lap, Nathan took it from her trembling hands then leaned in to fasten her seatbelt, being sure to graze her body every chance he got.

When he finished with her seatbelt, Nathan gently suckled the flesh of her neck. "Oh God," she moaned. "Please don't stop."

Nathan chuckled and moved away then clucked his tongue when she raised her hand to the silk at her eyes. "Touch it and I'll have you over my knee right here." His words stilled her hand in mid air. When she placed it back in her lap, Nathan smiled.

"Good girl."

Nathan walked around the car. He took several deep breaths before climbing in and taking off. The drive seemed like it took forever. Lauren look like a wet dream sitting blindfolded with her unconfined breasts swaying prettily with every movement of the car.

He sped past the driveway leading to O'Shea Haven, his heart beating wildly in his chest. When they reached the special markers, Nathan edged the car over to the side of the road.

"Stay put until I come around to help you," he said as he climbed from the car.

When he had Lauren out of the car, he lifted her into his arms and carried her out into the ankle deep pasture of grass. Nathan settled her on her feet then moved behind her. He released her blindfold then wrapped his arms around her waist while resting his chin on the top of her head.

"Where are we?"

Nathan moved around her so he could see her eyes as he told her. "This is the land bordering O'Shea Haven to the North. Your land. Our land."

Lauren's nose scrunched. Her brows knitted together in confusion. It was as if she were afraid to ask." What do you mean?"

"I mean I love you and I want to be with you. Forever, Lauren. Will you do that for me? Will you be my wife and have my babies? Will you show me how to ranch, and when we're old and gray will you still let me paddle your ass?"

Lauren laughed even as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Is that a yes?" Nathan was sure she was going to kill him by making him wait.

"Yes!" She threw herself at him, catching Nathan off guard. The next thing Nathan knew, he was flat on his back with Lauren sitting on top of him.

"All I ask is for some drawer space in the bedroom and an office. You can do what you like with the rest of it."

Lauren did that thing with her nose again, scrunching it up. She looked so damned cute. "The rest of what?"

"Our house, sweetheart." Nathan couldn't help but laugh when Lauren lifted her head to look around.

"But there is no house, Nathan."

"There will be soon enough, baby. You've got an appointment with a contractor next week. You see that rise over there?" Nathan asked pointing to a specific spot. "I think that'll be the perfect spot to wake up in your arms every morning. Until then, I've rented a place in town, which still isn't too long of a drive for you to help your dad out whenever you want."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

Nathan didn't think he sounded as though he was joking, but Lauren was looking at him as if he'd sprouted horns. "Very."

"What about Los Angeles and High Impact PR?"

“That’s the good thing about being the boss, baby; I can do whatever I like. We’ll live here and I’ll work from home. Of course, I’ll have to travel on occasion but it won’t matter because I’ll take you with me.”

Lauren’s tears fell freely then. Leaning forward, she kissed him. Her trembling lips felt like Heaven against his, her words were a balm to his soul. “I love you, Nathan Mills. More than life itself.”

Nathan spent the rest of the afternoon showing his new fiancée just how much her words rang true for him as well.

THE END

Maggie Casper

Maggie Casper's life could be called many things but boring isn't one of them. If asked, Maggie would tell you that blessed would more aptly describe her everyday existence.

Marrying young and being loved by a great husband and four gorgeous daughters should be enough to make anybody feel blessed. Add to that a bit of challenge, a lot of fun and an undeniably close circle of friends and family and you'd be walking in her shoes.

Speaking of challenges and fun, when not writing Maggie's alter ego spends her time fighting fires and treating patients as a Lieutenant and Advanced Emergency Medical Technician with the local fire department. These awesome people are like her second family, no picking and choosing, they're just stuck with her.

A love of reading was passed on by Maggie's mother at a very early age, and so began her addiction to romance novels. Maggie admits to writing some in high school but when life got in the way, she put her pen and paper up. Seems that things changed over the years because when she finally decided it was time to put her story ideas on paper, the pen was out and the computer was in. Took her a while to catch up but she finally made it.

When not writing, Maggie can usually be found reading, doing genealogy research or watching NASCAR.

Visit Maggie on the Web at www.maggiecasper.com.