



Fast Friends

By

Gail Roarke

Fast Friends by Gail Roarke

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Fast Friends

Copyright© 2010 Gail Roarke

ISBN: 978-1-60088-523-5

Cover Artist: Sable Grey

Editor: Susan Greene

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

Cobblestone Press, LLC

www.cobblestone-press.com

Dedication

For Kai, my First Reader and number one supporter.

Stan Ryan stepped out onto his front lawn dressed for a run. It was early on a clear, bright, autumn morning in Denver. The sky was bright but the neighborhood was still in shadow, the sun barely peeking above the houses to the east. Across the street, a U-Haul truck was parked at the curb. Stan remembered seeing the SOLD sign go up a few weeks ago. It looked as if his new neighbors had arrived.

Stan did a few limbering up exercises while he observed the new arrivals. He wondered how many were his new neighbors—there were two women and one man unloading boxes from the truck. Good odds that at least one of the new arrivals was a woman—and both of them looked good.

Deciding that there was no time like the present, Stan strolled across the street to introduce himself.

The large young man and one of the young women were carrying a sofa down the ramp from the truck. The man was over six feet and well muscled. His companion was of average height with shoulder-length dark hair, and didn't look nearly strong enough to carry her end of the sofa.

"Can I help you with that?" Stan stepped in next to the young woman. She gave him a wary glance, then smiled.

"Sure," she said. "You live around here, I take it."

Stan grabbed hold of the sofa, sharing the load with the woman. "Right across the street. Stan Ryan. I'd offer to shake, but..."

"I understand," the young woman said. "Leah Wright."

"So, we're going to be neighbors?" The possibility didn't displease Stan.

Leah smiled. The man holding the other end of the sofa laughed. "No, not us." She glanced toward the open front door of the house. "She's your new neighbor."

Stan let his gaze follow hers. A tall young woman with red hair exited the house. She was dressed in a black warm-up suit and ball cap. A red ponytail was threaded through the opening of the cap in back, bobbing with every step. Even at this distance, her green eyes were arresting.

Leah said something. After a moment, Stan tore his gaze away from the redheaded vision. "I'm sorry – what?"

Leah grinned and shook her head. "Story of my life. Everybody drools over the redhead, ignores the brunette."

"Not everybody," the big guy said. He looked at Stan. "I'm Victor, by the way. Since nobody else has seen fit to introduce me." He looked pointedly at Leah.

Stan nodded to Victor. "Nice to meet you, Victor."

The redheaded vision approached. She glanced at Stan, then turned her attention to Leah. "Who's the hunk?"

Leah laughed and turned to Stan. "That was easy, wasn't it?"

Stan looked from Leah to the redhead and back again, uncertain of where he stood. He liked hearing the redhead call him a hunk, though. "Stan," he told her. "Stan Ryan."

"Rachel Hartman," the redhead said. Her smile was as bright as her eyes. "So you're my new neighbor?"

"I am."

"Excellent."

Rachel's gaze dipped to give him a once-over. "You run?"

"Yes."

Rachel's smile brightened further. "Even better."

"You run?" Stan was certain she did. She had the body of a long distance runner. He sensed amusement from Victor and Leah at his question, though his attention was focused on Rachel.

"I do," Rachel agreed.

"We should get together for a run sometime."

"I'd like that."

"Me too," Stan said. He held Rachel's gaze until Victor cleared his throat. Stan looked at him.

"This sofa ain't gonna move itself," Victor announced. He raised his end a little, reminding Stan that he'd stopped moving.

"Oh—sorry." Stan began shuffling forward again, in step with Victor and Leah. "Duty calls," he said to Rachel.

"I love work," Rachel said with a laugh. "I could sit and watch it all day."

"Don't we know it," Leah and Victor said in unison. Stan watched them laugh, saw the look that passed between them. They were lovers, Stan concluded. He was certain of it. And that was fine with him. Leah was an attractive woman, but he was powerfully drawn to Rachel. It was good to know that Victor was out of the running. He'd be stiff competition.

Stan helped them carry the sofa into the house and set it down in the empty living room. He followed Victor and Leah back out to the truck. When he asked what he could do next, Leah brushed him off. "We've got this. And you were obviously just going out for a run. Don't let us keep you."

Stan turned to Rachel. "Are you sure? Because I—"

"We're sure," Rachel said. "I appreciate your willingness to help, but we've got this. Besides, how can Leah and I talk about you if you're right here?"

Stan grinned, unreasonably pleased. "You're going to talk about me after I'm gone?"

Rachel smiled back. "You betcha."

"I guess I'd better go, then." He turned to Leah, offered his hand. "It was nice to meet you. I hope you'll say nice things about me to Rachel."

Her grip was strong. "Most likely. You helped right away. That's a point in your favor."

Stan shook Victor's hand too. He slapped Stan on the shoulder. "Good luck, pal. Good luck on the running." His gaze slid over to Rachel.

"You'll need all the endurance you can muster."

"Victor!" Rachel sounded scandalized, but her smile didn't dim.

"I'm just saying, is all."

"I'll see you later, then," Stan said to Rachel.

"Count on it."

Stan nodded. He turned and started jogging down the street. He resisted the urge to turn and look back.

Rachel watched Stan run down the street. He was a handsome young man. A little shorter than she was, solidly built but not quite stocky, not with long, lean limbs like his. Black hair that would probably curl adorably if he didn't keep it cut short, dark eyes, and a dusting of freckles over pale skin.

She steeled herself for comments from Leah and Victor. She wasn't disappointed.

"Jesus, Rachel, planning your next conquest already?"

Rachel turned toward Leah. "And what if I am?"

"Trollop," Leah said with a grin. "Right, Vic?"

Victor cut the air in front of him with a firm slash of his hand.

"Keep me out of this."

"Coward."

Victor grinned at Leah. "You know it."

"He's cute," Rachel said. "And helpful. A nice guy."

"Not so helpful," Leah said. "We'd do better if it were just Victor and me moving the heavy stuff."

"I suppose," Rachel said. "He couldn't know that, though." Leah, Iron Maiden to the public at large, was by far the strongest of the three of them, though Victor, the Black Knight, was much stronger than a normal man. They cooperated to move heavy items only for appearance's sake, and because bulky items were hard to maneuver no matter how strong one was. Their strength was why Rachel had asked for their help. Having a superheroine for a best friend had its benefits.

She turned to give Leah a mock glare. "And by the way, who are you to be calling me a trollop?"

"If the shoe fits..."

"That's rich, coming from you. Or did I only imagine you telling me about your threesome in Chicago?"

"Well, yes..."

"*Iron Maiden*, my ass! You haven't been a maiden for years, Leah."

"Not since I was sixteen," Leah agreed with good cheer. "As you well know. I told you all about it when it happened. But enough about me. So, you gonna bed this guy?"

Rachel stared down the street where Stan had vanished into the distance. "I think I will. Eventually. Maybe. I may have to take his measure first."

"What?"

"Not like that, Victor," Leah said before Rachel could respond. "I'll explain later."

* * * * *

Rachel answered the knock at her door gratefully. She'd had just about enough of unpacking and sorting through boxes for today. Stan Ryan, in boots, jeans, polo shirt and leather jacket, stood on her welcome mat with a bottle of wine in one hand, a corkscrew and two glasses in the other. Rachel smiled, pleased to see him. "Stan. Please, come in."

"Thanks." He stepped inside and Rachel closed the door behind him, shutting out the cold night air. She felt self-conscious about her appearance. Her warm-up suit was dusty and her fingers were ink-stained from handling the crumpled newspaper she'd used to pack her breakables. She pulled off the ball cap she was wearing and tossed it behind one of the empty packing boxes stacked near the door before he turned to face her again.

"I saw your lights on," Stan said. He extended the bottle of wine. "I thought you might like a break from unpacking, so I brought you a little housewarming gift."

"Thank you." Rachel took the wine, a nice red. "You thought correctly." Her living room was a wreck. Packing boxes or their contents covered every horizontal surface. She walked over, placed the wine on the

coffee table and hastily cleared the sofa. She turned to Stan. "Please, sit down."

She hesitated for a moment. "I'm sorry, but I was just about to clean up a little," she lied. "Would you excuse me for just a minute?"

"Of course," Stan said.

Rachel retreated to the master bath to scrub away the ink on her hands, wash her face and brush her hair. She traded the sweats for jeans and a soft sweater over a matching bra and panties. Not that she expected Stan to see them tonight, but it made her feel pretty to know she was wearing them.

She examined her appearance in the mirror. Make-up would be a step too far, she decided. She headed back to the living room, where Stan was standing over an open box looking through the stack of games it contained. He looked up when he heard her approach. His wide-eyed look of admiration when she entered the room pleased her greatly. "Wow."

Rachel struck a pose. "You like?"

"You clean up real good."

"Thanks?"

"I mean, you look lovely."

"Thank you. Please, sit."

When they were both seated, Rachel said, "Now that I feel presentable again and have some wine to offer you, would you like a drink?"

Stan grinned. "I thought you'd never ask."

Rachel laughed. "Good thing you brought your own glasses," she said. "I have no idea where my glassware is packed."

"I thought that might be the case. And as I desperately wanted to have a drink with you."

"Desperately? I find that hard to believe." Hard to believe, but flattering.

"Why? You're a beautiful woman."

"I mean, I find it hard to believe you'd be desperate."

"Because I'm so ruggedly handsome?"

Rachel laughed again. Stan liked the sound of it. He still couldn't believe how well she'd cleaned up. The jeans and sweater displayed her slim figure wonderfully. Her unbound red hair hung in loose waves and framed her face perfectly. She'd been attractive before; now she was stunning.

"Yes, and modest, too. No wife? No girlfriend?" She peeled the foil away from the neck of the wine bottle.

"Never been married. No girlfriend at the moment. The job's available if you want it."

Rachel made a noncommittal noise. She took the corkscrew from Stan and began working it into the cork. "And what would this job entail, exactly?"

Stan shrugged. "The usual. Going out to dinner, the occasional movie, other shows. Other activities to be negotiated based on mutual interest."

Rachel looked up from uncorking the bottle. "I'll take the offer under advisement." She pulled the cork out of the bottle with a faint pop. She put it aside and poured a little wine in each glass as Stan held them out for her. She put the bottle down and took one of the glasses.

"What shall we drink to?" she asked, curious to see how he responded.

"To friends?"

Rachel smiled. "Works for me. To friends," she agreed. They drank.

"So," Stan said. He gestured at the box he'd been exploring. "Games, eh?"

Rachel smiled. "Yes. I love games."

"So do I. Chess?"

"Among others. I warn you, though. I'm very competitive."

"What a coincidence. So am I. Would you care for a game?"

"I'd love to." Rachel dug a chess set out of the box and set up the board, pieces, and a chess clock. Stan raised an eyebrow. Rachel caught his look. "We could play something else, if you like. Something easier? I've got Parcheesi, I think."

Stan narrowed his eyes. "Chess will do. Would you care to make a

small wager on the game?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Winner buys dinner for the loser this weekend."

"Done."

Rachel picked up two pawns, placed her hands behind her back, then presented her closed fists to Stan. He tapped her left hand, and she opened it to reveal the white pawn. "Your open," Rachel said. "Show me what you've got."

Stan proved to be good company: clever, witty, and well-read. He was also an excellent chess player. They drank most of the bottle of wine over the course of several games. He won the first game in a hard-fought contest. Rachel won the second, and the third was a draw. Rachel really ought to have been unpacking her things, but she was having too much fun. They'd still be there in the morning.

They got closer as the evening wore on. Eventually they sat with their thighs pressed together, Stan's arm around her shoulder, looking at one another and speaking at close range. As they wound up a digression into their respective favorites when it came to comedy films, Stan met her eyes.

He leaned forward to place his wineglass on the coffee table. He reached for hers. She let him take it. It joined his on the coffee table, and then Stan turned again to kiss her.

His lips brushed hers, then settled more firmly. He tasted of wine, and his arms pulled her close. Rachel was very aware of his hand on her waist, caressing her through her thin wool sweater.

She kissed him back, capturing his lip with her teeth for a moment, before letting her tongue invade his mouth. His breath hissed through his nostrils as he responded with enthusiasm. He kissed very well, with a skill that suggested plenty of practice.

They necked for quite a while. As time passed, they both began exploring with their hands. Rachel ran her hands along his thighs and discovered an impressive bulge between his legs. His chest was broad and hairier than she'd expected. His hands glided along her legs and over her jeans, caressed her flat belly both through and then beneath her sweater.

He explored her breasts through her bra, though she drew the line when he tried to free them from the lacy cups.

"No," Rachel murmured into his mouth. "Not tonight."

Stan rested his forehead against hers. "As you wish," he said quietly. "We'll save that for our first date."

Rachel smiled, eyes closed. "I believe you're assuming facts not in evidence."

"You're buying me dinner. That's not a date?"

Stan sat up. Rachel opened her eyes to see him watching her with an amused smile. "I'm just paying my debt. Is that so impossible to believe?" she asked.

"Well, yeah," Stan said. "How can we have a second, third and fourth date without having a first date?"

"Confident, aren't you?"

"No. Persistent. I know what I want."

"And you want me?"

"I do."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay. Tomorrow morning. Six a.m."

Stan studied her face. "You're serious? You are." He nodded. "Okay. Tomorrow at six. Where?"

Rachel nodded toward the front of the house.

"The street?"

"Yes. Come dressed to run."

Stan smiled. "Not exactly what I had in mind for a first date, but, okay. I'll be there."

* * * * *

It was cold outside at six in the morning. The shadows lay long and dark across the neighborhood. There was very little activity on the street. Stan wore a track suit over his shorts and t-shirt. The jacket had a hood, though he wasn't using it. He jogged in place for a minute, then did a little

stretching to warm himself.

Rachel appeared as if by magic while he was bending over to place his palms flat on the ground at his feet. She was wearing a forest green track suit. She looked better than she had any business looking in such a casual outfit.

Stan looked closer. She was wearing a little make-up. Nothing obvious, but just enough to bring out her eyes and highlight her mouth. Not that it needed highlighting. He'd thought about that mouth quite a lot since he'd spent so much time kissing it last night.

"Ready?" Rachel asked.

"Sure. What's the drill?"

"A nice five mile run, I think." Rachel's eyes danced. "Think you can manage that?"

"No problem." It was true. Stan routinely ran five miles. Occasionally he even stretched himself by doing a ten mile run. "Where?"

"I thought I'd ask you. You know the neighborhood."

"Ah," Stan said. He considered their options, then described the route he'd selected—a roughly circular route around the neighborhood that didn't cross any major thoroughfares. "Shall we?"

She nodded and set off. Stan followed. She settled into a sedate pace that Stan had no difficulty maintaining. It wasn't really challenging at all, he discovered. Stan began making conversation as they ran. About a mile into their run, Rachel asked, "Too slow?"

"I can manage a faster pace," Stan admitted.

Rachel smiled as if amused by something. "You should have said something." She lengthened her stride and picked up the pace, pulling ahead of Stan. He stepped up his pace as well, keeping up without trying to close the distance between them.

He was content to stay behind Rachel, watching her run. She moved with a smooth stride that seemed almost effortless, displaying a long-legged grace that he admired every bit as much as he admired the firm curves of her ass and the strong, lean muscles of her legs. Her initial pace had made him wonder if he'd overestimated her running ability when they first met. By the time they reached the halfway point of their

run, he had no such doubts.

Keeping up with Rachel was possible, but taxing. Stan had to push himself to maintain the distance between them. His lungs were burning and his muscles felt rubbery by the time they slowed to a halt in the street between their houses. Stan forced himself to stand erect and breathe normally. Heavily, but without gasping for air. He was sweating heavily as well, despite the chill air.

"Thanks for the run," Rachel said. She was flushed and glowing, but still had plenty of breath to speak. Stan was impressed. He smiled, nodded and waved to acknowledge her words.

"Same time tomorrow?"

"Sure." Stan was just able to manage one syllable without gasping for breath.

"Great!" Her smile was bright and there might have been a glimmer of amusement there. He couldn't blame her for it. He was the one who'd said he could manage a faster pace.

* * * * *

Stan met Rachel outside her house the next morning. They stretched a little to warm up. When Rachel asked if he was ready to run, Stan said, "That's all? We're just running?"

"Why? Did you have another idea?"

"How about a race?" The words were hardly out of his mouth when he saw that Rachel looked uncomfortable with the idea. "No?"

"I...don't think that's a good idea."

"The stakes don't have to be large."

"That's not the issue."

"What, then?"

Rachel looked distinctly uncomfortable. She glanced over Stan's shoulder, but whatever she was seeing was in her mind's eye. She met his eyes again and said, "You can't win. It wouldn't be fair to bet on the outcome."

Stan smirked. "Confident, aren't you?" The smirk faded as Rachel

held his eyes, her expression serene. "You're that fast?"

Rachel nodded.

"Fine," Stan said. "Then you have nothing to lose. Let's make the stakes something really valuable."

"Like what?"

Stan just wagged his eyebrows. Rachel gave him an arch look. "Really?"

Stan nodded. Rachel looked at him pityingly. "This is a bad idea," she said. The warning tone in her voice was unmistakable.

"It'll motivate me," Stan said.

Rachel's shook her head sadly, then smiled. "Fine. But let's be clear about this. I mean what I say. If you can catch me, you can have me. But not before."

"Right then and there?"

"Sure, if you catch me. You won't."

"So certain are you?" Stan asked in a credible imitation of Yoda.

Rachel laughed, as intended. He reached out to grab her arm and missed. She'd danced away out of reach. She shook an admonishing finger at him, though she smiled. "Naughty, naughty!"

Stan shrugged. "It was worth a shot."

Rachel sobered. "You're sure about this? You don't want to let things take their natural course?"

"I'm sure."

Rachel gave him a long, pitying look. She sighed. "We're both going to regret this," she said. "But, okay."

"Go!" Rachel said, and she sprinted away. Stan launched himself after her. Yikes, she was fast! She was nearly a block ahead of him already. She couldn't maintain that pace for long, though. Neither could he. Soon they both slowed to a steady, mile-eating jog. Stan didn't try to close the distance yet. He had miles to go yet.

* * * * *

Stan staggered up the street holding one hand to his side. The stitch

had mostly run its course, but he was still gasping for breath. He'd unzipped his track suit and pushed the sleeves up above his elbows to try to cool off. He was still overheated but simultaneously feeling a little chilled as his sweat evaporated.

Rachel was walking back and forth on the sidewalk in front of her house. She smiled and approached him. She had a healthy glow and tiny strands of her red hair were plastered to her skin along her hairline. She looked appallingly good for having run five miles so fast. "Nice try."

"There are no second place winners," Stan grouched.

"So you don't want your consolation prize?"

Stan perked up. "Hell yes!"

Rachel stepped in close. She cupped his face between her hands, tipped his head to one side and gave him an eager, open-mouthed kiss he felt right down to his toes. His hands came up to grab her waist and pull her closer.

Her body was warm, a delightful combination of lean, firm limbs and soft curves. Stan felt himself becoming aroused despite his fatigue. If he wasn't mistaken, Rachel could feel it, too.

She pulled away. "Same time tomorrow?"

Stan stood, breathing hard for a moment, feeling bereft. He wanted to bear her to the ground and explore that mouth for a good long time. And honestly, he wanted to tear her clothes off and bury himself in her. He took a steadying breath.

"Same stakes?" he heard himself ask.

"Absolutely."

"I'll be here."

Rachel smiled brightly. "Excellent."

* * * * *

"God, Leah, I'm going crazy. It's been a month!"

Rachel sprawled in a chair at Leah's dining room table, watching Leah putter around in her tiny kitchen. Victor was sitting there as well, reading the paper. Leah had invited Rachel to join her and Victor for

dinner. Leah glanced over her shoulder at Rachel as she stirred a pot of chili on the stove. "For God's sake, girl, just fuck him already!"

Rachel sighed in exasperation. "I can't."

Leah covered the chili and laid the spoon in its cradle. She turned to pin Rachel with a look. "You *can*. You won't. There's a difference."

"We have a bet!"

Leah's expression told Rachel what she thought of that. "And how's that working for you?" Rachel groaned theatrically and covered her face with her hands.

"I don't see what your problem is," Leah continued. She dropped into a chair across the table from Rachel. "You want him. He wants you. The only thing standing between you is unreasonable stubbornness about some silly bet."

"I get it," Victor said. It was his first contribution to the conversation.

Rachel looked at him with surprise. "Yeah?"

Victor nodded. He folded his paper and looked at Leah. "She and Stan made a deal. Yes, you could say that it's just a silly bet, but a deal's a deal. You don't break your word just because it's become inconvenient."

Rachel nodded firmly, pleased by this unexpected support. Victor had crystallized the sentiment she'd been trying to convey. "Exactly."

Leah still looked skeptical. "It's not a promise, though," Leah said. "It's just a bet. You can call off a bet."

"And you can ask to be released from a promise," Victor said. He glanced at Rachel and she shared an instant of perfect understanding with him. Victor got her on this point in a way that Leah, her more pragmatic friend, never would. "But you don't. If you don't want to be bound by an agreement, you simply don't make it."

Now Victor grinned at her. "I do hope that this has been a learning experience for you," he said. "Don't make the other guy's victory a condition of something you want as much as he does."

* * * * *

Rachel was a warm, soft armful, and her mouth tasted faintly of chocolate. She was dressed, as usual, in a thick, fuzzy sweater, warm slacks, and sensible shoes over thick socks. She dressed for warmth and kept her house warm, but her fingers were invariably cool on his skin.

Stan had brought chocolates and a wrapped package along with the bottle of wine when he knocked on her door that evening. A nightcap each evening had become as much a part of their routine as the early morning runs—a glass of wine, a little conversation, a game of some kind, usually chess, and some heavy petting.

"If I didn't know better," she'd said, taking the box of chocolates at the door, "I'd think you were trying to fatten me up."

"Perish the thought. Slow you down a little, maybe."

"Oh, you!" She'd kissed him warmly and then invited him to sit. He'd settled on her sofa, then poured them each a glass of wine. When Rachel joined him, he'd pulled her close with an arm around her shoulder as they drank.

Stan didn't doubt that Rachel wanted him as badly as he wanted her. Her eager kisses, her erect nipples, the glow in her eyes and the flush that overcame her when they made out were as obvious as his hard on. Which made it all the more frustrating when she gently but firmly rejected his advances each evening.

"Not until you catch me," she said. "That was the deal."

"You're a cruel woman, Rachel."

"Hey, I tried to warn you, but you didn't listen."

"You did," Stan admitted.

She hadn't mentioned that she'd come *this* close to being on the U.S. Olympic team, but he hadn't asked, either. It was his own fault, really. Pride goeth before a fall, and all that. At least they'd had plenty of time to get to know one another. When he finally caught her, they wouldn't be strangers.

He'd tried to concede the bet weeks ago, but she wouldn't let him. "You made your bed, and now you have to lie in it. Alone. For as long as it takes. You'll just have to take matters into your own hands."

"I have been," Stan said, wondering if he'd gone too far. But the

words were already out there, so he added, "It's not the same."

"Tell me about it," Rachel muttered.

That got Stan's attention. "Really?"

Rachel smiled shyly. "Yes, really." She ran her hand over his chest through his shirt. "You're not the only one who's frustrated, you know."

"And you've been...you know..." He kissed her again. "Taking matters into your own hands?"

Rachel looked down, biting her lower lip. Her cheeks reddened. She looked up and said softly, "Every night."

Stan pulled her close again. "I'm flattered." And aroused. The mental image her words evoked only excited him further.

Rachel's hold on him tightened. "So run faster. I want you to make love to me."

Stan fought the urge to suggest abandoning their wager. He held her close, enjoying the feel of her body against his. "I will. I promise."

Rachel kissed him again. She cupped Stan's face between her hands. Her bright green eyes darted back and forth as she gazed into his eyes from close range. "So, what's in the package?"

"Couldn't wait any longer, huh?"

She made a face. "You've been here twenty minutes!"

"Open it and find out."

Rachel's eyes danced. "Ooh! A present? For me?"

"Yep."

She turned on his lap and leaned over to pick up the package from her coffee table. Stan took the opportunity to admire the firmness of her ass. "Somebody's groping my ass," Rachel observed.

"Yeah? Who?"

"Some guy I know."

"That handsome devil from across the street?"

She resumed her place on Stan's lap, then tore off the wrapping paper.

"That's him—oh, a travel chess set!" Rachel turned and kissed him. "Thank you."

Stan glanced down, reaching out to tap the travel chess set. "I was

very cunning when I chose this for you."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. It's a magnetic travel set. That way we can still sit side by side while we play, instead of sitting across the table from one another. No need to give up valuable necking time."

Rachel threw her arms around his neck and hugged him fiercely. "Very clever," she whispered into his ear.

"The better to distract you from your game, my dear."

"We'll see about that. Set us up, will you?"

Stan arranged the pieces on the board. They settled down together on the sofa, the board balanced across their thighs. They began with frequent kisses between moves. But twenty minutes later, the only thing on Stan's mind was finding a way to prevent Rachel's queen threatening his king.

* * * * *

Stan loped along at a steady pace, still settling into his form. It was a bright winter day in Denver, and he was taking a noontime run away from his office. It had become a habit in the last few weeks. He took every opportunity these days to improve his speed. A little friendly competition never hurt either. He glanced to his right, where Ken Jennings, his closest friend since college, was running alongside him.

"Ready to give it up?" Stan asked.

"In your dreams, pal," Ken said. "I'll still be going strong when you're puking your guts up in the bushes."

"You like to think," Stan retorted. "Want to put your money where your mouth is?"

"A wager?" Ken asked. "Isn't that how you got into this situation in the first place?"

"On your left, handsome!"

Stan drifted to his right as he threw a glance over his left shoulder. Rachel was coming up on his left. About once a week she turned up downtown about the time he went running. It looked as if today was the

day. Her long red hair was threaded through the back of the familiar baseball cap. She was wearing black sweats today, and black Nike running shoes.

"Today's the day," Stan called.

She glanced at him, gave him a brief smile. "Is it?"

"Yes, indeedy."

"We'll see," she said. She didn't slow her pace, though. Soon she was a step ahead of Stan, then two, and three. The gap continued to widen. Stan watched her go, admiring her technique as much as he did her body. He'd learned a lot by watching her technique, and he'd enjoyed it, too.

She moved with the same effortless grace she always did. Stan found himself increasing his pace marginally, trying to keep up with her. He managed it for a while. He really had picked up his game considerably since he'd started pursuing Rachel, but kept pace with her now only at the cost of an ever greater oxygen debt. By the time he stumbled to a halt, gasping for air and sweating buckets, he'd lost Ken somewhere behind him. Stan stood bent over, resting his hands on his knees, gulping air into lungs that burned like fire. He looked up to see Rachel dwindling into the distance, still maintaining that punishing pace with no evidence of distress.

He thought he caught a flash of bright teeth as she glanced back once. It might have been his imagination. He lifted one hand in a brief wave, just in case. Then she was out of sight and Stan could concentrate on gasping for air.

A few minutes later Ken jogged to a halt at Stan's side. Stan pointed an accusing finger at Ken. "Not a word!"

"Wouldn't dream of it." Ken uncapped a bottle of water and sipped from it. Replacing the cap, he continued, "But if I were to express myself in a single word, that word would be *pathetic*. Or maybe *tragic*."

Stan straightened up experimentally. He could actually stand upright now. His lungs were no longer trying to crawl out of his mouth in search of air. His arms and legs felt weak with fatigue and his clothes were soaked. His feet practically squelched inside his running shoes.

"Seriously," Ken said. "When are you going to give it up?"

"When I catch her."

Ken blew out a breath. "You've been trying for, what, three months now?"

"Something like."

"Dude, find another hobby. The woman's out of your league."

"For now. I'm getting better."

"Yeah, right."

"I'm serious," Stan said. "I'm beating your time all to hell nowadays."

Ken uncapped his bottle and took another sip. Recapped it. He did that every time. "Okay, yeah," Ken admitted. "You are. But are you any closer to keeping up with her?"

"Yes."

Ken just looked at him. "Maybe." Ken kept looking. "Okay, no. Not really. But I've improved my pace dramatically. That's gotta count for something, right?"

Ken shrugged. "You tell me. What did she tell you?"

"If you catch me, you can have me."

"So...three months ago she left you gagging for air while she went bouncing merrily onward. And today?"

Stan scowled. Ken waited patiently, eyebrows raised. "She left me gagging for air while she went bouncing merrily onward."

"I rest my case," Ken said.

"I'm not giving up," Stan said. "Tomorrow, for sure."

Ken shook his head sadly. "Uh huh."

"Would you give up if you were me?"

Ken glanced up the street as if he could still see Rachel, then he met Stan's gaze. "No."

* * * * *

Stan was drenched in sweat. His lungs burned with every gasping breath and his limbs felt leaden, trembling with every additional step,

every swing of his arms. He was running on pure willpower now, determined that this time—this time—he would not let Rachel get away. She was bounding along in front of him, closer than she'd ever been on these runs, not quite close enough to touch.

He dug down deep, mining for his last dregs of strength. One more turn and they'd be only a few blocks from home. He pushed himself just that last fraction harder and reached out. His fingertips brushed her shoulder, grazing the fabric of her sweat-soaked hoodie. Even as he sensed he was about to fall behind again, irretrievably this time, Stan curled his fingers, catching the fabric on his nails. He closed his fist, twisting and stretching the fabric into a tiny knot in his hand.

He felt the tension in the fabric relax, and then stumbled into Rachel. She slowed to a jog, then to a walk, and finally to a halt. Stan followed suit, still clutching at the shoulder of her jacket. He stumbled to a halt, bent over and whooping for breath, but still clinging to her top.

"Okay, you caught me," Rachel said. "You can let go now. I promise not to run away."

Stan shook his head, struggling to breathe, feeling the rawness in his throat. "Not—" He coughed. "On your life. You're not getting away until I get...a kiss."

"Just a kiss?"

Stan looked up. Rachel was smiling at him, eyes alight. She was breathing deeply, but with no sign of the desperate oxygen debt he'd accumulated. "Just a kiss," Stan said, "for now. You promised that I could have you, and I intend to hold you to that promise. Just not right this moment."

"What makes you think the promise is valid at any other time?"

"You put no time limit on claiming my prize."

"It was understood," Rachel said, grinning.

Stan straightened a little, now that his breathing was easing a bit. "Not by me."

"All right." Rachel laughed. "You've got me there."

"I've got you here," Stan reminded her. "And I'll have you there as well."

"Ooh, big words from a man who can barely stand up straight."

"I'll live up to my big words; don't you worry."

"You'd better," Rachel said. "Otherwise, I'll be very disappointed. I didn't let you chase me all these months just to find out you weren't worth the wait. I expect full value. And by full value I mean—"

"I know what you mean. You'll get it."

"I'd better."

"You will."

* * * * *

Stan stepped in close behind Rachel, pressing her against the balcony railing. Rachel made a sound of pleasure and snuggled closer. Downtown Denver was spread out before them, gleaming in the dark. The wind was cold up here, but Stan's body against hers was pleasantly warm.

He slid his arms around her waist. She tipped her head back to rub her cheek against his. In a minute they would retreat from the cold to the warmth of the hotel room. This moment had been long time coming, and though she was eager for it, she was also enjoying the anticipation. Stan tugged aside the neck of her sweater and tipped his head to kiss her bare shoulder. She shivered at the touch of his lips on her bare shoulder. She was looking forward to this evening very much. Stan had pursued her with vigor and determination, and it turned her on that he wanted her badly enough to work so hard at catching her. Being wanted like that was intoxicating.

Rachel turned in Stan's arms. She was a couple of inches taller than Stan. She laid her arms over his shoulders, hands clasped behind him. "I've been looking forward to this," Rachel told him.

"You and me both," he replied. His mouth pressed against hers, lips parting, spreading her lips and making way for his exploring tongue. Rachel closed her eyes and matched his kiss, her own tongue meeting his. He kissed well, eagerly and appreciatively, but not too aggressively.

Stan's hands slid around behind her as he took her in his arms, one hand gliding up between her shoulder blades, the other coming to rest on

the curve of her ass. When he pulled her body tight against his, Rachel relaxed and melted into the embrace. The warmth of his body from knees to shoulders was comforting, a nice contrast to the cool wind.

Rachel made a soft sigh of contentment as they broke the kiss. She could feel her erect nipples. She could feel him getting erect as well. She pressed her forehead to his, eyes still closed. "Let's go inside," she whispered. "It's getting cold out here."

Stan nodded. He made a rusty noise, cleared his throat softly. "Sounds like a plan."

Despite their agreement, neither moved. Rachel kissed him again, pleased to feel the lump in his slacks. When she pulled her mouth away, he drew a shaky breath before releasing her and stepping back. "Shall we?"

Rachel took his hand. "Yes, let's."

Stan turned, took a step, and pulled open the glass door. Rachel followed him inside. He turned and closed the door behind them. She could hear the heat running, feel the warmth of the air pouring from the heating vents. Later, she knew, it might feel too warm. Just now it felt very nice. It took away the chill of being outside.

Stan tugged at her hand, drawing her toward the bedroom. He glanced back over his shoulder, smiling like a kid at Christmas. His joyful expression thrilled Rachel. Knowing how much he anticipated this made her feel beautiful. She let him draw her along, then stopped when they reached the bed. It was a king size bed, the covers already turned down.

Stan released her hand and stepped in to capture another kiss, one hand cupping the back of her head, fingers laced through her hair. There was an intensity to his kiss, a desperation, that sent chills through her body. His free hand rested on her hip for only a moment before slipping beneath her sweater to rest on her bare skin.

"God," Stan said, lips brushing hers. "I can't believe you're here with me."

"Where else would I be?"

"I don't know. I only know I thought this day would never come." His hand slipped around to cup her cheek for a moment before dropping

to slide beneath her sweater on her other hip.

"Well, here I am," Rachel said.

Stan smiled. "Yes," he said. "Here you are."

With that, he slid his hands up her sides, lifting the bottom of her sweater, gathering up material as he went. His fingers brushed the fabric of her bra and continued upward. Rachel raised her arms, shivering as his fingertips tickled the flesh of her upper arms.

She closed her eyes for an instant as Stan stripped the sweater off her. She caught a glimpse of the garment sailing through the air before it vanished behind a corner of the bed. She stood before him now in a black lace bra.

Stan's hands resumed their places on her hips. She lowered her hands to rest on his shoulders. He took a moment to admire her cleavage before he met her eyes. "Beautiful."

Rachel felt herself blush a little. She stepped in close, embracing him and laying her cheek against his. That way she didn't have to witness the look in his eyes. It was exciting, yes, but his arousal was so strong that she feared disappointing him.

Stan kissed her ear, then took the lobe between his teeth, very gently. Rachel shivered violently, all over. She felt his lips curve in a smile an instant before he attacked her ear again with his teeth. She gasped.

He kissed the point of her jaw, then left a trail of kisses like breadcrumbs down the side of her neck. Rachel let her hands drift down to feel out the shape of his ass. It was high, firm, and well-muscled.

Stan's mouth continued downward, kissing her collarbone before he leaned in to press a kiss between her breasts. He inhaled audibly, then sighed. "Mmm. Lilac?"

"Yes."

"I like."

The bra opened in the front. Stan's hands converged between her breasts. He struggled with the clasp for a few moments before he mastered it. He peeled it away from her breasts, holding it with both hands as he leaned in to plant a kiss on each rigid nipple.

Rachel lowered her arms, allowing Stan to slide the bra off her body. It joined the sweater on the far side of the bed. Rachel stood motionless for a moment, pleased by the look in Stan's eyes as he admired her naked breasts for the first time. She pulled Stan into another full body embrace, certain that he could feel her nipples pressing against his chest through his shirt. His hard-on poked her thigh, feeling bigger and harder than before.

Rachel sighed, holding him tight. "This is so nice."

"And we're just getting started, beautiful."

"You're overdressed," Rachel said.

"Want me to correct that?"

"No. Let me do it."

Rachel gave Stan a big, aggressive kiss before she opened a little space between them. Stan smiled with unseemly joy, watching her intently as she unbuttoned and then pulled off his shirt. She unbuckled his belt and opened his trousers. His hard cock pushed through the open fly, still enveloped in his silk boxers.

Rachel let his trousers fall around his ankles, then gave him a flickering glance and a grin before working her fingers into the fly of his boxers. His cock was large and hard and hot. He groaned and closed his eyes as she caressed him. She stroked him a few more times, feeling the foreskin glide along the length of his cock. Stan groaned even louder. He grabbed her wrist abruptly. "Enough!"

Rachel smiled triumphantly. "Off with the clothes, Mr. Ryan."

Stan pressed his lips together firmly, eyes rolling behind closed lids. Then he looked at Rachel. "Off with the clothes, Ms. Hartman."

Rachel released his cock with reluctance, telling herself that she'd get to play with it again very shortly. She kicked off her heels as she unzipped her skirt and stepped out of it. She found herself breathing heavily as she wriggled out of her panties, excited by baring herself to Stan for the first time.

Stan stepped free of his trousers, then out of his shoes. He leaned over to remove his socks before peeling away his boxers in one quick motion. He was every bit as handsome as she'd expected him to be. She'd

seen him running shirtless often enough to know what to expect.

The only mystery had been his cock, and now she looked at that. He was above average in length, and larger in circumference than average as well. Not the largest she'd ever seen, but definitely the largest Rachel had ever had the pleasure of...having the pleasure of.

She moved into the center of the bed and stretched on her side, propped on one elbow. She summoned him with a crooked finger and a smile full of promise. Stan crawled onto the bed and hastily stretched on his side facing her. His gaze lingered on her breasts. A moment later, his hand cupped one.

He stroked one nipple with a fingertip. It swelled and stiffened, and she drew a sudden breath, surprised by how pleasurable that simple touch was. He smiled and repeated the gesture on her other nipple, provoking the same result. He chuckled.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Just happy to be here," Stan said.

Rachel reached down to wrap her fingers around his hard cock, and now it was his turn to make sounds of enjoyment. "So I see," Rachel said.

Stan swallowed visibly before he spoke. "See?"

"See. Feel. Whatever—whoops!" Rachel pushed him over onto his back and threw a leg across his body to straddle his hips.

She knelt over him, supporting her upper body on her extended arms. She gave him an arch look. "So what do you want, Mr. Ryan?"

"You know what I want."

"Tell me anyway." The way his gaze played over her face delighted her. It strayed from her eyes to her mouth and back again, as if he couldn't decide which fascinated him most. He looked...hungry for her, as if he wanted to capture her lips with his mouth, maybe his teeth. The thought thrilled her. She wanted his mouth on her body, wanted him to breathe her in, swallow her whole. She wanted him to take her entirely and completely. "I want to make love to you."

Rachel cocked an eyebrow. "You want to make love to me? Really?"

"Yes. Desperately."

"Are you sure? Maybe you just want to fuck me?" She rolled her hips in a slow circle, grinding her mons against him, squeezing his cock between them.

"No."

"No? You *don't* want to fuck me?"

A brief narrowing of his eyes was all the warning she had that her teasing was at an end. Stan reached up to roll her nipples between thumb and forefinger of each hand. She stopped moving, instantly distracted, eyes closing as she caught her breath. It escaped in tiny gasps as he continued tugging and twisting them.

Rachel abruptly pushed herself upright, then clutched at his hands, overwhelmed by the intensity of the sensations, pulling them away from her hard nipples, holding them still. She gulped for air, staring into space but seeing nothing. When she could focus again, she saw Stan watching her.

Before she could speak, Stan freed his hands, wrapped them around her and pulled her down into a fierce kiss. He took what he wanted, claiming her mouth with lips and tongue and teeth. His aggressiveness startled her for a moment, then she relaxed into it. That was apparently what he'd been waiting for.

Stan rolled them both over so she lay on her back with Stan between her legs, his body pressed to hers. "Yes, I want to fuck you," he whispered into her mouth after the kiss. "I am *going to* fuck you. And I'm going to make love to you."

She looked up into his eyes from only inches away. He looked so intense, so serious. She smiled. "Big words from—" She hesitated as he ground his hips, ground his hard cock, into her. "A big man."

"So the question is, do you want to be fucked? Or do you want to be made love to...first?"

She couldn't help laughing. "Fucked, please." She rocked her hips against him.

Stan smiled. "Good choice."

He pushed himself up onto his hands and then knelt between her

thighs. God, he was gorgeous. Broad shoulders, muscular arms, and rippling abs that led her gaze down to the dark thatch of his pubic hair. When she looked up into his face, his brown eyes pinned her to the bed, his desire for her so clear and so intense that it was almost frightening. Stan held her gaze as he reached down to caress her pubic hair, then ran his thumb along her pussy lips. She sighed in pleasure and wiggled her hips. She was wet, but still tight around his gently probing finger, not yet ready to fuck. But there were other things they could do. She smiled at Stan. "My, what a big mouth you have, lover."

Stan chuckled, the twinkle in his eyes signaling that he'd understood her meaning. "The better to eat you with, my dear."

Still holding her gaze, Stan backed away, lowering his face to her pussy. He gave her a last, momentary smile, then turned his attention to the task at hand. She felt him kiss the inside of one thigh, then the other. She heard him breathe deeply, inhaling her scent, before he pressed his lips to her pussy in a delicate kiss. He licked her softly, running his tongue along the length of her labia. The gentle, moist caresses thrilled her. Rachel moaned, spreading her legs and raising her knees, offering herself for his attentions.

He teased at her pussy, running the tip of his tongue between the lips. Rachel opened herself to him, her labia swelling and parting as her arousal increased. She felt herself growing wetter. He worked one finger into her pussy, then two, spreading her lubrication as he continued to eat her. He began fucking her with two fingers in a slow rhythm, thumb stroking the outer lips to add to the stimulation. Rachel moaned as her pleasure mounted. The gathering tension drew the muscles of her legs taut. She marveled at how expertly he was reading her reactions, lapping at her clit, or flicking his tongue across it, guided by the tension in her trembling legs and the quick, increasingly ragged breaths she drew.

She began to rock her hips, slowly at first. She clutched at the bed with wide spread fingers, or raked her fingers through his hair. She felt him pause for a moment, felt his lips twist in a momentary grin before making the final push. Lips, tongue, teeth, fingers, all worked in unison to push her over the edge.

Rachel drew a deep breath—held it—then came with a shuddering cry. She thrashed beneath Stan, her whole body quivering. Stan clung to her, an arm wrapped around each her thighs, holding her and kissing the soft flesh of her inner thighs as her orgasm passed. She went limp as the tension ran out of her body.

“Oh, my.” Fatigue made Rachel’s voice soft and slow.

“Liked that, did you?” Stan sounded pleased with himself, and she couldn’t blame him. She was damn pleased with him. He moved into position between Rachel’s legs, supporting himself on his knees and hands.

She smiled contentedly, breathing heavily, a little warm but oh, so relaxed. She lifted her head to glance down between their bodies at Stan’s hard-on. He looked as eager as she felt. She rolled her eyes to look up at him. “See something you like?”

“You got that right,” Stan said.

Rachel let her head drop again. She smiled up at her lover, cheerfully lecherous. If he was half as talented with that lovely cock as he was with his mouth and hands, she was in for a hell of a ride—and the sooner the better. She raised her arms and wiggled her fingers in invitation. “Don’t stand on ceremony, then—ooh!”

She felt Stan press the tip of his cock between her pussy lips, the thick head parting her labia. She had a moment of doubt, wondering if she were ready for so large a cock. Then he was pushing himself inside her, filling her slowly. Very slowly, very patiently. He was hot and hard, and God, he filled her up so well! The slow, relentless friction renewed the heat inside her, the heat that had so recently exploded into pleasure.

She felt Stan’s balls come to rest against her ass and realized he’d bottomed out. She felt deliciously full, ever so slightly stretched by the necessity to take him in, but not uncomfortably so. She opened her eyes again, wondering when she’d closed them, to see Stan looming over her, head turned to one side, eyes closed in a look of great pleasure. She ran her hands up his arms, admiring the strength in them.

Her hands reached his head, turning his face toward her. He opened his eyes, giving her a heavy-lidded look of pleasure. She smiled

back at him, then pulled gently. He lowered his head enough to give her a brief kiss.

A brief kiss wasn't enough. "More," Rachel insisted.

He lowered himself to his elbows so that they lay belly to belly. Now she could give him a proper kiss, a thorough, aggressive kiss with lots of tongue. She could wrap her arms around his body, pulling him closer, feeling his weight on her belly as she tried to take his breath away.

"Now," she said when they broke the kiss. "Fuck me."

He pulled out, as slowly and deliberately as he'd thrust himself inside her. It seemed to go on and on, the slippery friction stoking the renewed fire in her pussy. He pulled back until only the very tip of his cock remained inside her before pushing back in. Rachel closed her eyes and moaned at the glorious sensation of being filled anew.

She spread her knees a bit more, settled into position beneath him, and tightened her hold on his upper body. "Oh yeah," she said. "Yeah. Like that."

Stan fucked her with slow but gradually increasing speed. Every withdrawal and thrust added to her pleasure, built the tension a little higher. He didn't speak. She didn't mind. If it took all his attention to give her such pleasure, she was okay with that.

He moved above her, against her, inside her, with single-minded determination. His breathing grew deeper as he labored at his task, deeper but steady. Her own breathing was getting quicker, rapid panting breaths by his ear, accompanied by the steady tightening of her hold on him.

She began to thrust her hips in time with his, increasing the depth and power of every thrust. The pleasure built, slowly at first, then rising higher and faster, a wave carrying her toward the shore until it crashed over her and she went stiff, body alight with ecstasy. She clutched him with desperate strength, a wail of wordless pleasure on her lips. It spread from her clit to roar through her whole body like fire, burning away her strength. He paused then, his deep breaths warming her ear and neck as she collapsed bonelessly beneath him. She could feel the bellows action of his lungs, the sheen of sweat between their bodies.

She gasped, jolted to alertness again by the renewed stimulation as

he resumed fucking her. "Oh, God," she whimpered, not sure she could stand any more, but anxious to feel that bliss again. He chuckled in her ear and picked up the pace, driving himself into her more rapidly and forcefully.

The pleasurable friction burst into glorious flame again. Her vaginal muscles clamped down on Stan's cock, squeezing him rhythmically as Rachel quaked and gasped through another orgasm. She clung to him with all her strength, digging her nails into the flesh of his back, lost in the unthinking rapture that washed through her.

When she came back to herself, she lay sprawled beneath Stan, limp and feeling wrung out, gulping for air and aware of her heart pounding in her chest. Stan held himself utterly still above her, his body rigid save the deep breaths he took. She could feel the tension in his body and smiled wearily, realizing how close he was to losing control.

She closed her eyes to concentrate, squeezing his cock inside her pussy. Stan twitched and his trembling tension redoubled. "Don't, I'm so close—"

Rachel smiled, feeling powerful. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, holding him close. She turned her head so that her lips brushed her ear when she spoke. "Not close enough."

She squeezed him again. Stan whimpered, "Oh, God," and then he thrashed against her, pumping his hips with frenzied speed for half a dozen strokes before he buried his cock in her with a wild cry. He pushed himself up, arms straight and back arched, head thrown back.

Rachel laughed, feeling him spurting inside her, thrilled to know she could reduce him to this. He fell forward, catching himself on his elbows again, snaking his hands beneath her to crush her body against his. His body was hot, his gasping breaths almost like sobs as he clung to her, quivering with pleasure.

Rachel held him tight, caressing him with her whole body as the tension ran out of his. She covered his face with kisses and whispered her pleasure, pride, admiration—and desire—into his ear.

"Dear God..." Stan muttered. He lay on his stomach at Rachel's side, head turned toward her. His breathing was nearly normal again. He

had one ankle draped over hers, and one hand resting on her belly, idly caressing her.

Rachel turned her head to look at him. "Was it worth the wait?" Stan remained silent. Rachel raised an eyebrow. "Is that a no?"

Stan grinned. "Let the record show that the defendant stands mute."

Rachel considered rising onto one elbow but she felt too lazy to bother. She settled for narrowing her eyes at him. "Answers like that will not get you invited back into my bed, Mr. Ryan."

"I'm experiencing a dilemma. If I say yes, you might think I'm satisfied and not invite me back. If I say no, I run the risk of insulting you, and you might not invite me back. The safest answer is to stand mute."

"Unless standing mute insults me."

"Hmm, yes. A fair point. What should I say to guarantee that you'll invite me back?"

"How about, 'That was the best sex of my life, and I would like to do it again often.'"

"That was the best sex of my life, and I would like to do it again often."

"See? That wasn't so hard."

"But this is," Stan announced. He rolled over on top of Rachel, settling between her legs. His cock was erect again, a firm pressure against her mons.

"Sure is," she said. "Just the way I like it."

The End

Author Bio

Gail Roarke grew up reading genre fiction of all sorts—science fiction, fantasy, comics, pulps—and decided early on that she wanted to write it. She's been writing ever since, though for a long time she wrote solely for her own entertainment. Eventually that palled and she started writing and submitting stories with the intent to be published. It came as something of a shock to her when she realized that what she was writing consistently was as much erotica as it was genre fiction. But as long as she's having fun, why not?