

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Romeo

Gail Faulkner

ROMEO

An Ellora's Cave Publication, July 2005

Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.

1056 Home Ave.

Akron, OH 44310

ISBN MS Reader (LIT) ISBN # 1-4199-0186-9

Other available formats (no ISBNs are assigned):

Adobe (PDF), Rocketbook (RB), Mobipocket (PRC) & HTML

ROMEO Copyright© 2005 GAIL FAULKNER

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part without permission.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. They are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

Edited by *Mary Moran*.

Cover art by *Syneca*.

Warning:

The following material contains graphic sexual content meant for mature readers. *Romeo* has been rated E-rotic by a minimum of three independent reviewers.

Ellora's Cave Publishing offers three levels of Romantica™ reading entertainment: S (S-ensuous), E (E-rotic), and X (X-treme).

S-ensuous love scenes are explicit and leave nothing to the imagination.

E-rotic love scenes are explicit, leave nothing to the imagination, and are high in volume per the overall word count. In addition, some E-rated titles might contain fantasy material that some readers find objectionable, such as bondage, submission, same sex encounters, forced seductions, and so forth. E-rated titles are the most graphic titles we carry; it is common, for instance, for an author to use words such as "fucking", "cock", "pussy", and such within their work of literature.

X-treme titles differ from E-rated titles only in plot premise and storyline execution. Unlike E-rated titles, stories designated with the letter X tend to contain controversial subject matter not for the faint of heart.

ROMEO

Gail Faulkner

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Nissan 350ZX Turbo: Nissan Jidosha Kabushiki Kaisha Ta Nissan Motor Co., Ltd.

Ken and Barbie: Mattel, Inc.

Castle Grayskull: Mattel, Inc.

He-Man: Mattel, Inc.

Dedication

To Char for her insight. Thank you, Patti, for your expertise. Allen who knows no limit to patience. Patricia Roxanne for inspiring me and enjoying the way my inspiration turns out.

Chapter One

"I should warn you about my cousin," Carla stated casually as she flew down the flat expanse of highway. After turning off Interstate 20 the road was virtually empty, a perfect opportunity to push the new Nissan 350ZX Turbo boy magnet she'd just given herself. This was the first real chance Carla had had to open it up and both girls were enjoying the speed and freedom the little car embodied.

"The fact is you're exactly his type—a delicate thing who's china-doll pale with big blue eyes and black hair. Of course, he's older than we are, the first child of the oldest son and all. He probably has six chicks on a string anyway. Likely, you don't have to worry. He'll be busy."

"Worry? Why would I worry? He's not a rapist, is he?" Lauren asked, laughing at her friend who seemed serious about the warning. Until now it had been a relaxed, girls out kind of trip. For Lauren it was an even greater step into independence than most, a welcome chance to get completely away from her loving yet stiflingly protective family. This little taste of *Thelma and Louise* was just the ticket as far as she was concerned. She was unwilling to let anything ruin the carefree weekend as they cruised down the road with the windows open. The sage and sun-laden air felt and smelled like sweet freedom.

"No, no, nothing like that. It's just that he's so 'in charge' about everything. He's the stereotypical tall, dark and handsome cowboy," Carla grumped as her long body shifted uncomfortably behind the wheel. "He's really bossy, dictatorial and a general pain in the ass. I'm only going to the ranch because all my other cousins will be there, and well, I'd like to see his reaction to you."

"Me? Why me? He's seen a million of me according to you," Lauren commented in growing concern.

"Yeah, but he's never met you. The original Ice Queen is what you are and you know it. I know I should have told you about him sooner, but I was afraid you wouldn't come," Carla confessed. "I've told everyone else about you and they can hardly wait to meet you."

"What? Who is 'everyone' and why are they so eager to meet me?" Suspicious and irritated, Lauren slid around to face her friend.

"The cousins. They, um, well... I told them you'd turn a cold shoulder on him for sure. They're sort of anxious to see that," Carla confessed.

"I see. You're selling tickets to a show, Carla? That's low. You're right. I wouldn't have come if I'd known what you're up to. It's not fair to me and certainly isn't fair to what's his name."

"Aw, Lauren. He's an arrogant, never been wrong, never been turned down jerk," Carla responded. "His name is Romeo."

"You're kidding," Lauren scoffed.

"Nope, seriously not kidding. Sick, isn't it? He's rich, good-looking and named Romeo. You can hardly blame us for wanting him to get a little taste of humble pie. You're just the ticket. The woman of his dreams who's never gonna be interested." Carla's attractive face twisted in a grimace while her wide hazel eyes sparkled with mischief. High energy radiated off her long, lean body even after several hours of tedious driving. In almost every way the two girls were exact opposites. One tall and in constant motion, the other petite and surrounded in an almost palatable calm. Their instant friendship was a mystery to most until you got to know them.

"Carla, I came as a favor to you. You begged me to come because you'd be so 'bored'. I didn't agree to be the main attraction. You know I've never been on a ranch before and that alone makes me uncomfortable with all the large, stinky animals and things. You promised it'd be fun. Now you spring this convoluted tale of what—revenge?" Lauren frowned darkly.

"Come on, be a sport. You don't have to do anything differently than you normally would. I didn't actually lie. The ranch is a blast when Romeo isn't hanging around making up a bunch of rules. He really is a pain in the ass," Carla continued.

"What do you mean, a lot of rules?" Lauren asked.

"You know, no running at the pool, no cannon balling each other, no playing bumper horse, it's endless," Carla explained.

"Sounds like reasonable safety stuff to me. Are the cousins a bunch of teenagers?" Lauren wanted to know. Doubtful now that she'd heard the complaints.

"Oh, we're all around our age, twenty to twenty-five now. Last time we were all at the ranch I guess we were teenagers." Carla laughed. "Oh, well, he deserves it. The man lives a charmed life, I swear. He needs shaking up."

"I hardly think my visit will relieve all the angst I hear in you, Carla. It's more like you and your cousins need therapy over this guy. Good grief. Those rules were an attempt to keep you all alive to reach your twenties. I doubt he'll give me a second look anyway. You'll be disappointed again and the little chip on your shoulder will just get bigger," Lauren predicted. "In any case, I don't intend to perform like some dancing bear. If it weren't such a long way back, I'd make you take me home."

They were three hours and forty-five minutes into the trip. Turning around now would be another three hours and forty-five minutes of being mad at each other as they drove back. Yuck.

"Yeah, I knew you would. Part of why I didn't work up the nerve to tell you 'til just now. Come on, Lauren. You know I love you. You're the one who got me through that whole Philip fiasco. I wouldn't do anything to hurt you. The Romeo junk isn't that important. I just thought I should warn you," Carla sheepishly added.

"I have a feeling it's the only important thing about this trip, Carla. I detest subterfuge. You know that. Tell me about your other cousins. The wild monkey ones," Lauren demanded. "I get the feeling I'll be the odd one out anyway. What the hell is 'bumper horse' and is it as dangerous as it sounds?"

Laughing at her city friend, Carla proceeded to explain bumper horse and various other activities. Soon Carla turned into an imposing entry gate and drove up a long, winding road to the Texas ranch her cousin owned. The drive was long enough for her to get through a short history of the ranch and its present bad-boy owner.

The ranch was the original family homestead, but now it was owned and operated by Carla's oldest cousin. His parents had died tragically young in a private plane crash. He'd been seventeen, an only child. His grandparents had still lived at the ranch then so they'd been his guardians. By the time Romeo turned twenty-two, they'd both passed away. He'd been sole owner and completely in charge for fifteen years now. His aunts, uncles and their families visited often. Somehow, he'd managed to retain the ranch as the family hub for the entire clan.

Privately Lauren was intrigued, although Carla told the whole story in an off-handed manner. Carla was not impressed with the man who'd been forced into the responsibilities of adulthood so young. As far as she was concerned, he'd been an ass forever.

As they pulled up to the sprawling ranch house, Lauren grinned. It looked like a scene from a western movie. The main house was a prominent feature but surrounded by barns and outbuildings in easy walking distance. A massive operation if you went by the number of barns, Lauren decided. A porch wrapped around the rambling house, which had obviously grown through several decades and styles. The resulting massive structure retained a relaxed casualness expressed in the comfortable rockers and porch swings distributed along the entire veranda. The landscaping surrounding the house was gracious and welcoming, as was everything about this large working operation.

Lauren stepped out on the far side of the car while Carla sprang up from behind the wheel to greet a number of young people. Lauren took the few seconds she remained unnoticed to glance about. The tang of cut hay mixed with animal scents drifted up from the barns. It wasn't unpleasant, just a sort of fresh outdoors smell she wanted to inhale into every part of her. It was a smell she'd never experienced before in a life filled

with sterile interiors. Her gaze drifted to the side of the house to see a huge dog race around the corner. Following the dog sauntered a large man using a battered cowboy hat to beat the dust off his body. The man was tall and moved with the loose-limbed grace of muscles honed and developed through hard use. His rolling gait was simply the cowboy stroll at its finest. His dark head was bent as he whacked thick thighs with the hat. The shirt stretched interestingly across his heavily muscled chest might have been white or beige at one time, now it was mostly dirt red and sweat-stained. The soft material moved with him to mold a flat abdomen then disappear into low-riding jeans. Slim hips seemed emphasized by the powerful long legs below them.

The man glanced up at the commotion and while his face didn't change, Lauren received the impression of a grimace as his eyes slid over the sporty little car they'd arrived in. His dark, lazy gaze traveled to the boisterous crowd and suddenly he looked directly into her eyes. Lauren blinked at the shocking intensity of that gaze and glanced down at the stampeding dog again. Coming from the side made its path a direct line to Lauren first. The dog was completely okay with the arrangement as he managed to doggy-grin and wag his tail while pounding across the lawn. Lauren weighed a hundred and ten pounds—the dog had her beat by at least seventy and showed no signs of slowing down. Lauren considered jumping in the car again but that just seemed too cowardly. No one else appeared concerned. They wouldn't let a killer dog run loose, would they?

A plump lower lip sucked and white teeth clamped down on it as she watched the thundering approach. Abruptly a low whistle pierced the air and the dog stopped, turned in a flash and rushed back at the man. Lauren's eyes shot up to him and a hint of a grin met her gaze. He kept moving toward the group as a whole but looked only at her. His focused attention was just beginning to feel uncomfortable when Carla called her name and waved her around the car to start introducing Lauren to the boisterous gang. Smiling and greeting each one with seeming undivided interest, Lauren still knew exactly where the cowboy was at all times. He stood back and watched, the dog

squirming at his side. The feeling that his eyes never left her was unsettling, but at least the dog didn't leave his side either.

Romeo was content to wait while Carla introduced her friend around to his cousins. It gave him a minute to enjoy the view. His first look into those liquid blue eyes had sent a sharp bolt of heat straight to his cock. From this slight distance, he drank in a long look at the rest of her and experienced the sensation of his life flashing before his eyes. Bachelor days were over. Heat surged up from his crotch like a swarm of angry bees. It enveloped him with stinging awareness. He'd been attracted to compact little women all his life, but he hadn't known there was a perfect one out there. This curvy feminine being with her flawlessly beautiful face was the one he'd been looking for.

Her every feature seemed painted with perfection. Huge, dark blue eyes, full inviting lips, a shining cap of soft black curls tumbling around her head. She was barely five feet four inches tall, but no one could mistake her for a child. The gentle slope of breast and hip drew the male eye like a magnet. His absolute awareness of her femininity overwhelmed him for a moment. Her delicate bones, the graceful way she tilted her head and smiled at something one of the idiots said. Even the way her body shifted as she turned to another member of the family captivated him.

He was damn glad to hear her name wasn't Juliet. That would have just been too much. As it was, he'd have a hell of a time not jumping her in the next ten minutes. It was surprisingly difficult to control the elemental drive to claim what he considered his already. This aggressive need to possess her wasn't even remotely rational, he realized in amazement. Romeo wasn't comfortable with the conviction that this was his woman. He wasn't arguing with it, just startled by it. Yeah, that was probably the biggest understatement since, "Houston, we have a problem".

She stood there and changed his world by merely existing. Making up his mind swiftly was both a curse and a blessing, but that's how he'd always been. This time it shoved him off the edge of the planet into an unknown universe. His future suddenly

stretched before him full of things he'd thought were a long way off. Now he could hardly wait to get there. He'd imagined feeling trapped when some crafty female finally made him contemplate walking down the isle, not this overwhelming drive to propel her there as fast as possible.

Her wide-eyed look at Edgar told him large animals intimidated her. She also looked tired. He noticed tiny lines of strain around her edible mouth. Schooling his features not to frown at that, he waited for Carla to get around to him. The primitive monster that was his need to protect and control a loved one's environment reared its head. The need to cosset and pamper infiltrated lust with searing urgency, shoving aside all other considerations as he studied those telltale signs, which were chillingly familiar. He wanted to whisk her off to a soothing environment, to personally ensure his overactive family remained at bay until she felt better. He ruthlessly wrestled the possessive monster into submission and consciously projected civilized urbanity.

Romeo stepped forward as Carla finished with everyone else. "Hello, hellion," he greeted her warmly.

Laughing, Carla went up on tiptoes to peck his cheek while warning him, "Don't you touch me, Romeo. You're filthy."

Lauren had known who it was. No way to miss the air of quiet authority draped across the wide expanse of his dusty shoulders. He might look like a ranch hand, but his presence said 'master of the domain'. His above-six-foot height made him imposing, but it was the dark intensity of aristocratic features that told one of his Spanish ancestors mingled with the tough Texan survivors of a by-gone age. It created a sinfully handsome man with thick black hair, which now fell over his brow in Rhett Butler rakishness. From the top of his glossy head, down his chiseled nose to the cleft in his perfect chin, the man was just ridiculously handsome.

Carla turned to Lauren. "This is my friend Lauren. I knew you wouldn't mind one more this weekend."

"What?" Lauren sputtered, grateful for a good excuse to drag her eyes off his unbelievable face. "You didn't tell him you were bringing a guest?" she demanded of Carla. Oh great, just great. Not only was she the dancing bear for half this crowd, she was an unexpected guest to the other half.

"Romeo doesn't mind. Do you?" Carla insisted.

"No, not a problem. Nice to meet you, Lauren, I hope you enjoy the ranch." His low voice seemed to vibrate down to her bones as he held out a hand to her. Placing her slender hand in his large grip shot that vibration right back out again with an electric jolt to her system. Damn, not a good indicator for the Ice Queen expectation.

"I'm sure I will," she managed in a steady voice as she pulled away from his gentle grip. "Sorry if it's an inconvenience," Lauren added self-consciously.

"Don't be silly," one of the young men assured her. "Another beautiful face is always welcome, right, Romeo?" The young man turned to Carla. "Hot car, hellion. You didn't say you'd gotten a new one. Can I drive it?" Lauren decided the family resemblance was most pronounced in the high energy radiating off each one of these cousins. All of them tall...well, anyone was tall compared to her, but the family seemed to breed tall and good-looking right down the line. The constant motion thing would have marked them though. In a group, they were like a force of nature.

Before Carla could answer, Romeo's deep voice interjected smoothly. "Perhaps the girls would like to take their bags in and relax first, Steve. It's a four-hour trip down here. Pop the trunk, Carla." His tone was low and quiet, but there was no suggesting about it. Those soft directions were commands. Lauren immediately recognized the attitude that drove Romeo's cousins nuts.

A little smile snuck up her face and she had to look down to hide the amusement. When she glanced up again, Romeo shot her a questioning look. He'd seen her instant amusement and questioned it with a raised brow. Lauren pretended not to see the brow as she reached into the now open trunk for her one bag. A large hand closed over hers from behind and gently moved her hand aside as Romeo lifted out her bag.

"This it?" he questioned softly, his tone intimate in the midst of the crowd. Around her, Lauren felt watching eyes and avid expectations. He now stood beside her to curve his large body over hers for the bag. His scent of fresh-cut hay, pine and just pure male enveloped her in a slightly dizzying fog of strange new hormones she didn't know what to do with. No, no, no. These vultures were not going to read anything from her interaction with Romeo.

Being careful not to breathe in too deeply and lose all hope of rational thought, she resolutely turned slightly away from him. "Yep, and the rest are Carla's." Lauren smiled brightly and intentionally looked over at Steve. "You look like you're into weightlifting, Steve, they should be no problem for you." Her flirty joking blended into the ribbing and diffused the attention off her and Romeo.

Steve and his younger cousin Jason grabbed Carla's bags and commenced to loud groaning at the weight. Carla smacked both of them on the back of the head in playful protest and everyone moved toward the house. Somehow, Romeo was right beside Lauren with a large hand at her back as she went up the steps to the porch. She moved away from him quickly, trying to be casual as the group entered the house to greet more family in the form of aunts and uncles.

The large entry, which had probably been the front room at one time, was crowded with Monteros and it was almost difficult to see the casual comfort that made this rambling structure a home. There was a fireplace off to the side, beside it were long rustic benches for removing boots and coat racks at each end so clothing could be shed right at the door. No stuffy pretension of a formal entry existed.

Through several archways one could see the various rooms and a hallway leading off down both sides of the house. Directly in front of them was the oversized living room whose casual seating arrangements fed naturally into what appeared to be a den, complete with a pool table. In the opposite direction off the living room an archway led to a large dining room. Beyond that appeared a doorway that probably led to the kitchen since there was also a pass-through in the wall and cabinetry barely visible in

the other room. Every room boasted its own fireplace, which seemed to draw the rustic past into the present. The fireplaces were large and welcoming with wood stacked neatly by each one, even in the middle of summer.

The introductions over and general pandemonium continuing unabated, Lauren suddenly felt a warm rush of breath wash over her ear from behind. "Come on through here, I'll show you where you can relax a moment." His low voice sent a shiver down her spine.

It would have been nice to turn down the invitation, but at this moment, her head was pounding and her legs had just started trembling. Lauren really wished she wasn't physically desperate for a few seconds' peace. She should have told Carla about her little problem before accepting this invitation. It's not like the condition was transmittable or contagious. It was just a pain in the ass, as Carla would say.

Lauren's head turned slightly to him and nodded. Immediately his large hand spanned her back again and guided her backwards. With tender insistence, his hand remained on her back as he turned them down a hallway.

At the end of the hall he opened a door, ushering her into what immediately felt like a soothing space. But Lauren couldn't be sure anymore—she needed her medication as the pounding in her head grew louder. Romeo stepped past her to deposit her case on the bed. In that moment when his back was to her, Lauren let herself grope for the chair at the wall beside the door. She sank into it while shaking hands fumbled with her purse.

He seemed to sense her distress and glanced back at her even before he dropped the bag. Sharp eyes took in her collapse onto the chair and shaking hands.

"What is it?" Romeo demanded as his big body moved across the room in a second and he sank to his haunches before her. Steady hands took the purse from her and delved into it. "What am I looking for, Lauren?"

"Prescription," Lauren breathed, her head relaxed back onto the tall chair and her eyes closed gratefully.

"Let me get you a glass of water, just a second." He bounced up and was gone. Then she felt a glass pressed into her hand and a pill to her lips. She opened for the pill and drank the water gratefully.

Opening her eyes a slit, Lauren found him in front of her on his haunches again, studying the prescription bottle. He read it carefully then plucked her purse off the floor and started digging through it again. "Are there more?" he asked tightly.

"No, just that one for headaches. I'll be fine in a few minutes. It's only a migraine," she assured him. His casual commandeering of her purse was something she didn't have the energy to deal with right now. However, it highlighted his in-charge attitude. Lauren was aware enough to be relieved she'd put the immunosuppressive drugs she'd now be on for a lifetime in her case. His nosy ass would have had a field day with those. Aaarrrrggg, even snorting silently hurt.

Romeo dropped the purse and looked into her eyes. "Why?" he asked bluntly.

"Because I get them?" Lauren attempted a feeble joke to distract him.

"I'm asking why you get migraines? People who get them this bad know why, Lauren. Tell me." There was that commanding tone again—it was beginning to wear on her.

Lauren smiled weakly—he really could be a pain in the ass. "It's stress. That's the trigger. Relax. I'll be fine soon."

"What caused this much stress, Lauren? You've only been here ten minutes. It takes much longer than that for this sort of thing to build. You were already shaking and couldn't see very well, could you?" Romeo pressed her with surprising knowledge about the condition.

"You really want to know, Romeo? You won't like it," she warned him tiredly and leaned back, closing her eyes again. It took too much energy to look at him and argue.

His hands settled on her jean-covered thighs and rubbed up and down in a soothing caress. "I already don't like the fact you get them, honey. I really don't like the fact that the doctor on your prescription is a heart specialist. What's one more thing to

dislike?" His low tone was an auditory smile as he murmured to her encouragingly. "So tell me why you have the headache, then tell me about your heart."

Shocked at his perception, Lauren managed to lift an eyebrow. "What makes you say it's a heart doctor?" Lauren asked.

Before he could answer she opened her eyes and frowned at him. "Look, Romeo, we just met a few minutes ago. I'm an unexpected guest in your home so that entitles you to some answers about a near collapse. It does not give you the right to demand my life story," she informed him firmly and removed his hands from her legs.

"I see," he mused, allowing her to remove his touch but now resting both palms on the chair arms on either side of her. "Then tell me the part it does get me."

"I am feeling stressed because of your cousins. The reason Carla invited me this weekend is not entirely what it seems. I found out in the car outside your gates. That's what gave me the headache," Lauren stated and closed her eyes again.

"Really?" Romeo's voice was a gentle murmur. He straightened up and bent to scoop her into his arms. Before she could react to being in his arms, he deposited her on the bed and adjusted the pillow behind her. Immediately turning to the tall windows, he pulled the drapes, submerging the room into a dimly lit environment that did calm her. The bed she lay on had to be a queen, its width covered with a muted forest green down comforter that pillowed her entire body in welcome softness. The room seemed to flow around them in tranquil tones of well-polished natural wood and plush woodland colors.

Fetching water again from the attached bathroom, he held it to her lips until she drained it. Then he was sitting on the side of the bed and leaning over to take her hand in his. "Now tell me the real reason you were invited."

Lauren huffed. He was good, very good. He'd done everything possible to aid her recovery, waiting on her hand and foot, and then asked for information. She felt obligated to tell him. She took a deep breath, trying to ignore how gorgeous this dominating, caring man was, and began her explanation.

"Carla said she convinced me to come this weekend because she wanted to see your reaction. She has also told your cousins what a cold shoulder I'll give you and now they're watching our every move. She thinks I'm the Ice Queen. They can hardly wait to see me put you in your place," Lauren said resignedly.

"Why does she think you're an Ice Queen?" Romeo asked.

"Because I hardly ever date, and when I do, I don't...um, she knows I don't put out," Lauren finished determinedly. He wanted details, might as well be blunt.

"Ah, Carla doesn't know about your weak heart, does she?" Romeo surmised.

"I do not have a weak heart. It's perfectly fine!" Lauren defended herself.

"But it wasn't fine before, was it? Tell me what happened, Lauren. It's better if I know to begin with. That way we won't have any nasty surprises later." His gentle tones made him sound perfectly reasonable. Until you thought about what he was saying. The weasel wouldn't give up.

"My heart is fine. It's the rest of me that's, ah, not what it could be. However, I am not in danger or an invalid. So stop with all the concern and let me rest a minute. I'll be up soon and everything will be normal," she insisted. Lauren determinedly closed her eyes and decided ignoring him was the best method of getting rid of him.

Firm lips briefly brushed hers then were gone. Her eyes blinked open as he straightened and smiled down at her. "I need to clean up and then I'll be in my study when you get up. It would be a good idea for us to have a chat about this little plot my cousins are trying to involve us in." He strode to the door and turned. "Don't worry. It was right to trust me with the truth. You'll come to find I'm a dependable guy."

Romeo Montero moved down the hall frowning. The little female he'd left in the darkened room disturbed him on every level. The first thing he needed to know was what her condition really was. A photographic memory gave him the doctor's number from the prescription bottle. He'd known the name anyway. He knew what the man did for a living and it worried him.

Looking at a frail form lying in a darkened room wrenched him back in time. The flood of helpless anger was familiar and not welcome. His mom had been a tall blonde but slender, easily exhausted and often suffered the same migraines. Intellectually he knew it wasn't his fault she had been sick. It wasn't his fault she and his father had died so young. Emotionally it'd been hard to deal with. Losing his parents and grandparents in a short time span left side effects that lasted a lifetime. It had created a deep fear of losing loved ones. His natural protective instincts kicked into high gear at the first sign of danger.

After a quick shower and change, he headed across the house. Entering the den on his way to the study, the din of laughing and talking quieted suspiciously as his six cousins looked up at him.

Carla glanced around. "Hey, where is Lauren?" she asked.

"I showed her to her room. She seemed tired," Romeo answered tersely. He was sure Carla didn't know her friend had been or was gravely ill. That didn't excuse her from obviously losing track of her for this long, much less not noticing the white lines of strain around Lauren's mouth a few minutes ago.

"Is she all right? Should I check on her? I thought she'd share my room, where did you put her?" Carla wanted to know in her usual rush of both questions and information.

"She's in the green room. She said she'd be out in a few minutes. I doubt she wants anyone checking on her," he responded.

"She's cute, isn't she?" Carla insinuated as if it'd just occurred to her.

"Beautiful," Romeo agreed casually. "But she seemed a bit prickly to me." Six sets of eyes lit up at his comment. The whole group was obviously in on this just as Lauren said. That required some attention—right after he took care of the important stuff.

"I've got work to do. I hope you guys are old enough to refrain from killing yourselves or each other." With that, he headed off to make a few phone calls.

Shortly Romeo had all the information he needed. Lauren was a heart transplant recipient. Her surgery had been two years ago. At the age of ten she'd been in a serious car accident, which had nearly killed her, that's when they'd diagnosed the heart problem. She'd spent years waiting for a new organ and the injuries from the accident complicated her condition. Consequently, her life up to a year ago had been very sedentary. The doctor explained she now had a healthy heart but her body was trying to catch up.

The doctor also divulged that Lauren belonged to a very protective family with three older brothers and father who were all still uncomfortable letting her go. They'd spent too long with a sweet little girl on the edge of death. The doctor laughed as he commented she'd be pissed if she found out he was telling another protective male about her condition. But Romeo and the doctor were old acquaintances. Their relationship went back too far for the request to be denied. Especially when Lauren was at Romeo's place.

Leaning back in his chair, Romeo realized the house felt very quiet. Lauren hadn't shown up in his study and he began to have a bad feeling when he realized how much time had passed. Rising, he went in search of her. She wasn't in her room, the pool area was quiet but down at the corral there seemed to be a commotion. Romeo frowned as he headed in that direction.

All six cousins were appalled when Lauren confessed she'd never been near a horse, much less on one at their suggestion of a ride before supper. Carla assured her it was a blast. She had to learn to ride, it was just wrong to be a native Texan and not know how. So wearing her brand spanking new cowboy boots and jeans, Lauren stood beside what looked like a giant of a horse and petted it nervously. Steven was the one who brought it out of the barn and "tacked up" for her. Now Carla was insisting she "mount" it.

They were standing in the wide, long corral directly off the horse barn door designed for a large number of horses to be tacked up at the same time. It was actually big enough for the private rodeo shows Romeo and the hands occasionally put on for visiting groups of school children.

"You're sure it's gentle?" Lauren asked for the fifth time.

"As a lamb. It's the most boring horse Romeo owns," Carla assured her. "Now put your foot in the stirrup and swing the other leg over."

"I can't reach the thing, Carla. I haven't got the mile-long legs you have. Is there a stepladder I could use or something?" Lauren questioned as Carla laughed and the big beast swung his head around to eyeball the two women. Lauren stared back at it and could swear the thing was laughing at her. Could horses laugh? This one could apparently.

"Shouldn't there be, like, padding? Or helmets? A hockey uniform to ride these things?" Lauren wanted to know. Up close and personal put a new perspective on riding and it wasn't a nice one. How could anyone consider the insisted precaution of wearing boots protective clothing? Carla had made a big production out of the appropriate attire for riding, making Lauren go change before they came out here. Dang, that whole irritating clothing scene seemed woefully less than adequate now. The horses were mammoth.

"Jason," Carla called. "Come over here and help Lauren up. She's too short to reach the stirrup." At barely twenty and the youngest cousin, he was all energy and action on a whole new level it seemed. Jason grabbed Lauren around the waist and easily lifted her slight form up on the animal in what seemed to Lauren an abrupt motion giving her no time to prepare.

Lauren found herself perched atop a shifting mountain of muscle. Fear shot through her and she froze. Unaware of her friend's momentary bout with terror, Carla untied the horse from the rail to lead it to the center of the corral so she could teach Lauren the basics of riding. At that moment, Steven emerged from the barn with the

horse he intended to ride. It was a magnificent, prancing beast. As far as Lauren was concerned it snorted fire and had a death wish for every other living thing. It reared and screamed, broke away from Steven and charged down the corral at top speed, straight at Lauren and her huge horse.

The horse under Lauren had no problem deciding what to do. It whirled and jerked to get out of the way. The swift, unexpected movements made it seem to simply step out from under her. She didn't have a good hold on it and her feet weren't even in the stirrups yet. Crashing to the ground from that height was not Lauren's greatest concern. It was the black hooves of death thundering towards her as she lay in the path of the screaming devil horse.

All she could do was roll over and bury her head in her arms. There was a lot of action around the corral as people tried to yell instructions, but the two seconds between Lauren's hitting the ground and wild horse being upon her didn't allow escape.

Only one hoof hit her with a glancing blow to the back of her upper thigh. The way it moved her and her cry of pain made it appear to the horrified eyes watching that she'd been trampled with every fall of the steel-shod hooves. Romeo's huge body vaulted the fence and came skidding to his knees beside her prone form. Large hands hovered over her, afraid to touch, afraid not to. Lauren groaned and lifted her head to check the location of the satanic beast.

"Oh, God, you can move? Don't move! Where does it hurt? Is it your back, your neck? Don't move!" he commanded again as she attempted to roll over and look at him.

"Why not? I need to get out of here," Lauren stated belligerently. "That damn beast wants to kill me. Getting on the other side of the fence seems like a really good idea to me."

"He could have seriously injured you. We have to be careful moving you. Now tell me where it hurts! Please, Lauren, don't move," he begged her desperately.

The panic in his voice made Lauren twist her head around to look at him. The Romeo kneeling beside her was a pale, tortured man. It was an emotion she recognized immediately. She'd seen that face leaning over her hospital bed on countless occasions – she'd seen it as they wheeled her into surgery. She was tired of that face.

"I'm just bruised from the fall. The devil beast didn't manage to actually trample me. It got me once on the thigh, which hurts like hell, but I doubt it's a fatal injury. Now help me up. I think I'm lying in poop or something. It smells like poop down here." Lauren started to push herself up. Strong hands stopped her and pressed her back down in the dirt.

"You're sure? We can fly straight to the hospital. But it's so important not to injure you further. If it's an internal injury we may not know right away," he insisted.

"Romeo! Let me up!" she demanded. "I told you I'm fine! Stop with all the commanding shit and let me get out of here."

"Okay, okay, but go slowly. It's better to be sure," he insisted.

As Lauren rolled over, she found herself looking up into a ring of faces. Romeo on his knees beside her was running a clinical hand over her body while every one of the cousins gathered around. Lauren frowned fiercely at all the attention and the stricken look on everyone's face.

"If all of you are staring at me, who is keeping the wild beasts away?" she demanded.

For the first time Romeo glanced up and realized they were all there. "Put the horses away," he barked. His low voice held lethal command. Everyone jumped into action immediately. Looking back down at Lauren, he sighed deeply. Her shirt was ripped at the shoulder and several scratches could be seen on the back of her shoulder and upper arm, her face and hair were covered in dirt, but she seemed whole otherwise.

He slid his arms under her and lifted her to his chest as he stood up and headed for the gate. Over his shoulder, he issued orders in terse statements. Lauren felt the immense body carrying her shudder as he lifted her and knew it certainly wasn't the

strain of her weight that bothered the big lug. He was feeling a reaction to fear. Somehow, she always seemed to make big men feel helpless when something happened to her. She knew she wasn't as delicate and fragile as they liked to think she was, but the look on his face had told her he'd thought the worst when he saw her hit the ground. Her arms slid around his neck and her head came to rest on the broad shoulder beneath it. One hand crept into his hair to massage his scalp while the other patted his back. She always felt sorry for them when she saw that look.

"It's okay," she whispered to him, trying to ease his burden. "I'm not really hurt."

Striding away from the confusion in the corral, he whispered back to her, "Well, I'm not okay. You scared the goddamn life out of me, baby. Don't do it again!" The sight of her being trampled was burned into his brain with ghastly clarity. He'd almost lost her before she even knew him. Losing another person was unacceptable. Losing her would be an event he couldn't survive. Never mind they'd shared less than an hour's acquaintance. She might not know it yet but she was his woman.

The simple fact that her shirt was torn and he could see blood on her body was intolerable on a cellular level. The unexpected shock of watching her fall shook him to his core.

"It wasn't my fault, Romeo," she murmured defensively, mistaking the stark terror in his tone for reprimand. "It's those beasts. They went crazy."

"It's Steven's fault," he informed her. "He had no business taking that animal out! Of course, all of them were behaving like irresponsible imbeciles again. You've never been on a horse before, have you?"

"Well, no. It seemed like a good idea until I got right next to one. They are much bigger than they look on TV," Lauren commented seriously.

Romeo barked out a laugh at that. They entered his private apartment. He carried her through his bedroom to the bathroom. Sitting her down carefully on the vanity, he started unbuttoning her shirt.

"What are you doing?" Lauren demanded.

“Undressing you. We have to treat the scratches on your shoulder and you need a shower before we do. It’ll help wash out the wound and you smell like poop anyway,” he teased softly, trying to appear harmless and altruistic.

Romeo’s need to possess would not allow him to let her out of his sight to take care of the injuries. He knew this level of intimacy was neither normal nor called for, but it was unthinkable to do anything other than see to every one of her needs himself.

“No.” Her hands came up to cover his and stop the action.

“Look, baby. You’ve got to take care of those scratches right away. I know you want a shower so why not take it now?” he argued gently.

“I’m not undressing in front of you, Romeo. Let me go to my room and I’ll take care of it myself,” she stated calmly.

“Aw, don’t worry, Lauren. I’ve seen a woman before. There is no need to be embarrassed, honey. Now let’s get this done. You’ll feel better afterwards,” he insisted.

“I said no, Romeo. Are you going to force me?” she asked quietly.

“No! Good God! Why would you even think that? I just want to be sure you’re all right.” His concerned eyes searched her face. Something else was going on here. The way she looked at him was old. Way too old for the twenty-three he knew her to be. It wasn’t embarrassment on her face, it was — armor. Her face was a mask he couldn’t see behind.

“What’s going on, Lauren?” he asked quietly. “Why is undressing a hot spot for you? Did someone hurt you? Did something bad happen?” His serious face turned hard and a deep flush swept over it. “You can tell me, sweetheart. It’s okay. We’ll just deal with that, too.”

“No, nothing like you’re thinking happened,” Lauren quickly responded to his tight look and shuttered eyes. It didn’t consciously occur to her that they were reading each other on an intimate level. She simply knew exactly what his dark mind had come up with. “But I’ve spent a lot of time in hospitals. People treat you like a piece of meat in there. They undress you and bend over you in groups examining you. They discuss

you and forget to pull the sheet back up. Sometimes you can't do it for yourself. It's all done 'for your own good'," she explained in a tight voice. "I am not going to be the only naked person in the room ever again. If you want to undress me, you'd damn well better get naked first."

He smiled. Already knowing her history, the problem became crystal clear. "Sure, I can do that."

Chapter Two

His clothes hit the floor in an amazingly short time. Suddenly straightening before her was a gloriously naked man. Her eyes traveled over his wide, muscled chest, the torso below undulated with ridges leading her to narrow hips and the fascinating equipment between them. She'd never actually seen a naked man before. Pictures and movies did not prepare her for the reality.

Her gaze centered on the heavy erection and she couldn't look away. He stepped up to her again and returned to unbuttoning her shirt. She sat there dumbly and just stared at him. Her shirt and bra disappeared and he took a moment to look at the line down the center of her chest. It hurt him just to see it. He didn't worry she'd notice him examining it. She still hadn't lifted her eyes from his cock.

"Never seen one of those before?" he asked quietly as he lifted her slightly to slide jeans and panties down over her butt.

"Not in person," she admitted. "Does it hurt?"

He frowned as he squatted to remove her boots and slide the pants off. "No, why would you think that?"

"It's sort of red and swollen. It looks like it hurts," Lauren stated as he stood up. She looked into his face. "It also looks much too big to fit where it's supposed to. Are you bigger than most guys are? Because if that's normal, I'm not sorry I've said no anymore."

In the back of her mind Lauren knew getting naked with a virtual stranger should have been utterly shocking. Something about this man and his need to take complete control of her care made it feel natural. His gentle tone of voice and competent, matter-of-fact handling hushed the panicking virgin. After his clothes hit the tile floor, it had

been impossible to think about anything else. *Apparently, in the right circumstances she was a brazen hussy*, the virgin within sniffed in disdain.

"Lean over, baby, I need to see the bruise on the back of your thigh," he directed as his big hands helped her sit on one hip so she leaned to the side and he could look at the back of her leg. The large red mark was already beginning to darken. A deep, ugly bruise would quickly appear.

"It fits, sweetheart," he answered her question as seriously as she'd asked it. "I don't know what most guys have. Don't make a habit of looking," he stated casually as he lifted her off the vanity and moved them over to the big shower. He adjusted the temperature and stepped in with her. Gently placing her under the water, he carefully rinsed the dirt and grime out of her hair and off her body, paying special attention to the abrasions on her shoulder. Shifting her out of the water again, he grabbed the shampoo and started massaging her hair, carefully keeping the soap from the cuts.

"I'm glad you've said no, too. A little thing like you requires special care, honey. A man has to prepare you really well before it'd be a pleasurable experience for you. If you let the wrong guy touch you, you'd be scared for life." He rinsed her hair and soaped up a washcloth. She let him bathe her with an absentminded acceptance. Her eyes were still glued to the stiff, red-knobbed cock and heavy balls below it. He gingerly patted the scrapes on her shoulder and she barely winced. That small pain made almost no impression on her. He supposed it wouldn't after what she'd been through.

The conversation, her wide-eyed innocence and his overwhelming sense of possession drove him hard. She'd given him nothing but acceptance once his clothes came off and the gift of her trust sang through his soul. Touching her intimately became a necessity. He hadn't meant to do it now, but the need to show her how precious she was to him wouldn't let him stop.

Romeo put down the washcloth and soaped his hands. "Now I'm going to wash between your legs, honey. This is how a guy should touch you."

Wide eyes shot up to his. "You are? Ah...I...um..."

His soapy hands slid down her body from both sides as he stood to her side, her uninjured shoulder pressed into his chest. The position gave him complete access to every curve and crevice. Callused fingers separated her bottom and moved down the crack. They almost distracted her from the hand in front 'til he glided fingers over plump folds, pressing up to insert them into the deep grooves. Gently he rubbed her sweet cunt and rimmed the rosebud ass behind her.

"Oh," Lauren moaned. "That feels so good." She sounded surprised.

"It's supposed to, now relax and let me show you how good it can be." Knowing fingers found her clit and stroked over it gently. Slowly he added pressure to the bundle of sensitive nerves. Behind her, his middle finger slid into her ass shallowly, working in and out with gentle thrusts.

Lauren felt dazed and awash with entirely new sensations. Letting Romeo touch her like this wasn't the hardship people who knew her might think it was. Being an Ice Queen was a defense mechanism for a helpless little girl trapped in a hospital bed. It protected her from the ones who worked the white corridors only for a paycheck. It shielded her when the ones who really cared moved on to a new floor and another job. She'd spent formative years hiding behind it. Now it was a habit.

Besides, she reasoned to herself, if you were offered the opportunity to learn from the best, who wouldn't? According to Carla, Romeo had a vast amount of experience and the women involved seemed happy about it. It was embarrassing to be a virgin at twenty-three. This was the perfect chance to change that.

Lauren clutched his thick forearm in front of her as heat spread through her body. It burned in a tingling rush up her legs as the fire in cunt and ass intensified. Dazed eyes turned up to Romeo and he dipped down to claim soft lips. Unable to be gentle with his kiss, he plunged into her depths with the hard push he needed so desperately elsewhere. His hands remained tender and patient, insistently guiding her into passion's inferno.

The luscious little body in his arms started to tremble and he increased the pressure on her clit and thrust deeper into her tight ass. She exploded, jerking and thrusting on his hands as he swallowed her moan of release and kept eating her mouth. His fingers manipulated her unrelentingly—thrusting into her bottom while two rough digits gripped her slippery clit and pinched down, shooting a new fireball up her body.

Lauren screamed and collapsed against him, no longer able to support her own weight as her body came a second time before the first was complete. As the trembling subsided, he lifted his mouth and smiled down at the panting woman in his arms while his fingers still petted both cunt and ass.

“Oh, Lord, that was an orgasm, wasn’t it?” she gasped.

“That was two orgasms, baby,” he corrected proudly. His hands reluctantly moved up her body. The one in front drifted to her breasts to stroke and cup dainty mounds. His thumb rubbed over her nipple firmly and she shuddered. “Those can’t be your first?” he questioned softly.

Lauren laughed shakily. “First ones like that. Stop,” Lauren sighed. “That feels way too good already. I can’t do that again so soon.”

“Yeah, you can,” he growled with a smile in his voice. “But we need to get out and dress your scrapes first.”

“No. What about you?” Lauren asked, recovering swiftly as she turned to face him. “You need a shower, too. I get to touch everything you got to touch. That’s our deal.”

Romeo grinned at her earnest face. “I love the rules. I’m all yours.”

Lauren had to stand on tiptoes to reach the tops of his shoulders so he picked her up and held her against his body as little hands smoothed over him. Sweet mother of God, this was torture, he decided. A breathtaking torture he’d be willing to endure for the next sixty years or so.

“Hand me the shampoo,” she directed—he complied. Washing his hair while suspended off the floor was tough. Especially when he kept trying to nibble on her

neck, her nose, her ear, anything he could reach. Lauren wrapped her legs around his waist for leverage so she could lean back.

Romeo groaned and dropped his head to her shoulder, just where she needed it to get the back. Suddenly she became aware that the big red part of him was positioned at the narrow pink part of her. Lauren froze. Romeo chuckled softly into her neck.

"Don't worry, baby. You're not ready for that yet. Are you done with my hair, because I can't take much more of this." His hips moved shallowly and the bulb of his cock caressed the damp folds of her pussy.

"How do you know I'm not ready?" she panted.

"I know because I haven't tasted you yet. You are done with the hair," he decided for her and let her slide down his body. Her hands immediately went to work on the rest of him. Apparently, she could be easily distracted with a hard body. Except those busy hands eventually found their way down to the throbbing erection and tight balls she couldn't stop looking at.

She tried not to hurt him while exploring his long shaft with gentle, soapy hands. She didn't quite believe something so swollen, throbbing and reddened was not hurting him. He groaned in a deep rumbling sound as soon as she touched him. When his hips jerked, her worried eyes went to his face. It was set in a grimace.

"Oh, sorry. Did I hurt you?" Lauren immediately let go. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to."

"Lauren, touch me. Keep touching me. It doesn't hurt." Romeo growled as his hands took hers and brought them back to his shaft. "I like it, baby. This is not pain on my face and when my body jerks it's because I like it even more."

Worriedly she looked down as he wrapped both her hands around his thick erection and then let go of her. "Show me what to do, Romeo?" she asked.

"Do whatever you want, Lauren. I like it," he breathed.

"Just show me! I don't know how to please you. I'm afraid I'll hurt you or something," Lauren demanded.

His hands came back to hers and closed around them to tighten the grip, he moved them up and down. "Like this, oh, yeah, nice and tight. Now on the up stroke run your thumb over the head. That's it. Do it a little bit harder. Yeah, just like that, don't stop." He panted, his eyes were closed and his body thrust into her fists with each stroke.

While Lauren watched in fascination, the erection in her hands expanded even more as the head turned an angry-looking red. Each time her thumb swept over the bulging head, she found a silky substance she wished she had time to investigate. His body was thrusting, every muscle clenched and defined. His massive thighs propelled each plunge and he groaned deeply. She saw his flat abdomen tremble and he gasped, "I'm going to come."

White ropes of hot liquid shot out of his cock up over her breasts and stomach. Romeo grabbed her and hugged her against him in a fierce hold as his body continued to shudder and rub in powerful thrusts. He barked out an exclamation that wasn't a word and gulped in air harshly. It looked like a pain reaction to her. But he'd said it didn't hurt so she kept caressing him.

"Enough," he gasped. "Stop."

Her hands stilled, his head dropped down to rest his cheek against the crown of her head. He held her tightly as her hands now caressed his ass in an attempt to soothe him.

"You okay?" she ventured cautiously. His swollen cock was still hot and pulsing against her stomach and he was barely able to breathe.

"Honey, the only way I'd be better is if that happened inside you," he murmured.

"Oh," Lauren frowned. Well, that was very instructional. If she couldn't even wrap her hand around the thing, what made him think it'd fit inside her? Now she knew virginity was not the worst option. It was a damn good thing this happened with a guy who was very sexually active elsewhere. No need to worry about his wanting to try the

other with her. They weren't even a dating couple so he would not assume she wanted to anyway.

Romeo stepped back and put them under the water again. Reluctantly he let go of her to rinse his cum off her breasts and abdomen. He still felt dizzy—her little hands wrapped around his cock was better sex than pounding most women into the mattress. Seeing her splattered with his seed was a visual that moved him in an elemental way. Oh yeah, keeping her naked and covered with his cum felt right. Suddenly he understood the urge to mark a woman in the most primitive way possible. He wanted his cum in her, on her. It stated ownership on a cellular level. His drive to establish ownership of this woman was a base animal response that would not be denied.

He ran the soapy washcloth over her then shut off the water. Stepping out of the shower, he immediately grabbed a towel and dried her carefully while he dripped on the bath mat. He didn't get his own towel until he'd wrapped hers around her and secured it. Drying off quickly, he purposely tossed his towel back on the rack. Letting her be the only clothed person in the room wouldn't fix past hurts, but it was something he could give her. Maybe it would help deal with that old pain.

Sitting her on the vanity again, Romeo grabbed supplies to dress the scratches on her shoulder. She turned for him and he prepared to swab the area. Neither of them commented on the clothing issue as she watched him tend to her.

"How am I going to get clean clothes?" she asked. "I can't walk through the house like this. They'll all know exactly what we did."

"I'll go get your bag in a minute," he responded. "If they see me, I'll just say you're in the shower. It'll be fine. Besides, they know better than to talk to me after this."

"It wasn't anyone's fault, Romeo. The horse is evil and it went nuts." Lauren tried to reason with him. Strangely, she felt the need to curb his wrath before he went face-to-face with his cousins. "I'm not even hurt that bad, just a scrape and a few bruises. Let it go."

"Honey, this is letting it go. If I think about what could have happened, things would get ugly real quick," he responded quietly as he pressed a large square adhesive over the injury. Helping her off the vanity, he led her into his room. "Why don't you lie down a minute while I dress and get your things? How's the head? Any sign of another headache?"

"No headache, but I could lie down. It's been a busy day," Lauren confessed tiredly. She went over to the bed and took off the damp towel. Draping it over the side of the bed, she crawled in, sliding under the sheets naturally. Even an averted migraine left her drained. Trying to hide it took an even greater toll. The events in the shower added an amazingly warm and fuzzy layer of tired on top of that. After what had just occurred, sliding into his bed for a tiny minute didn't register as anything but a necessity for Lauren.

Romeo watched her as he dressed and a smile spread across his soul. He didn't dare let it show on his face. Seeing her settling into his bed while he moved about the room quietly felt good. Fully dressed, he stepped over to her and dropped a kiss on her forehead. "I'll be back in a bit, baby," he whispered and she grunted. Her eyes didn't even open as he slipped out of the room.

It was already after six and everyone was gathered at the big kitchen table having supper when he emerged. Walking into the room brought a hush to the table. Romeo almost felt better when he saw the worried faces.

"How is she?" Carla asked immediately.

"She's resting," he responded in a quiet voice. Cold black eyes cut around the table as he looked at each face. "Did you know she'd never been on a horse before?" he asked the group. All the heads nodded. "I see." His lips turned down as he regarded them. Even the uncles didn't say a word as the aunts sat back and watched.

"I won't waste my breath on how stupid that stunt was, Steven. You and I will talk later. Carla, how long have you known Lauren?" he asked as he pulled out a chair and started loading his plate.

"About a year now. Isn't she going to eat? Should I take her a plate?" Carla wanted to know.

"No, I'll take her one later. She's sleeping. How did you meet her?" Romeo started eating as he waited for a response.

"She volunteers in the children's ward. She and I hit it off when I was doing a rotation in there," Carla told them. "She seems to really understand the kids. I don't know why she's not going into a medical profession. She'd be so good at it."

Romeo raised his eyebrows and looked at her. "You ever ask her why?" It made perfect sense to him. Of course, she'd volunteer there. She knew exactly what it was like to be little and trapped in a bed.

"No, I guess I haven't. We met when I was going through a rough patch and we never have gotten around to talking about that," Carla mused.

Romeo nodded and went back to his meal.

"Are you going to tell me if she's hurt?" Carla demanded. "I am the one in pre-med. I think I should look her over."

Romeo lifted his eyes slowly to Carla. The black depths weren't cold anymore. They burned with the anger he'd been holding in. Carla gasped and sat back instinctively.

"No. She's had about enough of your care. Perhaps you should work on your medical observation and diagnostic skills, Carla. Because when you're a real doctor, I'll expect you to be able to tell when someone has had a HT in the last twenty-four months," he bit out.

"No shit!" Carla gasped.

"And I'll also expect you to know when they're showing signs of a migraine," he continued. "It's the little white stress lines around their mouth and eyes. Of course, the trembling and difficulty seeing is a dead giveaway, too." Romeo suddenly clamped his mouth shut. Lauren was going to kill him. He knew Lauren hadn't wanted everyone to know about her condition. She wanted to be treated normally after being an invalid so

long. If Carla didn't know about her physical problems yet, she'd probably been hiding them.

"What's an HT?" Jason wanted to know.

"Heart transplant," Carla told him shortly. She was frowning as she registered all Romeo was and wasn't saying. "She had the migraine when we arrived, didn't she?" Carla asked quietly.

"Yeah," Romeo replied. Looking around the room at the somber faces, he sighed. "Look, guys, don't treat her like an invalid. She'd hate that. Obviously, she didn't tell Carla because she wants to be treated like everyone else. Her new heart is fine. But she doesn't have the stamina everyone else does. Do me a favor and try to be adults about this." He frowned darkly at them. "And back off the Ice Queen shit. That was beneath you and you know it."

He stood up to leave the room, no longer interested in food, but turned back to them. "I'm going to marry that woman. I hear one of you give her a hard time about not turning the cold shoulder to me, I'll give you the hiding I should have when you were kids. And believe me, mommy and daddy will not lift a hand." He glanced at his aunts and uncles, raising his brow at them. They all smiled and shook their heads. Romeo stalked into his study to gather some papers he needed to go over.

Back in his room, he made himself comfortable on the other side of the bed and started doing the paperwork a ranch and investment portfolio the size of his entailed. He needed to get a lot of it done. He intended to be busy doing other things in the near future.

Lauren woke up to a dimly lit room. Directly in her line of vision sat Romeo. Pillows against the headboard propped him up. His long body stretched out as he studied a paper he was moving forward and back again as he tried to read it. His other hand held the file he'd gotten it from and he frowned fiercely at the defenseless paper.

"Where are your reading glasses?" Lauren asked quietly.

He didn't even look at her as he scowled at the paper. "In the old man store where I'll get them when I'm an old man."

"Ah, perhaps you should visit the 'Seriously in Denial' store and see if they have something to tide you over," she suggested.

Romeo stuffed the paper back in the file and laid it on the nightstand. "Hungry, brat?" he turned to her and asked.

"Why are you naked?" Lauren wanted to know. It certainly wasn't a complaint as her eyes wandered over the long, lanky length of him. Romeo naked was a visual delight of honed muscle covered with a dusting of dark male fur that begged to be stroked.

Romeo grinned. "I'm a 'follow the rules' kind of guy." He rolled off the bed and reached for a pair of shorts at the foot of it. "I'll be back in a minute with a tray," he tugged on boxers and the shorts he'd left on the bed.

"No thanks," Lauren turned over and stretched.

"Uh? You're not hungry?" he questioned.

"Yeah, I am. What time is it?" she slid out of bed. "Did you bring my clothes?"

"Over there," he pointed at the closet. "You don't have to get up, honey. I'll bring you something," he offered again.

"I don't like trays in bed. I'll just raid the fridge and get out of your hair," she stated casually as she pulled her bag out of the closet and grabbed the first clothes she came to.

"I was hoping you liked being in my hair," his low voice rumbled. He leaned up against one of the bedposts, crossed bulging arms over his bare chest and watched her dress.

Lauren shot him a glance and smiled. "You know I did. It's time I went back to my own room though. You've got things to do I'm sure."

"Nothing more important than convincing you that this is now your room," he murmured.

Lauren tucked her shirt into shorts and noticed they didn't go together. A lot like this situation. "This room is taken. The one you gave me seems free. I'll keep that one, thanks."

"I'd like you to stay, Lauren," he stated directly.

Lauren faced him fully and cocked her head to the side as she studied the seriously imposing man looking at her. Wearing only shorts and leaning casually against the four-poster bed, he was a pin-up advertisement for tall, dark and sexy. "You've been very kind, very, ah, educational. I'm grateful for both, but I think it's clear I'm not in the same class as you. Heck, I'm barely on the same planet with you when it comes to experience. I'm not able to be casual about sex, certainly not with a stranger. And particularly not while there is an audience outside just waiting for something to happen. I'm sorry if I somehow implied I could do a weekend fling."

"Okay, sweetheart," he said after staring at her a second. *She takes this seriously*, he thought. "We'll start at the beginning. I don't want you to be uncomfortable with this relationship. We'll do the dating dance. We'll go to movies, have picnics down by the river and drink wine in front of the fireplace. You'll fall head over heels in love with me. I'll ask you to move in with me. Then I'll get you drunk in Vegas and you'll wake up married to me. How does that sound?"

"Seriously, Romeo," she sighed. "I don't want to be a plaything. I thought I wanted experience but as it turns out, I'm okay with being a nerdy little virgin."

"There is nothing in this conversation that I'm not serious about," Romeo countered. "I'm not looking for a plaything. We need to spend some time together before you're ready to commit, honey. We can do that starting right now. What I don't want is to see you walk out that door. We're not strangers, Lauren. You can't deny we have the kind of chemistry that starts fires. The people outside that door have nothing to say about what happens between us."

"Romeo, this is your home. Do you usually bring a woman here? Are they used to seeing co-habitation with someone you met the same day?" she asked incredulously.

“Carla told me I’m exactly your type, but that you usually have six women on a string. It’s the type you’re attracted to, not the person. I don’t want to join a long line of others. I just can’t do that right now.”

“Carla talks a lot of shit,” he spat out. “There are not six women on a string. Yes, I have been attracted to women who look like you all my life. But I know the difference between a body that gets my rocks hot and a woman I want to spend the rest of my life with, Lauren. I’m not a kid chasing after his dick. And if it makes any difference, I have never brought a woman here. You’re the only woman outside my family who has stepped foot in this room.”

Romeo straightened from the bedpost and stalked over to her. His hands came up slowly to fold her into his embrace. He moved slowly so she’d know she could stop him at any time. She didn’t. “This is what we have, Lauren.” He brought his lips to hers and licked along the seam of her closed mouth. Her hands clutched his biceps—he slowly kissed his way into her mouth, gently, leisurely invading her this time. When her lips parted to accept him, he took the time to explore her teeth, the soft interior of her cheeks and finally stroke her tongue. He insidiously turned up the heat, pressing her along the length of his body. One hand went to her bottom, cupping it to bring her into him while the other cradled her head as he sucked her tongue into his mouth.

Lauren knew he was going to kiss her. She even knew he’d make it the best damn kiss ever had on the planet. He’d do it because he could. She just couldn’t dredge up the will to stop him. His declaration that she was the only woman to have ever stepped foot in the room was so convincing. She decided wanting to believe something too good to be true had to be a sickness. It made you let the guy who could make an Olympic sport out of kissing kiss you. It made you wrap your legs around his waist and rub his cock into your wet pussy as well apparently.

Romeo turned to the bed and laid her down on it gently. Those gorgeous legs wrapped around his waist kept his cock crammed right where he wanted it to be. With her beneath him, he could keep teasing her sweet pussy with his cock and use his hands

for further convincing. His whole body rubbed sensually over her as he ate her mouth. His hands gravitated to those delectable breasts and hard fingers plucked the little pebbles atop them.

Her body knew it liked this now—it exploded into flames as soon as he touched her. Every inch of her wanted his caress and every one of those inches was determined to ignore the logical virgin shrieking at them from her brain. The only plans her body was willing to hear about were the ones that let him do whatever he pleased. But he wasn't doing it fast enough. He hadn't loosened a single button, zipper or snap. How were they supposed to get her clothes off if he wouldn't follow the program?

Romeo lifted his head and looked down at the moaning, undulating woman in his arms. Her hands were clawing down his back, her knees in his armpits and willing written all over her. Romeo took a deep breath and focused on the long-term goal. "Sweetheart, if I just wanted to nail you, I'd be doing it now." He gave her a minute to open her eyes and realize they'd stopped the lovemaking.

Lauren frowned up at him in confusion and Romeo continued. "I want you to understand that I mean what I say. When I tell you I want a long-term commitment that means I'm willing to do whatever it takes to get one. So, I'm going to confess some things that will make you mad as hell at me. I'm doing it right now because we need to get everything out between us. And because I'm sure you'll find out soon anyway and be even madder if I don't tell you."

Lauren tried to ignore the sheepish little boy tone in his voice. That dark-eyed, dark-haired scamp peeked at her guiltily as he confessed he knew she'd find him out. He was such a cutie she had a hard time frowning seriously up at him as she waited for the dreadful confession. He held her pinned beneath him, but most of his weight was supported on his elbows. "Are you going to let me up to hear this?" she asked.

"No. I might need to remind you what we are together. I can't risk it," he stated tightly.

"Well, get on with it," Lauren prompted when he hesitated again. He really was afraid to tell her whatever it was he thought he'd done. That amazed her. He was supposed to be the experienced man of the world. The guy who was fully in charge at all times. This hesitation gave her the first real indication that he was truly sincere when he claimed his feelings for her were genuine. You couldn't be afraid of a "throw away" person. By all accounts, Romeo wasn't afraid of anyone.

"I called your doctor this afternoon," he started. "I actually know the man. My mother was his second heart transplant surgery. So, it's not like he was telling a stranger your case history. I know about the accident you and your mother were in when you were ten. How your mom died in your arms while you were trapped in the car. The serious injuries, how they had to rebuild your pelvis, that they discovered your heart problem then. How long you waited for a donor, the heart surgery and the migraines. I also know you have three older brothers and your father is still living."

He paused to study her face. She watched him calmly without a flicker of emotion. That in itself was disturbing and he swallowed roughly. "I'm sorry if you think I was prying. I had no idea he'd go into such detail when I told him you were here and I was worried for your health because of the headache. But I didn't stop him either. I wanted to know," Romeo trailed off quietly.

"Is that it?" Lauren asked.

"Ah, most of it," he hedged.

"There's more?" Her eyebrows rose.

"Yeah, at supper I got so mad at that bunch of irresponsible children that I told them you'd had a HT twenty-four months ago and the migraine when you got here. I sort of ripped into Carla over being a piss-poor doctor for not knowing this stuff." He paused again. She waited. "It just fell out of my mouth. My choices were that or see to it they all carry the same bruises you do. As it is, I still have Steven to deal with. He deserves a thrashing for bringing that particular animal out like that."

"I forbid you to touch him, Romeo," Lauren stated quietly.

"Forbid me? What the hell kind of statement is that? No one forbids me. I understand you're pissed at me, but you can't go around forbidding me." He frowned into her eyes.

She didn't respond, just watched him as calmly as she had for the last five minutes.

"Look, Lauren, let's get this out in the open between us. Be mad at me. Tell me exactly what you think of my overbearing, interfering and generally controlling ways. You can swear at me, kick me, whatever. But you can't forbid me. No one forbids adults."

"There is no point in any of that, Romeo. You are well aware of what you did. You know exactly how intrusive I find your meddling. You wouldn't have been afraid to tell me if you didn't." Her tone was still calm and even. "The only thing I can change is the future. I forbid you to touch him. If you ever want me to forgive you, that's what it'll take."

Romeo popped up off her as he realized what was happening. His big body paced across the room and turned to face her again. Lauren propped herself up on her elbows to watch him.

"You'll forgive me and then what?" he wanted to know. His eyes narrowed as he studied her. She was playing a power game with a master strategist. The fact she held all the bargaining chips didn't escape him. So maybe it wasn't a game but a test. Would he bend to her wishes? It really depended on what she was willing to give for the concession on his part. If it was just a tiny bit of what he wanted, it was a game. If she was willing to let this go and start over, it was a test. Oh, God, he hoped it was a test. A test meant she wanted to trust him, wanted to believe him.

"Then we start over and get to know each other," she responded.

"Starting tonight? You'll stay with me?" he pressed, unable to believe it was actually going to be that easy to get around what he'd done.

Lauren got up and paced to the other side of the room. At least she was farther away from the door, he noticed.

"I spent all of my teens in and out of a hospital or going to a therapist because of the way my mother died. I want to date, Romeo. I want to experience some of what I missed. Go to a movie with my boyfriend and neck in the back row. I want to make out behind the barn. Get flowers on Valentine's Day. To know what it feels like to get a call at two a.m. just because he misses me and wants to hear my voice. Or when he takes me to the beach, so he can look at me in a bikini. I want to have fun." Lauren turned and stared out the window into the starry night.

"I'm also really unsure about sex with you. I know exactly how big that thing is and I think it's going to hurt. I'm afraid. I know I'll disappoint you. I know all the stuff I want are things you did a long time ago. It's got to sound lame and stupid to you," she ended softly.

Romeo was across the room in a lunging move she didn't see. Pressing himself up behind her, he wrapped his arms around the forlorn little figure she made. His head dipped down to press his lips against her ear. "I want to take my lover to the movies," he whispered. "And neck in the back row. She won't have panties on so I can make her come with my hand and no one will know. I want to take her out behind the barn to the back woods and go skinny-dipping in the pond. We'll make out on the bank as we dry off. I want to send her flowers on Valentine's with a diamond in the center of every rose. I never want to call her at two in the morning because I miss her. I want her to be right there beside me so I can lick her awake because I need her. I want to make love to her in the back seat of a limo after we do dinner and a show in London. I want to take her to a private beach in the Caribbean so she won't have to wear a bikini at all. I want her to have fun. I want to play with her."

Lauren turned in his arms and looked up at him. Tears dripped slowly down her cheeks. He licked them off and continued. "I will never do anything to hurt you, Lauren. If I can't make you beg me to put it in you, and then you enjoy it all the way to your womb, I will not do it. You can tell me to stop at any time and I will. I swear, honey, you'll like it."

He'd just taken what she felt were silly little-girl wishes and made them beautiful, sensual adult fantasies. He promised the moon and she secretly suspected he could give it to her. Where did this man come from? Was it possible he was telling the truth about everything? Could he really have decided so abruptly that they were made for each other?

"I'm still not comfortable with the audience out the door. I know it's old hat to you, but this is a big deal to me. I can't relax and stay here tonight, Romeo. I'd never, um, it'd be... I can't," Lauren wailed softly into his chest.

"I took care of that already, Lauren." Romeo glanced away and frowned. "I guess I threatened them all with a hiding if they said one word to you about being an Ice Queen or not turning a cold shoulder to me. I, well, I told them that mommy and daddy wouldn't lift a hand while I did it either."

Lauren's mouth dropped open as she stared up at him. "You threatened them with a spanking?"

"Yeah," he acknowledged.

"You can't say that to adults!" she scolded emphatically.

"Well, if they act like children they deserve to be treated like children. I also told them I intend to marry you. No one is going to say one word to you if you stay here tonight. And if they do, I will take care of it in the manner they deserve," Romeo threatened darkly.

"Romeo, I forb—"

"I know, I know, you forbid me to touch them," he interrupted. "All this forbidding better come with some conceding, honey." He was still frowning as he held her against him.

"What kind of conceding?" she wanted to know.

"The kind where you agree we're an exclusive couple," he told her. "And you agree to stay with me tonight." She opened her mouth to interrupt but he laid a finger over it.

"We don't have to do anything, baby. I know you're still a bit shaken up. But I want you to sleep here with me. Tomorrow we can deal with the other. Just stay," he pleaded softly.

Lauren's arms crept up around his neck. Her fingers sifted through his hair as they gazed at each other. A smile bloomed across her lovely face as the big man in her arms held on tightly.

"You want to be my boyfriend?" she whispered.

"Oh, yeah," he breathed.

"Good. My first boyfriend needs to be a big guy who won't be so intimidated by my brothers. They are a mean bunch and have been scaring men off for a couple years now. I thought I'd be a virgin for the rest of my life." Lauren stretched up on tiptoes—he helped her by lifting so her lips brushed his as she spoke. "And then there is my dad, the ex-Marine. I don't even want to think what he'd do to a little guy." The sentence ended as her lips sealed against his and he opened under the firm licking of her warm, soft tongue.

Romeo reached down and grabbed her thighs to wrap her legs around him again. It was easier to kiss her when she was riding him. He suspected her father might be a valid issue, but he didn't have time to deal with it right now.

Lauren pulled her mouth a breath away from his and continued. "My oldest brother just retired from pro football this year. So he's old and you probably don't have to worry about him." She dived back in for another long suck on his tongue. Pulling back a millimeter, she continued with the list. "The next one owns a boxing gym. He doesn't compete professionally anymore so that makes him old, too." Lauren licked down his jaw to suck on the tender spot between neck and shoulder. "The youngest one is a race car driver. He's away a lot. You can probably avoid him." Her licking tongue traveled back to his mouth and they kissed deeply for several long minutes.

While still kissing her deeply, Romeo carried her over to his nightstand. His hand reached down and he dialed the phone without looking, only pulling away from her mouth to put it to his ear when someone picked up on the other end.

"Yes, this is Mr. Montero." He spoke smoothly into the phone with his eyes locked on hers. "I'm reserving the honeymoon suite for tomorrow. Yeah. We'll be in around four. Sure. That will be fine. Thank you." He hung up and went back to kissing her.

Lauren pulled back and sputtered, "What did you do? Where? Tomorrow?"

"I reserved us a room in Vegas for tomorrow." He turned and headed for the door with her still wrapped around him. He kissed her neck down to her cleavage as she tried to avoid him and get some information from the growling heathen who was easily carting her across the house to the kitchen.

"What about dating? You haven't asked me to move in with you. What happened to all that? We can't get married tomorrow. You don't even know, well, we don't know if..." Lauren glanced up as they entered the kitchen and her voice trailed off. Oh, damn, she'd been nearly yelling at him, every one of the people in the kitchen had to have heard every word.

Romeo lifted his head from her chest to answer and saw the surprise in her round eyes. Following her line of vision, he turned swiftly to see what she stared at. All six cousins were seated at the kitchen table with two loaves of bread and every condiment known to man spread across it. It was after midnight, he should have known they'd be in here. They all gaped at him walking in with Lauren wrapped around him, yelling about not getting married tomorrow while he licked her chest.

Carla recovered first. "I see you're feeling better, Lauren. Is he being a pain in the ass and trying to order you around?" she asked hopefully. "I warned you, girlfriend."

Romeo turned and walked over to the table, only releasing Lauren when he had a chair to sit her in. People shuffled and moved over quickly so he could slide another chair in beside her.

"I...ah...no, I mean yes, he's a bit, ah...decisive, but..." Lauren trailed off in embarrassed confusion.

"Hand me the bread and some of that stuff, guys," Romeo asked. He swiftly started making two sandwiches.

Carla continued. "What's this about tomorrow? You're planning on getting married tomorrow? Don't you think Devin might have a problem with that?"

"Oh, um, we're not..." Lauren floundered.

"Yeah, we are. Her family is made up of trained killers and I have to be married to her before I meet them. They might let me live then. Which one is Devin?" Romeo asked as he plopped a sandwich in front of her. The faces around the table grinned at this amusing turn of events.

"They are not," Lauren defended. "Well, two of them are, ah, maybe three of them. The fourth one is just fast."

"Devin is her wanna-be boyfriend," Carla supplied. "The one who has been puppy-dog infatuated and saintly patient for months now. He's the guy who gets to hear how she's not ready to settle down all the time."

"Carla!" Lauren gasped. "We haven't actually had an opportunity to discuss that quite yet," she stated sharply.

Romeo put down the sandwich he was about to bite into and looked at Lauren. "I guess we can refer to Devin Dufus as your stupid ex-boyfriend now. Right?"

"Well, he's not really stupid. He's a surgeon. I think I should —"

"Let me give him a call after we get married and tell him to shove off," Romeo interrupted. "Then we'll call him your nerdy, stupid ex-boyfriend if you like."

"Ah, what I was going to say is that he deserves an explanation, Romeo," Lauren stated firmly. "I have no idea what that explanation is, but I think I should give it to him personally. He deserves at least that."

"Oh, man!" Steve hooted. "Can I come? I'd love to hear how you go from casual no-commitment dating to married to someone you just met in less than twenty-four." Leaning back from the table balancing on two legs of his chair, Steve continued to chuckle over this tale.

"Shut up, Steve," Romeo barked. "The only reason you're not in the emergency room right now is she forbade me to touch you. That was over the horse incident, she hasn't said a word about your wise-ass mouth."

Steve's chair slammed down and his mouth dropped open. "She forbade you? Shit, Lauren, I think I'm in love with you. You're obviously a magical being or something. Would you care to consider another proposal?" Laughter erupted around the table at that.

"Careful, pup," Romeo warned. "I don't feel benevolent about this. Lauren is busy for the next sixty years. If I die before she does, she's still not available."

"Cut it out, guys," Lauren demanded. "You're enjoying this little show way too much. I'm about to revoke the other thing I forbade him to do." Lauren pushed away from the table. "I'm done discussing this in front of an audience." Romeo grabbed their sandwiches and stood up with her.

"Hey," Carla called after them as they headed for the door. "What was the other thing?"

"Spanking each one of you," Lauren shot back over her shoulder. "I fully understand the urge to do so."

"There's a private patio off my rooms, we can eat there," Romeo murmured as he sort of herded her back toward his wing of the house.

Lauren glanced at him and sighed. "No one said you weren't determined I suppose." He wasn't about to let her go back to her own room. Now a whole bunch of new junk was cluttering up the original disagreement and they were nowhere near a compromise. One thirty in the morning and it looked like a long night ahead of them.

His private patio was a walled-in oasis complete with a stone waterfall into an inviting hot tub. Lush shrubbery made it a perfect private garden of delight. The table's umbrella was folded so they could see the stars as they sat on the padded chairs and munched through the sandwiches. Both remained silent. She suspected mostly to be sure she ate. He watched like a hawk 'til the last morsel disappeared.

They both sat back and looked at each other. "What now?" Lauren asked quietly.

"We go to bed and get some sleep. I'm beat," Romeo sighed.

Lauren smiled. "Good plan."

Chapter Three

Lauren awoke to a rough hand caressing her thigh while a very gentle mouth sucked and licked at one of her nipples. Groaning, she stretched while the mouth remained attached to her breast and the hand slid between her legs to lightly cup her intimately.

Romeo lifted his head and grinned up at her. "Need the bathroom?"

"It's morning, doesn't everyone?" Her sleepy face scowled up at him.

"Ah, not a morning person." His wicked grin widened. "I'll be here when you get back, honey."

Closing the door behind her, Lauren frowned at the lavish surroundings and headed for the toilet. Afterwards she turned on the shower. His ass could just wait. She knew what he wanted. She still didn't think it'd work between them and she wasn't about to rush back in there and see how badly that scenario would turn out.

Just as she turned her head up to the warm spray, the door behind her opened. Of course, what made her think he'd stay in bed like a good monster? Two hands slid around her to cup her breasts.

"Did you not get that I'm a nasty grump in the morning?" Lauren asked as one of his hands wandered down her abdomen.

"Hmmm, the nasty part is good, the grump part is my responsibility," he mumbled into her shoulder while dragging his tongue across it. Firm fingers plucked her nipple then rubbed across the swollen nub. The other hand was pushing between damp folds, petting them softly. "If you're still grumpy when we're done," he continued. "I'll agree that you get to tell Dufus to take a hike."

"And if I'm not?" she questioned distractedly, his hand between her legs making it difficult to think as it strummed and caressed without giving the firm touches she was beginning to want.

"We fly to Vegas this afternoon," he mumbled into her other shoulder.

"That's it? All I'm agreeing to is a visit to Vegas?" Lauren questioned as she turned in his arms and slid her hands down his torso to grasp his cock firmly as he'd shown her yesterday.

"Oh, God, easy, baby," he gasped. "Ah, yeah. A visit," he agreed. "I want your agreement on the marriage thing. But I'd never make a deal over it." Romeo groaned as she stroked him steadily, not easing up one bit. "Slow down, I'm not the one who needs help getting turned on. Let me pleasure you," he pleaded as her hands worked him, one hand kept stroking and the other slipped under his balls to lift and roll them between curious fingers.

Lauren leaned forward and dragged her tongue across a male nipple then immediately sucked it into her mouth, pulling hard. Romeo's hands left her body to flash to the walls of the shower stall steadying him as his body clenched and jerked in response. "Lauren! What the hell are you doing?" he barked out.

She ignored him and reattached both hands to his erection. Suddenly her lips let go of his chest and she melted to her knees. Romeo only had time to look down in amazement as she held his cock securely between both hands and fed it into her mouth. Her lips sealed around him as her hot, wet little tongue slithered across and down. Gulping desperately, he watched her head start to move. The firm suction she applied with each pull removed all coherent thought from his brain. He braced bulging arms more firmly against the walls and hung on.

Her fists worked the thick root of him as she slurped over his inflamed head with increasing speed and pressure. The fire of release streaked up his body with white-hot explosions, she drew the fluid from his soul as her greedy mouth pulled and swallowed

every drop that erupted out of him. She worked him hard 'til he slumped back against the wall in trembling shock, drawing his cock from her mouth.

He gazed down at her blankly as she regarded him from her knees. Slowly she rose while he slid down the wall. When he sat on the floor of the shower looking up, she calmly stated, "Don't challenge me in the morning. I told you I was cranky." She raised one brow and stepped out of the shower.

Romeo thought his brain might explode. If that's what happened when she was cranky, he needed to hide the coffee. Perhaps sprinkling crumbs in the bed would do it? Maybe leaving his socks on the floor? Whatever it took, her cranky sent him into another stratosphere. Gathering himself off the floor, he shut off the shower and stumbled out.

Lauren was brushing her hair at the vanity, already in panties and bra. "You gonna get over it and get dressed? I need coffee and I'm not facing that room full of vultures alone after last night."

Romeo grinned. She was still cranky. He'd lost the deal he'd been so confident of, but aw hell, she made the sexiest cranky person he'd ever seen. Sauntering over to her, he dropped a kiss on her head. "I'll be just a second, angel face," he murmured and grabbed his razor. Once again he stood there naked, seemingly unconcerned while she was partially dressed. Swiftly done with the shaving, he quickly dressed. Lauren was standing by the door leading to the main house tapping her foot.

"Where'd you learn that, honey?" he asked quietly as he held the door open for her. They moved across the relatively quiet house.

"You taught me," she answered shortly.

"Damn, seems like I'd remember that," he mused as a wicked twinkle sneaked into his eyes. She was getting crankier—apparently talking was a struggle before coffee. "Just yesterday you'd never seen one, this morning you operate it like a professional. How does that work?" he pressed.

"Movies, books, ability to extrapolate. Coffee?" Lauren demanded as she stepped into the big, empty kitchen.

Romeo chuckled. If he'd had a few more steps, he could have pressed her with enough questions to reduce her responses to one word or grunts. "Have a seat, I'll get it going," he offered.

"Now, Romeo, do it now," she demanded and followed right behind him as he got the materials.

"You can sit, baby," he insisted as she stood at his elbow while he measured granules into the coffee filter.

"Want to know where it is," Lauren murmured as she watched the first drips appear in the empty carafe.

Romeo shook his head and laughed. "Now that I know the paramount importance of coffee, we'll have a coffee maker in our apartment. Don't worry. No one will withhold it."

Lauren's eyes darted to his. "Good, withholding would be suicidal, Romeo," she warned darkly. "Grounds for divorce!" she added for good measure.

Romeo's grin widened. If she was threatening him with divorce, she expected to marry him. Hell, he'd go pick the beans himself if need be, there was never going to be a shortage of coffee in this house. Well, except for certain early mornings when he couldn't help himself.

"Not a problem, baby," he assured her.

When the carafe was half full, Lauren grabbed it and filled the cup he'd slid in front of her while she stared at the dripping nectar of the gods. Adding two sweeteners, she took a sip and slumped against the counter. Romeo picked her up—careful not to spill a drop from the cup she clutched and gently sat her in a chair at the table. His own cup in hand, he settled beside her.

When she'd gotten to the bottom of her first cup, Lauren glanced around. "Where is everyone?" she questioned.

"It's only seven thirty. They won't be up 'til after nine," he answered. "Which is a good thing because we need to talk, sweetheart."

Lauren got a second cup and sat down again. "Okay, talk."

"When are you going to call Devin and take care of that?" Romeo asked.

Lauren raised her brows as she regarded him. "I thought I'd see him Monday and have a chat with him then."

Romeo frowned. "You're a hard woman, Lauren. Is this how it's going to be? I demand and you just do whatever you please?"

"Pretty much," Lauren responded and took another sip.

"It's how you handle your family, isn't it?" he accused.

"It is now," she confirmed.

"I don't like it," he growled.

"You're going to put up with it, aren't you?" she smiled at the big scowling man beside her who'd just realized little did not mean helpless. She might be brand spanking new to the intense relationship scene, but there was no reason not to start like you meant to go on.

Romeo turned to her and swooped down, fastening his lips over hers. His kiss invaded her forcefully. Sweeping into her mouth, he sucked her coffee taste deep into his body, stroking over tongue, teeth and soft tissue with masterful demand. His hands gathered her upper body against his, pressing into her hard. Her arms wound around his neck and she groaned into his mouth.

Insistently he drew on her, his hands roaming her body. Plucking and squeezing her breast, gliding down to her ass, he filled his hands with it and roughly cuddled it. Suddenly he grabbed her hips and swung her up to straddle his lap. Slamming her down on the rock formation in his crotch, his hands returned to her ass. Her body

undulated under his urgent direction, rubbing both cunt and tits into him as he kissed her desperately.

Romeo broke away from the kiss and stared up at her. "You're doing it again!" he accused.

"What?" she gasped.

"You're meeting me more than halfway in this physical stuff. I can barely keep up with you, honey. What happened between last night and today?" he asked softly as she continued to rub against him.

"You happened. You told me you'd make all my wishes and desires come true. You told me you'd stop if I wanted to. I haven't wanted to yet," Lauren purred. "Is it a problem? Am I too much for you? Are you tired of it?" Her face turned worried as that occurred to her.

"Oh, God in heaven, NO," Romeo assured her. "I'm a bit confused but happy as hell, sweetheart."

Lauren still frowned. "Now I feel uncomfortable." She sighed deeply and stepped off his lap to pace across the kitchen.

"No, no, no." Romeo watched her move away from him. "I'm an idiot, baby. Don't think this isn't what I want. I need to understand where you're coming from, that's all. I don't want to scare you or shock you. I asked because it's important you're comfortable emotionally as well as physically."

Lauren leaned against the counter and folded her arms as she looked at him seriously. Another little frown skittered across her brow as she thought about what he asked. She wasn't sure she wanted to examine her physical responses. Intellectually she felt hesitant and uncertain about moving into the new ground a full sexual relationship entailed. However, as soon as he laid a hand on her she became some sort of wild woman who couldn't crawl into his pants fast enough.

"You know I've never had a sexual relationship, right?" Lauren questioned.

"The very reason I've been cautious, baby," Romeo answered.

"You also know I've been cooped up in a hospital or under the protective eagle eye of my family from preadolescence until recently. Suddenly you happen and you're everything forbidden and dangerous. You turn me on and know what to do about it. You say you want a long-term relationship with a reasonable amount of believability. That gives the good girl in me freedom to let the bad girl out. I feel like the gloves are off. I'm suddenly liberated from adolescence with a walking, talking 'He-Man from Castle Grayskull' who wants to show me everything Ken would never do to Barbie. If you really want to go on with this, be prepared to deal with a woman who can't get enough of this.

"You asked what's different between last night and this morning. What's different is I woke up beside a naked, sexy man who wanted to touch me. I woke up in an adult situation with a fully developed adult who intends to share it. I feel brand new. I want to try everything. What happened in the shower was just flat-out going for it. It's how I wanted to express what I felt. You understood it. You knew I was feeling defiant and independent. I needed to push back on the physical level. You let me. You let me be an adult who can make her own choices and you let my choices mean something to you.

"Just being free to make a choice is a new and exciting activity for me. When you're that sick and that damaged by circumstances, you have no choices. Everything from what you eat to how or when you sleep is regulated to improve your chances of survival. Survival becomes the decision maker in every aspect of your life. I know this sounds really horrible—they worked so hard to give me this chance to live, but being the baby girl in a family of strong men already cuts into your choices. When you're sick and on the edge of death, well, you have none. They didn't even know what taking me to the mall would have meant.

"You're right. I'm different, I intend to stay different, Romeo. You can hardly say you knew me before, but does this change things for you?" Lauren asked.

Romeo cleared his throat and swallowed. The gorgeous woman standing across the kitchen from him just declared she intended to go wild. She'd literally broken out of the cage and given herself permission to try everything. He was damn sure that if he didn't get onboard, she'd find someone who would. There was no way he'd let her take her brand-new self out that door to go wild in someone else's arms.

"The only thing that's changed is my urgency about getting to Vegas, baby. Whatever you want to try, we'll try, but I want you to know you're going to be trying those things with me." Romeo stood up and stalked over to the counter where she stood. Resting his hands on either side of her body, he leaned into Lauren's face. "I'm the guy who broke open the box for you, darling. I am the only guy who's going to show you what fun it is to play with the big kids."

Romeo sealed her mouth with his. Immediately her arms went around his neck and her mouth opened to suck him in. He gathered her willing body to him and plunged into her with barely restrained lust. His body thrust into yielding feminine curves that pressed back at him. She turned into the wild, moaning sex maniac she'd warned him about. Now that he knew where this came from, he encouraged her abandon with hands and body.

At the doorway to the kitchen, Carla groaned loudly. "Oh, for heaven's sake. Can you two please get a room? People need coffee. Besides, I'm too young to see this. You're going to scar me for life. I'll never be able to face this kitchen again without wondering, damn it."

Romeo lifted his head and laughed. Lauren buried her face in his chest and echoed Carla's groan. His little wild woman was embarrassed at being caught crawling up his body. She'd had one leg wrapped around his hips just when Carla interrupted them. Two minutes more and Carla wouldn't have had to wonder. Lauren would have been balanced on the edge of the kitchen counter with both legs wrapped around him, with nothing but a condom separating them. An interesting possibility, but not where he wanted her first time to be.

"Oh, yeah, I intend to get us a room, and you can be damn sure about every surface in that place," he growled as he gently moved the two of them away from the coffee machine.

Lauren smacked him on the arm. "Romeo!" she hissed. "I said I wanted to be a bad girl. I didn't say one word about public displays and general announcements!"

He grinned at her red face. "Well, tell the good girl that I fully intend to make a general announcement and as big a public display as I can manage of our marriage license. So give me back that nasty little bitch in there. I want to show her what bad boys do first thing in the morning." Romeo swung Lauren up in his arms and headed out of the kitchen, leaving a bemused Carla staring after them.

They reached his rooms in a lust-induced fog. Unable to resist her mouth long enough to get there, he'd been kissing her deeply all the way across the house. Neither knew if anyone else saw them. Neither bothered to look.

Romeo put her down at the foot of the bed and whipped his clothes off. Fully naked, he yanked her back into his arms and fastened his mouth to hers again. Lauren's hands wandered his body as he fumbled with buttons and snaps on her clothing. Getting the shirt and bra off first, his mouth latched onto a plump nipple as soon as it became visible. He gave up on the clothes and simply grabbed her shorts at her hipbones and ripped them in half.

Lauren gasped as the sound of rending clothing penetrated her brain but his mouth didn't give her any time to analyze. Her panties suffered the same fate as her shorts. His mouth was now on her tender belly as he sank to his knees. His large hands palmed her ass and held her hips still as he moved lower. The licking, kissing man in front of her was actually growling deep in his chest as he buried his face in the springy curls at her crotch.

Lauren's legs started trembling when his tongue snaked out to flick over her swollen clit. The damp caress sent her staggering back against the bed. Romeo lunged after her as her ass hit the bed. He grabbed her thighs and shoved them wide while his

face returned to the plump folds between them. The low rumble in his chest hitched a moment then returned to a contented growl as he licked up a deep groove and down the other side.

Lauren felt burning waves of heat radiate from her center as his relentless mouth sucked in each fold and bathed it carefully. Her body fell back on the bed as she gasped in great gulps of air. Suddenly his hot, twisting tongue plunged into her opening—thick fingers held her cunt lips open while he pressed into her. He didn't withdraw but remained buried in her, licking and rubbing sensitive tissue that had never known this kind of attention. Lauren groaned and flexed her hips up into his face. It felt so damn good, so dark and nasty. He didn't thrust—he entered and stayed to investigate every millimeter he could reach.

The blood rushing through Lauren's body gathered at cunt and breasts. Her nipples ached and throbbed as he flattened his tongue to stretch her narrow passage. Lauren thought she might die as her body twisted to get more of him inside her. Her hands went to her breasts to rub the ache away.

Romeo finally pulled his tongue out of her, pressed it against her engorged folds and dragged it up to the puffy clit beckoning him. He gently licked around it, circling slowly while he glanced up her body and watched her fondle her breasts.

His avid tongue snaked over her clit and her whole body jerked. He lifted his head and looked down at the open cunt beneath him. His fingers came up to investigate as he watched. Sliding over flushed folds gently—he prodded her clit with light touches. His other hand moved down to press a thick digit into her contracting passage. Her body pushed up at the dual stimulation, the finger in her cunt disappeared to the knuckle and she groaned loudly.

"That's it, baby," he breathed. "Are you ready for more?"

"Romeo, don't talk!" she gasped. "Can't talk!"

Romeo chuckled as he watched her writhe on his fingers. "Oh, yes we do, sweetheart. I tell you how beautiful you are and you let me." He slipped another finger into her tight opening and ducked down to lick around his knuckles.

"Oh, God!" Lauren gasped. "You're a talker? We're doing this and you want to chat about it?"

Romeo slurped at her as his fingers thrust in and out gently, he lifted his head to watch again. "Yes, I want to look at you, taste you, feel you, eat you and tell you exactly how wonderful and beautiful it all is."

Lauren moaned as he thrust a little harder. Her tight channel contracted around his fingers. "I can't... You can't expect me to...ah... Oh, yes, just like that. More, I need more."

"See, talking is good," he crooned as he thrust into the pretty cunt harder. Lauren moaned and undulated to the rhythm he set.

"I love how you look, baby. Looking at you is almost my favorite thing," he continued.

"Okay," she gasped. "What is your favorite thing?"

"This," he stated as he head dived down and his sucking mouth fastened over the clit he'd been tormenting. He sucked hard as her body fought through the firestorm that swept up her.

Just as the burning pleasure ebbed to glowing warmth, he grabbed her under the arms and hauled her up the bed with him. When her head reached the pillow, his heavy body settled over her and he started kissing her again. Romeo reached down, hooked his arms under her knees and brought his hands back to her breasts. The slow motion adjustment to her position didn't register until she found herself spread and unable to move as his heavy erection slid down her dripping cunt to stop at the gaping entrance.

She sucked in a breath as he pushed into her insistently. Thick inches squeezed into her slowly. He lifted his head from her lips and watched her face carefully as he pressed

in. Her eyes rounded as hot steel invaded her. She kept waiting for the pain. It never came.

"Oh," Lauren gasped as he settled his groin onto her fully impaled cunt.

"Am I hurting you, baby?" he gasped as his body began to tremble.

"Ah, no," Lauren whispered.

"Do you want me to stop?" he questioned again.

Deep inside her body, the thick head of his cock nudged her womb. She could feel it burning her from the inside out. It felt hot, hard and so good. "NO. Don't stop, Romeo, please don't stop!" she groaned.

"Oh, God, thank you!" he moaned and his hips pulled back marginally, pushing in slowly. The shallow thrusts caressed nerve endings that seemed connected to every possible body part.

The incredible fullness robbed her of rational thought. The pike between her legs wasn't moving fast enough. Her calves tried to wrap themselves around his forearms for leverage so she could push back harder. He wouldn't let her.

"More!" she demanded.

"Wait," he responded and kept inching in and out of her slowly.

"No!" Her nails raked his back to make her point.

"You need more time!" he insisted shortly.

"Fuck. Me. NOW!" Lauren screamed at him.

"Damn it, woman! I'm trying to make sure you like it!" he groaned in exasperation.

"I LIKE IT. Fuck NOW!" Lauren grabbed his ears and held his face directly in front of her. "NOW!"

"Oh, baby, I can't wait!" he bellowed as his hips suddenly jerked back and slammed into her. He let go of her breasts, grabbed the backs of her knees and held them straight-armed out to the sides. His knees came up and he crouched over her bent body, pounding his thick cock all the way in her with a force and speed that sent her

spiraling off into the universe. Screaming her release didn't slow him down one bit. He pounded through her clenching cunt with mind-numbing power. As her shudders wound down, he suddenly pulled out of her.

Lauren felt strong hands grip her torso and flip her over. "Kneel!" he snarled at her. She complied, dazedly gazing down at the bed. From behind, he thrust into her channel with full body-powered ferocity. Each slam of engorged cock into the wet inferno between her legs wrenched a guttural grunt from him. Lauren's arms collapsed and she was suddenly on knees and elbows.

He knew he was fucking her hard and rude. He couldn't stop. This little woman stripped away his control with the demand he fuck her. The simple male animal that needed this could not be appeased with only one orgasm from this cunt. He needed her cum dripping down his thighs before he'd let her up. One of his hands released her hip to slither around to her swollen clit. Thumb and forefinger clamped sensitive flesh between them and began milking it like a nipple.

The rough handling sent her into a ruthless, grinding climax. Her body thrashed as white-hot explosions shot through her. Lauren screamed and tried to arch away from those callused fingers. He wouldn't let her.

"Please... Oh, God, please, Romeo. I can't take anymore!" Lauren begged.

"Yes," he growled. "More." Romeo threw his head back and squeezed his eyes shut. The sensations thundering up his body demanded a base dominance. He needed her to know him for her mate. How fucking her 'til she passed out was going to do that remained a mystery, but he couldn't stop.

Her body shuddered weakly under him again and Romeo finally let the orgasm take him. It felt as though his body liquefied and simply drained into her. The hot jets of seed kept racking his entire form with harsh intensity as he slammed into her. When it subsided, he collapsed on her back. She lay limply beneath him.

Gradually it dawned on him she hadn't moved. Romeo rolled off her and came up on an elbow to look down at her. Her head was turned away from him and all he could see was the gentle rise and fall of her back with each breath. He frowned.

"Lauren," he murmured as he ran a hand down her back. She didn't respond. "Honey, are you all right?" Nothing.

"Lauren, baby. Please talk to me. Please, sweetheart. Did I hurt you? Are you in pain?" He tried to brush the hair off her face but she turned it into the pillow and brought her arms up to clutch it tightly.

"Oh, Jesus, baby. I did hurt you. I'm so sorry. Oh, God, please, baby, tell me where? Okay, you don't want to talk to me. I understand. Should I get Carla? Would you be better if I got Carla?" He scrambled off the bed.

"No! Get back in this bed and calm down," Lauren's muffled voice demanded.

"Ah, yeah, sure. But, ah..." he trailed off as he gingerly sat back down on the bed. Her little hand reached up blindly and came to rest in the center of his chest. She pushed gently and he allowed her to press him back down on the bed. "Uh, honey, what's going on?" he asked cautiously.

"I am trying to recover from a full-body meltdown," she huffed from the pillow. "I've just been had by the world's wickedest lover and I need a minute to handle it. Please refrain from calling an audience!"

"Oh," he responded blankly, and then what she'd said sank in. "Ohhh," Romeo purred and gathered her slender body next to his. "No problem, sweetheart. I'll just be here amusing myself until you're ready to talk." He started dropping kisses down her spine. At the slope of her ass, the kisses turned into licks with little nips scattered among them. He couldn't resist and since she still hadn't moved, he opened his mouth and sucked gently until he was sure he'd left a hickey. Levering up to admire his handiwork, he saw her body start to shake.

"Did you just mark my ass?" she questioned around muffled giggles.

"Damn straight I did," Romeo responded, and licked over the cute red mark already glowing against lily-white skin. He decided the other cheek needed one also, just for balance, you know. Leaning over her, he licked that globe 'til he found the perfect spot and again sucked gently. This time the mark was right on the underside of her cheek where ass met thigh. As he sucked, her bottom lifted off the mattress and her legs drifted open.

He saw no reason to lift his head when she obliged him so sweetly. He lapped up the juices on her inner thigh. Her legs shifted again and he licked higher. Now she was squirming under his questing mouth, trying to center him where she wanted attention. He gently lapped up all the remnants of their lovemaking before nudging her legs further apart. She complied swiftly, spreading herself as wide as possible for the man who was now lying between her legs.

Romeo grinned as he surveyed the bounty before him. The puffy little cunt was red and sloppy. Above it, her rosebud ass innocently clenched as his finger rimmed it. Have mercy – this dog had gone to heaven. He lowered his face to take a long swipe. Starting at her clit, he dragged down over plump folds, briefly he dipped into her tender opening then up the delicate membrane separating it from her ass.

Lauren squealed and rolled over to face him. "Romeo, what are you doing?" she demanded.

"Getting your attention," he innocently responded.

"What? You don't think you have a woman's full attention when she spreads her legs as wide as possible for you?" Lauren demanded.

"I wanted you to talk to me," he defended himself. The almost petulant response made her laugh outright.

"I thought men didn't want to talk after." She gasped as he crawled up her body, dropping a kiss on each nipple as he passed them.

"You thought wrong," Romeo mumbled into her neck. Her legs shifted out as he settled his big body over her.

"Hey," Lauren sputtered. "We're talking, remember." His cock rested on the damp folds of her as he shifted himself around to get fully comfortable. Most of his weight was supported on his elbows but his lower body sought nature's cradle between her hips. His powerful legs adjusted out, spreading hers even wider to accommodate him.

"We are talking, baby. I just need to be sure I have all your attention." Romeo grinned down at the suspicious face she turned up to him.

"Okay, what are we talking about?" Lauren wanted to know. "I have the distinct impression you're pinning me down to tell me something you're afraid to again."

"Yeah, well, you know me too well already. I just thought we should discuss the fact that, well, I lost my mind a few minutes ago." Romeo sobered as he regarded her. "I'm sorry, baby. I should have been gentle the first time."

"Ah, you're apologizing because you think you should protect me from an experience like that?" Lauren questioned.

"I'm apologizing because I behaved like an animal. It won't be like that next time, I promise. Even if it kills me, I'll go slow, sweetheart. Please give me another chance."

"Is it always like that for you?" she asked.

"No." Romeo glanced down and swallowed roughly. "I, ah, I've never quite felt like that before. I don't know what came over me. I've never lost it and gone berserk. Honey, I'm really sorry," he ended sincerely.

Lauren grinned up at him. "Never?" she pressed.

"No." Romeo frowned as her slender legs slowly slid over his to wrap around him.

"I'm the only woman who's ever made you lose control?" she purred softly as her fingers threaded through his hair.

"Yeah, and you can stop that right now," he warned as her body shimmied under him. The motion moved his dick to the opening of her cunt. She had to be sore—he knew he couldn't have her again so soon.

"We have more talking to do, woman," he stated firmly as he readjusted away from temptation. "The thing we haven't mentioned yet is, I didn't, ah, I lost my mind as I said and didn't, ah, there wasn't..."

"Condom," she interrupted him. "The word is condom. Nope, you didn't put one on, did you? Is that a regular omission for you?"

"Shit NO! I've never entered a woman without one before. Never! I mean, it just doesn't happen." He rushed on as she opened her mouth. "I want you to know that the doctor told me about them having to rebuild your pelvis. I know you weren't physically a virgin because of all the surgery. I also know you can't deliver a baby because of the pins in your hipbones. Honey, I think it's too soon to have kids, but if there is one, we'll handle it together. You have to believe that. Do you?" he questioned worriedly.

"Am I allowed to talk yet?" Lauren raised her brows.

"For God's sake, talk!" he demanded.

"First, my doctor talks a hell of a lot, but I forgive him this time. Second, I'm relieved to hear I'm the first. Third, I'm on the Pill."

"The Pill?" Romeo repeated darkly. "Why?"

"Well, I was dating someone, for quite a long time actually. As we can both attest to, you can't ever be sure of when emotions are going to explode. Naturally I thought it might be a good idea to take precautions," Lauren explained.

A growl rumbled up Romeo's chest. "Yes, well, isn't it lucky Carla got you out here in the nick of time?" he bit out.

Lauren cocked her head. "Are you mad that I'm on the Pill?"

"No," he snapped.

"Then your fists are clenched in my hair because..." Lauren trailed off as she watched him visibly try to relax.

"I am not mad," Romeo stated. "I'm tense."

"Oh, I see. The big difference between those two escapes me at the moment. Explain it to me," Lauren invited.

Romeo huffed and glanced away from her. "I am tense because you thought about sleeping with that man."

"Excuse me!" Lauren gasped. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't you like the embodiment of sexual experience? Can you even count the number of women you've actually nailed, much less thought about?"

Romeo pressed his pelvis into her as she started to squirm out from under him. His hands gripped her head as he turned her angry face to his. "You're right, Lauren. I am the last person on earth who has any right to say that. I'm not proud of it. You asked me a question and I answered honestly." His sincere face mollified her and she stilled beneath him again.

"Honey, I'm going to start apologizing right now. I am jealous of any man you look at. I am not rational about it. I will try to control it, but as of right now, I hate it that you thought about sleeping with him. I'm sorry if that offends you," he ended quietly.

Lauren smoothed a hand down his face. "Do you have a little black book, Romeo?" she asked quietly.

"Ah, no," he frowned.

"List of numbers on your computer?" she pressed.

"Sort of, my address book is in my hand-held," he confessed cautiously.

"What do you suppose I think about that?" she asked.

"I don't know. I guess you don't like it either. But honestly, I'm not involved with anyone. Even if I was, it'd be over now. This is the relationship I want," he stated firmly.

"Do you want me to trust your word on that?" she asked.

Romeo frowned. Slick little girl had skillfully cornered him with his own words. Regardless of his answer, he'd have to extend her the same trust he wanted from her.

Romeo shifted and looked away from her, spitting out a vile curse before he met her eyes again.

“You’re a damn dangerous woman. Just so we get all the cards on the table, let me list my faults—I am obsessed with protecting the people I love, obviously that makes me controlling, bossy and now the brand-new fault of jealous. I do not wish to be rational about this but you’re gonna make me, aren’t you?”

Lauren smiled serenely. “It’s time to let go of that old fear, Romeo. You know it is. You can do it and I have faith that you’ll understand how it makes everyone else feel.”

Romeo scowled and rolled off her. He stared up at the ceiling and shook his head. “You’re going to tell me, aren’t you? The part about how everyone else feels.”

Lauren moved to rest an arm across his chest and her chin sat on it. She grinned at the pout on his face and assured him she would. “Oh, yes. Each and every time.”

He couldn’t resist touching her for long. His hands glided up and down her slender back as he looked into those laughing eyes. “It might take a while to rehabilitate me,” he stated darkly.

“I am willing to invest the time in you,” she promised seriously. “I have faith in your ability to learn. Given the right incentive, that is.” Lauren knew the play was taking a huge step into commitment. It wasn’t really the risk she’d thought it would be. He’d convinced her somewhere in the kisses and phenomenal lovemaking that this sort of thing didn’t happen very often.

His eyes crinkled but the smile remained hidden on his lips as he continued. “It’s taken me fifteen years to get this way. I’m sure correcting old habits will take longer than acquiring them.”

“Mmm, so you’re saying we can’t be sure for another fifteen years?” Lauren frowned.

“Nope, I think you need to double the time to get rid of something. Then it’s a good idea to be cautious for another twenty years at least. Yeah, this could take as long as fifty years, sweetheart.”

Lauren laughed. "I suppose you'll put me up for at least that long. Do you think you can find the room?"

Romeo rolled her over and kissed her long and hard. When they were both gasping for air, he raised his head and grinned down at her. "Sorry. Not an empty room in the house. You'll be bunking with me."

Lauren cradled his face with her hands, her smile faded as she gazed at the striking bad boy leaning over her. "I need to be sure about this. The feelings between us are new and untested. I need you to keep your promise, the one about dating. Can you do that?"

Romeo searched her eyes. In them, he found a scared little girl who wanted to trust him but still wasn't sure she could. There was the woman who'd taken her first steps into intimacy and didn't know what to do next. Primarily there was a sweet, giving spirit that he wanted to gather into his body and protect at all costs.

"Lauren, I will keep every promise I ever make to you or die trying. We'll take all the time you need, baby. As long as we are both clear that the relationship between us is exclusive and intimate, I'll probably do any damn thing you want. What I will not do is leave you. Do you understand what that means?" He kissed her palms as her hands drifted down his face to rest on his broad shoulders.

"Explain it to me," she invited.

"Wherever you are, that's where I'll be," Romeo explained. "If you need to be at your place near the specialists, that's where we'll live. If you'd like to move to the ranch, that'd be great. We don't have to get married right away but, honey, I want my ring on your finger. Can you do that for me?"

Lauren smiled into his serious face. "Aw, how sweet. You want to mark your territory."

Romeo grinned back at her. "Damn straight. I hope you're willing to lift weights 'cause the rock on that little finger is going to weigh you down. If it can't be seen at twenty paces, it's too damn small."

Lauren chuckled. "Careful, big guy, don't make me a target for muggers and desperate criminals."

"Oh, you'll have all the security you need, angel face." Romeo dipped down to sip at that smart mouth because he couldn't resist it. "I'll be right next to your luscious body at all times. They want the rock, they have to go through me."

"Mmm, so now you're a bodyguard?" Lauren teased as she twirled a lock of his hair in her fingers.

Romeo was licking down her neck when he grinned into her flesh. "Guarding this body has just become a career for me. I'm very serious about my duties. Don't interrupt me, woman."

"Well," she murmured. "I've heard about your guarding me, wanting me, being jealous of me, marrying me and moving in with me. There is one thing I haven't heard."

Romeo looked up sharply, his eyes narrowed as he surveyed the lovely face watching him so carefully. His body slid off to the side of her as he considered this turn in the conversation while sitting up slowly.

Lauren sucked in a breath as he voluntarily removed himself from bodily contact. He sat back against the headboard and gazed out the window. Lauren didn't move as she waited for him to speak.

Taking a deep breath, he started talking in a quiet voice. "I was a fully self-sufficient man until you stepped out of that death trap Carla drives. I'm the one whose world came to a screeching halt the first time big blue eyes met mine. You were looking at the dog. I'm the guy willing to beg just for you to sleep in the same room with me. You wanted to call it a fun time and be done with it."

He turned his head and looked down at her with a gentle smile. "I'm not complaining, baby. It's not your fault—you didn't do one thing to trap me. The fact that your little hands hold my world, that you are as necessary to me as the air I breathe, is my problem. I haven't told you I love you because I couldn't live if you looked at me

with doubt or worse, pity.” He grabbed her hand and squeezed it as she opened her mouth to respond. “No, let me explain this. You don’t have to say anything.”

Lauren frowned but nodded.

“I’m a confident guy, sweetheart. But that doesn’t mean I’m not scared shitless every time I look at you. You’re a beautiful sparkling spirit who’s suddenly discovered the big wide world. What if you decide you want to explore it by yourself? What if being your first means you want to know what the second would be like? I’m not strong enough to say ‘Go play, I’ll be here when you decide to settle down’. I need you too much. My heart has spent a lifetime searching under every rock and around each corner for you.”

He brought her palm to his lips and kissed it. “When I hand you my heart on the ‘I love you’ table, I’d like to be reasonably sure you want to exchange yours as well. I’m willing to earn that from you. I’ll do the time it takes to get you to look at me, not the dog.”

Tears streamed down Lauren’s face. “You’ve got to admit, the dog is scary. How could I know the guy who owns him is *actually* the big bad wolf?” she whispered. Looking into his serious face, she saw a man who’d protect and guard forever. He’d try to hide it for her, but there was no doubt in him over what he wanted. She considered her meager experience with men. It wasn’t like several hadn’t indicated interest, she’d just never been interested back. Not enough to do anything about it at least. This tidal wave of emotion he drowned her in, was it the real thing?

All she had to judge it by was the practical knowledge that love was never selfish or mean, or thoughtless. He’d passed that test with flying colors. He not only passed but also added dizzying sexual hunger and a freaking astounding ability to satisfy it. Was she willing to walk away from this? *NO* echoed through her mind with resounding finality. If this wasn’t the real thing, she’d no desire to figure out what was. It couldn’t be better than this.

Romeo laughed softly. "Perhaps you should pay more attention to the drool on my chin, baby, I'm the one salivating over you."

Lauren blinked and grinned with him. "When do you suppose we can sit down at the 'I love you' table? I'm not sure I can do the time to earn it. I've just discovered the big wide world, you know, it's hard to walk past it without touching."

Romeo closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the headboard again. "If we go there, Lauren, I'll never let you go," he warned her quietly.

"Aren't I a lucky girl," she purred. "First time out the gate and I get the grand prize." A curvy little body slithered up the expanse of tense male sitting on the bed. Firm thighs straddled his hips as she situated herself in his lap. Round breasts pressed against the hard planes of his chest when arms wrapped around his neck. Butterfly kisses peppered his face. His hands couldn't remain at his sides. Suddenly steel bands wrapped around her and he was crushing every inch of her into him.

"I love you, Lauren." Romeo groaned as he buried his face in her hair. "Please let it be enough, baby."

The world shifted as she turned her face into his neck and felt her soul sink into its new home. He completed her in ways she'd never known were incomplete. He was tingling excitement and the perfect serenity of a safe harbor. There was no doubt or fear, just a sigh of intense pleasure as the future filled with every fantasy the little girl had missed opened before her. How could she ever have thought she wanted to do them alone?

Lauren laughed shakily. "I love you, Romeo. Now don't make me get rough with you. I need a lot more instruction on the care and maintenance of the big bad wolf. Between the two of us, you're the one most likely to get bored."

"Okay," he agreed. "We'll start with the 'Worship Him' lesson and move right into 'Obedience and Compliance'." He was already lowering her to the bed, kissing her deeply.

"Start wherever you want," she whispered as his lips moved down her throat. "We'll still end up in the shower eventually. Don't forget what happens when I get pissed."

"Sweet Jesus, I live for your little cat fits," he agreed reverently.

About the Author

Hello everyone. If you're reading this, I hope it means you've enjoyed reading one of my books. If you have some other opinion of them, feel free to lie to me anyway. I hereby absolve you from all possible guilt and consequences for flagrant, adjective, saturated lying to the author.

I'm a chronic fantasizer. Every good romance novel ended too soon. After a while, I started making up stories when I had a few minutes to while away. So now, instead of sitting around with a blank look on my face, I've taken to writing them down.

Because of my father's job, we moved every three years in my early life. My first memories are of Bermuda, and then we were in several African countries. It was a wonderful childhood. I gained a rich cultural background in the world community, but never learned to spell. As an adult, I avoided writing at all costs, embarrassed over my limitations.

But the writer will not stay silent forever. She broke out, and insisted on learning the mystical world of grammar and spelling. Haven't mastered all of it yet, but they let me write for you anyway. Bless every editor on the planet. They give dreamers a place to send fantasies and save us the embarrassment of owning our shortcomings.

Gail welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at 1056 Home Ave., Akron OH 44310.

Also by Gail Faulkner

Full Ride



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com