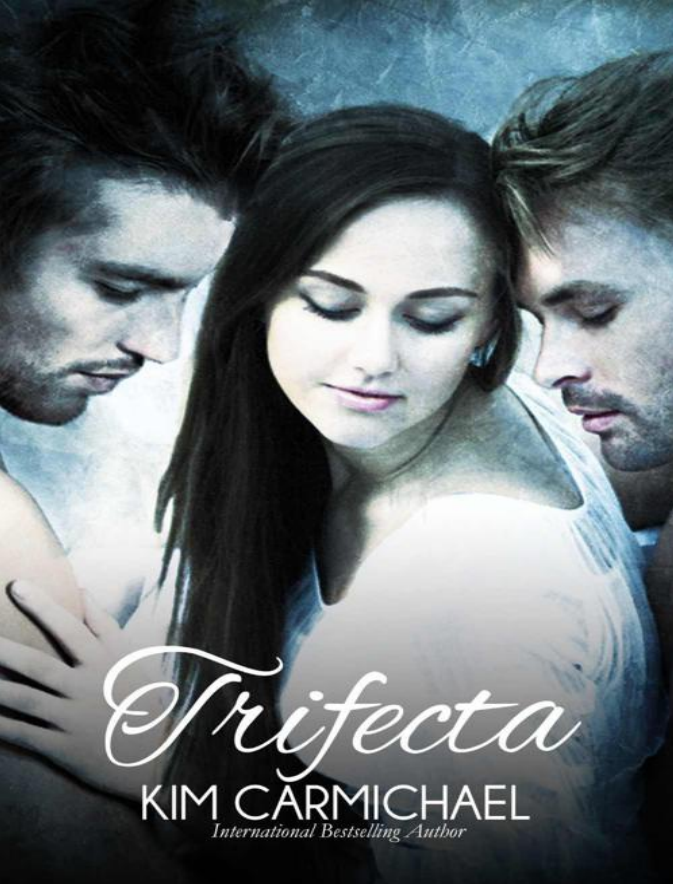


The background of the cover is a close-up photograph of three people. In the center is a woman with long, dark hair, her eyes closed, and a serene expression. She is wearing a light-colored, possibly white, top. On either side of her are two men. The man on the left is looking down towards her, and the man on the right is also looking down. They appear to be in a close, intimate embrace. The lighting is soft and moody, with a blueish-grey tint to the overall image.

Trifecta

KIM CARMICHAEL

International Bestselling Author

The background of the cover is a close-up photograph of three people. In the center is a woman with long, dark hair, her eyes closed, and a slight smile. She is wearing a light-colored, possibly white, top. On either side of her are two men, also with their eyes closed, leaning their heads against hers. The man on the left has dark hair and a beard, while the man on the right has lighter hair and a beard. The lighting is soft and moody, with a blueish tint in the background.

Trifecta

KIM CARMICHAEL

Trifecta

By Kim
Carmichael

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I dedicate this book to anyone who
ever dreamed a bit of a different dream,
something left of center but magnificent
anyway.

Chapter One

The plane dipped, falling at least a mile, and leaving Lauren Redmond's stomach spiraling through the stratosphere. She hugged her purse to her chest, a makeshift, useless life preserver as she prepared herself to splatter to Earth.

Her heart pushed against the wall of her chest begging to be heard. She leaned forward in an attempt to protect any part of her body. "Please, I promise I'll change." She whispered her vow into the crumpled mass of papers in her hand. "Land and I promise I'll tell them."

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are crossing through a zone of turbulence as we make our final descent into Los Angeles. Please keep your seat belts fastened. We will have you on the ground as soon as possible."

The voice over the intercom bore through her brain as she tried to focus on the critical announcement. Every muscle in her body tensed tighter in anticipation of saving her life.

"They always say there's turbulence, but I think that's just a way to get us to be quiet." The old woman next to her shook her head and sat back. "The airlines are cutting back, I'm sure not giving us a bag of peanuts is saving millions."

Lauren didn't answer. The entire trip from San Francisco to Los Angeles was like an earthquake. They spent the flight with their seat belts fastened. The flight attendants never even served drinks.

The plane continued to shake as if it were flying through gravel. She glanced at her watch. They should be touching down soon, there couldn't be much more to this.

The 'No Smoking' sign blinked, causing a false-friendly chime to ring out through the aircraft. "Prepare for landing."

"See I told you, nothing." The old woman stretched.

Once more the plane found an air

pocket, dropping, as if it were sliding down a hill but would never hit the bottom.

"Oh!" The woman cracked and clutched the armrests.

Lauren's trembling amplified, vibrating her entire body right through her bones.

"Please prepare yourselves for a hard landing." The nameless, faceless, heartless, intercom announced.

Lauren put her head down. "I swear I'll do it this time, just get us down." This ride cinched her decision, no more life in limbo.

No one uttered a word. There wasn't one noise except for the rumble of the plane matching her trembling.

They finally hit.

One bounce. A second bounce, and a third. Tires screeched, trying in vain to slow down the speeding capsule. As her back pressed into her seat, she was positive she didn't put it in its full and upright position and prayed her mistake wasn't fatal.

Everything stopped.

"We have safely landed in Los Angeles," a much too happy woman's voice announced over the intercom. "We will be taxiing for several moments, please remain seated."

Sepia light illuminated the cabin, and Lauren raised her head allowing herself to breathe. The exhaustion of relief

enveloped her and everyone else on the plane collectively looked around. She watched while the other passengers seemed to forget the ordeal, and began rushing to gather their items to engage in the age-old ritual of standing in the aisle in hopes the doors of death would soon open and release its cargo of captors.

They arrived safely. Now, she had to keep her end of the bargain. She waited for her turn to escape, and with her tray table still stowed away she pulled the papers she traveled across California to retrieve, using her lap to straighten out the sheets that comprised her performance review.

After one glance, she crushed the papers in her fist. Yes, she got the raise

and she got the promotion. She even got an award. Her stellar medical sales record spoke for itself. She was responsible for the majority of filled wrinkles and plumped lips in the Beverly Hills area.

Sales or not, promotion or demotion, this trip to corporate headquarters and this flight back only served to highlight exactly what she didn't have. She glanced down at her empty ring finger.

The plane cleared, leaving only some sleeping guy and a woman waiting for a wheelchair. She retrieved her carryon, and made her way out letting the jet way lead her into the airport, toward the escalator. At the bottom of the moving

stairs she would live up to her end of the bargain she made with the universe. She needed to change her life, become an adult, and stop living in fantasyland.

Airports only held two paths, arrivals or departures. Before she made a move, she observed her surroundings. A man stood at the bottom with a bouquet of roses, and a woman holding a baby looked around for her match. Another group of women huddled together bouncing, pointing and screaming.

She wondered how many were there to tell their two best friends, the two men they loved that they were leaving.

“Laurie!”

She grabbed the railing, willing the escalator to stop because she was sure

she didn't hear right. Only one person called her by that name. The only homing device she needed to insure he was here in this crowd was to turn where every other woman within a twelve-mile radius stared. No matter if you were near or far, Jason Morgan was a sight you had to take in.

She made it to the bottom and headed straight for the beacon of blond hair. Today he was playing the role of someone between a rock star and a secret agent, with his tall frame draped in black pants, jacket and turtleneck. She had lived with this man for six years. Spent countless hours with him. Yet still, to this day, when he moved his hair

aside and peered at her over the pair of black rimmed sunglasses he decided to wear even at night, her insides bubbled, every nerve-ending overflowing with excitement, need and yearning.

“We heard the flight was rough, and I decided to come in and get you.” He held his arms out.

“I hate flying.” She stepped back, resisting his hug. “They prepared us for a bad landing.”

“I know, but it's better than your driving. How many promises did you make to yourself if the plane landed and you didn't die?” He wiggled his fingers.

“Just one.” The biggest one yet. The longer she stayed, the longer she would never have her own family, her own

home, stability. She would always be the third wheel on the bicycle. Unneeded, unfulfilled and wobbly. Still, she allowed his fingers to lure her into his arms.

Instead of being pulled into one of his big-brother hugs, he held her out by her shoulders.

She stumbled at being stopped, tripping on both her feet and her suitcase.

“I got you.” Jason caught her, startling her with a kiss on the lips before he helped her stand. “Let’s go, Russ is driving in circles.”

Again, she floundered on her feet. In the millions of kisses she received from

this man, he never kissed her on the mouth, his lips lingering. The bubbles already throughout her body began to explode, leaving her tingling and terrified.

“Careful.” He grabbed her arm to steady her, kissed her again, and took the handle of her suitcase. “You okay?”

Another matching kiss left her without any strength in her legs. She needed to remember her resolve. “I need to talk to you guys.”

He put his arm around her. “Well it will have to wait. We have a surprise for you.”

The kisses alone surprised her enough. Caught in a stare, she didn't notice they'd left the airport until the hot

Southern California air, even in the middle of October, blasted over her. “Jason, I really need to tell you both something.” No surprises, no kisses, nothing but her talking to them and taking charge. She needed to live like everyone else.

“There he is.” Jason lifted his arm.

The vision of living like everyone else dissipated as Jason guided her to a massive red monster truck with silver rims, huge tires and a step to get inside.

“What is this?” At first she backed away, but the door to the truck opened and she found herself staring right into Russell’s face. He wasn’t the freeway stopping traffic jam Jason was, Russell

reminded her of a 1950's leading man. The man with the dark tailored suit, combed back hair and bursting brain who would come home with his briefcase of important work and still have time to help his children with their homework then make love to his to wife every night.

While Jason was unattainable, Russell was the kind of man someone could have if they were only a little prettier, a little smarter or a little better.

“My parent's dealership got it. It's fun.” Jason bent down and put her foot on the step.

The only word to describe the scene going on around her was surreal. Jason being the gentleman, kissing and helping

her, coupled with Russell smiling at the airport, his own personal nemesis.

“We were worried about you. Come on, we can all sit in the front.” Russell offered her his hand. “But you get the middle.”

She put her hand in his, needing something normal. Russell would listen when she said she needed to talk to them.

“In we go.” Jason cupped her bottom using both hands, and lifted her.

She gasped at the way Jason touched her, it was unexpected but not unwanted. She couldn't want it, and she went to say something, but Russell tugged her.

“Welcome home, you were missed.”

He slid back to the driver's seat with her in tow. While Jason threw her bag in the back, Russell snaked his hand around her neck and brushed his lips against hers.

Something was wrong. Jason lived by his own law of physics, and she tried to chalk up his kisses to one of his creative experiments or artistic expressions, but Russell wasn't the kissing type. Only simple hard pecks ever left his lips, but this kiss treated her to a supple mouth made all the more potent by the fact he licked his lips right after. The shivers hiding underneath her skin after Jason's affection took on a throbbing residence right between her thighs with Russell. "What's going on?"

“I told you we have a surprise. We need to take your mind off your flight.” Jason moved in until their legs touched, and slammed the door shut.

As Russell drove away, she turned left then right and was met with nothing but visions of the men she wanted. Since college, the three of them had been best friends, and her own needs had gone unfulfilled because she couldn't love them both or have them both. Right now they needed to have a discussion, yet her words heeded a different plan. “What is it?”

“Steve got an exhibition. We are going to see his show.” Jason handed her a bottle of water. “I know you're

thirsty.”

On any other day she would have taken the drink, swooning over the small gesture. “I don’t want to go the exhibit. I have to talk to the two of you.”

“We have to go.” Russell’s voice took on its normal dare-to-defy-me tone.

“No.” She double dared him and hit her fist on her knee. “I told you, we need to talk.”

“Okay.” Russell pulled over. The truck seized to a stop. “Are you sure you’re okay from the flight?”

Both Russell and Jason faced her. She kept her gaze forward, her mouth shut, concentrating on the lone drop of sweat making its way down her spine. “Yes.”

“Are you hurt?” Jason moved into her field of vision.

“Are you dying?” Russell tapped her.

“Not right now.” She frowned. There was no way she could tell them like this, here in some cartoon car with them playing some kissing game with her. “I can’t go looking like this.” She glanced down at her wrinkled grey business suit. “I look like I’m going to work.”

“Yes, your corporate regalia.” Russell rubbed the fabric on her sleeve between two fingers.

“Oh, well if that’s what’s bothering you, we can help.” Jason reached into the small cargo space behind the front seat, pulled out a garment bag and

unzipped it.

The glare of the multi-colored traffic lights coming into the car must have blurred her vision, because the short, deep purple dress with the V-neck and ruffle at the hemline she'd admired the last time she dragged them shopping somehow appeared.

“Are either of you dying?” This was the exact dress she pictured one of them taking her out in, only she couldn't pick which one. Her heart made half a beat, and froze in the center of her chest, a swollen, aching organ.

“She's upset we didn't get the shoes.” Russell let out one lone laugh.

She jerked her head at the sound of joy coming out of Russell.

“Yeah, those shoes were cool, with straps and all that girl stuff.” Jason hung his arm around her shoulder.

“Good thing we got them.” Russell reached under the seat, handing her the matching footwear. “Now, do we still need to talk?”

Her heart finished its beat, this time cowering behind her lungs and ribs for protection. “How did Steve get a show?”

“He called, someone canceled and they needed some art.” Jason pulled at her suit jacket.

She leaned up and allowed Jason to remove her blazer. “I can’t go to the show, I’m exhausted.”

“He said you had to go.” Russell took the jacket and tossed it behind him.

“But...” She pressed her back into the seat when Jason bent down and removed her shoes.

“No buts.” Russell swiped the shoes away. “We’re going.”

“I can’t go.” The words lost some of their fire when Jason distracted her by starting to unfasten the buttons on her shirt. “What are you doing?” She put her hand over his.

“Undressing you.” Jason answered as if he were ordering a hamburger from a drive through.

Three buttons released, revealing her beige work bra. “Jason.” She tightened

her grip on him, tried to cover herself. No matter how many times she pictured these men removing her clothes, this wasn't allowed to happen, not today, not after her promise.

“How come bras are so much sexier when they’re regular and not trying to be sexy?” He moved her hands away and tilted his face to Russell.

Both men looked down at her chest.

She exhaled in an attempt to make her chest appear smaller and to cool herself down.

Russell curled around her and nodded. “You know what else I like?”

The heat in her cheeks was only matched by the heat in her panties. Did they both agree her plain underwire bra

was sexy?

“What might that be?” Jason finished off the buttons.

“Mismatched panties.”

With her shirt open, she listened to this diatribe and didn't possess the strength to stop Russell as he reached for the waistband of her pants. She knew she should say something, really she should, but she froze, needing to see what he intended to do.

The three of them watched as he unbuckled her patent leather belt. She held her breath when his fingers grazed her stomach working the hook, and she dug her fingers into the leather seat when he slid the zipper down.

No arguments, yells or screams, the fact being these men had seen her in various stages of undress many times. Instead, she waited.

“Perfect.” Another smile formed on Russell’s face when he opened her pants showing Jason the triangle of white and light blue polka dotted fabric.

“Very, very nice.” Jason’s turned his gaze from her chest to her lap and reached out.

She took a breath, and with her intake of air, reality also entered her mind and she caught his hand. If he dared touch her he would find out all too fast what the effect of this joke or whatever was having on her. “Stop!” This may be what

every one of her fantasies was made of, but it was a fantasy. “What are the two of you doing?”

“As Jason explained, we need to get you dressed for the show.” Russell took hold of both sides of her pants.

“I’m not going to any show.” She clasped her shirt together and wiggled her hips forcing Russell to let go. “I can’t, I have things I need to do.”

Jason put his fingers on her chin and stared right into her face. “I really need you to go with me, Laurie. Please.”

Russell moved forward and whispered in her ear. “It’s at the Loft’s in the Valley.”

Damn everything. Now she

understood. She let her head hit the back of the seat. Not only did she have to go, she now knew why they were playing these games with her, anything to distract Jason. Steve's show should be Jason's. "I need to get dressed." They needed to be together for this. One last time with her best friends.

Chapter Two

Even filled with people, an art gallery was a serene place. The smell of clay, paint and creativity filled the air, while the lighting illuminated everything the artist wanted their patrons to take in and masked the imperfections.

Jason took in the space, not the sculptures strategically placed on pedestals or the paintings hung in the exact right locations, but the people. The collection of people at these events could be more of a show than the art itself. There were the connoisseurs tiptoeing between the works, the

groupies there to be seen, and the critics there to cast ruin with a mere head tilt. A chill ran through his body and he grabbed Lauren's hand, trying to remember why they were here.

Tonight was not for art, at least not the kind of art that would be on display. The three of them needed to forge ahead. He studied the one woman who consistently held his interest for over six years. The dress showed off the curves she attempted to hide, but both he and Russell got a nice preview of things to come when they dressed her. Not that they hadn't seen her before, but tonight possessed purpose. The sight of her polka dotted panties made him want to take her right there.

Once she realized she wouldn't be getting out of the gallery event she combed out her long brown hair, and applied the exact right amount of clear lip gloss to her already plump lips. She didn't need a lot of makeup, adding anything extra to her small features would detract from her overall beauty. No, she wasn't hot, not in the Southern California, blonde, boobs and built sort of way. She was the ideal incarnation of the woman one spent the rest of his life with. The kind who could put on a suit and lead a board meeting, don a cocktail dress and entertain a room full of people, or put on nothing, and ensure any man's satisfaction. They both wanted

her, which was why neither had her.

“I need to find the ladies room.”
Lauren faced Russell.

Jason frowned, he may be the artist, the man who knew his way around a gallery, but Russell was the man with answers, including the location of every bathroom, any direction they needed to take and all life issues in general.

Russell put his arm around her and pointed toward the corner of the room. “Is everything all right? You look gorgeous.”

“I have some adjusting to do.” She pulled down the hem of her skirt before swiping Russell’s arm off her. Jason received one narrowed eye when she let go of his hand, looking at her palm as

she walked away.

“Your plan isn’t working. All we’ve done is piss her off.” Russell stepped in front of him, jaw set, fist struggling not to clench.

“We’ve just started and she’s jet lagged.”

“From a sixty minute flight from San Francisco?” Russell grabbed his sleeve. “You said we all had the latent desire to be together, I’m beginning to think you don’t know what latent means.”

“It means dormant, existing as potential, and that’s exactly what we do have.” Though he wanted to flaunt his psychology minor at his best friend, a flash of orange stung the corner of his

eye. Like venom, the color seeped into his retinas, taking hold of him and rendering him motionless.

“What do we do now?” Russell waved his hand in front of his face.

His eyes remained affixed on the living Jack ‘o Lantern. If the woman had a green stalk coming out of her head the picture would be complete.

“Jason?” Russell looked behind him and turned back, his fist closing at last. “Let’s get out of here.”

“No, we can’t after we dragged Laurie here.” Caught in a stare, his voice lacked any backbone. He watched the bitch pick up a glass of champagne and nod. She nodded, damn it.

“Speaking of Lauren.” Russell stepped

to one side, blocking his view of the woman who destroyed his life.

With the spell broken, Jason blinked and got his mind back to the present. "If you stick to the plan the three of us will be a couple by morning." He conjured a smile at the image. "Actually in our case it would be a trouple."

"How are we supposed to be a couple?" Russell raised his arms.

"So the two of you finally made it official."

Catherine Dumar loomed out from behind Russell, the orange glowing blob who would like nothing more than to overtake him, smother him and absorb his lifeblood. She already did.

“At least I have someone to make it official with.” Everyone assumed artists were gay. He didn’t defend his heterosexuality anymore, and shoved his hand in his pocket.

She licked her teeth, reminding him of an animal who finished off its kill. “It’s nice that Steve was able to make it for a last minute show. I suppose he has enough finished pieces to act fast.”

“I had less than twenty-four hours for my show.” Jason’s throat dried out, his voice cracking like a blob of dried paint.

She cocked her glass of champagne in his direction. “When you get the call you need to act.”

“I’m an artist, not an actor.”

“Then maybe you should go into acting.” She chuckled, sounding like a wicked witch even if she looked like a pumpkin right before it was carved.

“You were the only critic who didn’t admire his efforts.” Russell leaned forward.

Jason’s body went dead. That same sensation when he woke up after sleeping on his arm. The numb right before the prickles came. No matter how many times he explained to Russell that efforts and talent were two different things, his friend would still defend those reviews. Laurie understood, she never reacted, only read the comments and scooped them up for her scrapbook.

“You forget something.” Catherine stared Russell down, even though he stood well over a foot taller than her. “My opinion is the only one that matters.” She finished off her drink and thrust the glass toward Jason. “This one looks like he makes a good living, maybe you can be the housewife.”

She pushed the glass into his chest, but Jason held his arms back, causing the champagne flute to crash to the brick floor. The shatter of crystal echoed off the walls, causing everyone to turn toward them. “Or maybe not.” She kicked the shards in his direction and turned.

“Don’t say it.” Jason moved toward a

wall when a uniformed waitress rushed over with a dustpan and brush.

Russell shook his head. "Say what?"

"That I shouldn't have defended myself after her review."

"All right, but it wasn't a defense, you went after her, and rule number one is not to comment on your reviews." Russell motioned for a waiter with a tray of drinks.

"Stop telling me what I know." Jason took a drink and sniffed it. "This is watered down garbage."

"Whatever." Russell retrieved two glasses. "Here comes Lauren, now what?"

"Keep the plan. Take everything to the next level." Right here was the

reason they had to move forward with Lauren. He was distracted and his art suffered. Russell just needed her, period. He downed his drink. There wasn't enough alcohol to even tickle his tongue.

Lauren returned stepping backwards, pounding her fist into her palm. "The bitch is here."

"Here." Russell gave her one of the drinks.

"Should we leave?" Lauren turned up backwards, again at Russell.

"I'm standing right here." He waved at her.

"They already went a few rounds, maybe it's over." Russell shrugged his

shoulders.

She frowned at him while she had her conversation with Russell. "It won't be over until he kills her by putting on a show to die for, not by attacking her."

Russell tapped his glass against hers and they both took a sip.

Jason crossed his arms. "I'm standing right here."

Lauren turned and held her glass out to him. "You have the talent and soon the world will know."

The moment she looked at him and the edges of her mouth curled up in the type of smile girls used when they held a great secret, the scene from before began to dissipate. Halloween began to morph to Christmas, and he wanted his present.

“Let’s go see the art.” Jason clinked his glass against hers and they finished off their drinks. He took her glass and motioned forward.

Lauren walked ahead and he turned to Russell. They nodded at each other, put their glasses down, and followed.

They caught up with her at the first piece. Russell put his arm around her, while Jason took her hand.

Lauren glanced between the two of them, pursed her lips, and stared at the sculpture.

Jason leaned back on his heels, allowing Lauren time to absorb the art. The sculpture depicted a man and woman in the throes of sex. The man

grabbed the woman by the hips, and his thick erection was ready to plunge into her. The woman's head was thrown back in apparent ecstasy.

Lauren let go of him and put her hand over her mouth.

“I like it.” Russell pointed at it. “Do you?” He pushed Lauren closer.

Jason supposed this was his best friend's way of talking sexy to her, but he went in for the redirect. “Watching can be almost as fun as doing.”

She wrapped her arms around herself and stomped to the next piece.

“We sound like perverts.” Russell elbowed him.

“No, we’re getting to her. I could sense how turned on she was when we

dressed her.” He watched as Steve, the artist of the evening intercepted her. The two of them hugged, and Steve leaned in and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Lauren returned the favor and gave him another hug.

“Great.” Russell grumbled.

“Come on.” Jason pushed him and the two of them went after her.

“Let me show you something.” Steve put his arm around her, corralling her to a different sculpture.

Both Jason and Russell rushed behind them.

The second sculpture was derivative of the first, with the same man and woman now having sex. Her legs were

spread, he was deep inside her, one hand cupped her breast, the other held her tight. The woman's mouth was half open as if she wanted, no needed, to moan.

"Tell me what this evokes in you." Steve moved his arm down around Lauren's waist.

Russell looked at him, eyes wide, jaw set. "Steve wants her."

Jason held up his finger. "They're friends, maybe he can relax her."

This time Lauren's art critique wasn't silence and storming away, she put her hand on Steve's shoulder and whispered something to him.

Steve moved her hair away from the side of her face, his mouth heading for

her ear.

Russell stepped forward, but Jason took off, sliding between Lauren and Steve. They couldn't have this roadblock now. "Do you use live models, or do you just work from your very foggy imagination?"

Steve chuckled, gave Jason a friendly slap on the arm and shook Russell's hand. "Erotic art is where it's at. I am just trying to get a read on what Lauren thinks of it."

The three men turned their attention to her.

Lauren curled her lower lip over her teeth and bit down, her gaze traveling between each of them.

Steve stepped forward. "If Lauren wants, she and I can go talk about it in private, not in front of her roomies."

"Lauren can do anything in front of us." Russell crossed his arms.

Lauren's mouth opened.

"Maybe Laurie would rather talk about in private with us." Jason put his arm around her, and attempted to pull her toward him.

"No." Lauren pushed him away. "I told you I had to talk to you before, but you ignored me with your dumb games." She put her hands on her hips.

"Lauren." Russell reached out to her.

Jason tensed. He couldn't be wrong about this.

Lauren backed up. "So, now I'm going to say it. I'm done with this, I'm moving out." With her hand pressed to her chest, she glanced around the gallery and ran toward the exit.

No, not Lauren, she never left. She had to be with him, with them. "Shit."

"I think I need to see to my show." Steve nodded and walked away.

"Looks like you have no choice but to be the housewife, your little woman just ran out crying." Catherine came up behind him.

Jason arched his back. Her words crawled down his spine giving him the chills.

"Well, your art can always be your

hobby." She chuckled.

"Maybe being a decent critic can be yours." He turned to her, the bright orange overtaking his sight. "I take your crap as a compliment."

"I guess we'll see on your next show, if you ever have one." She tilted her head and sauntered away.

"Are you trying to destroy everything in one night?" Russell elbowed him. "You and your ideas and your mouth."

"Hold on, let me think." He shut his eyes. In the grand vision he created in his mind of the three of them, Laurie announcing that she wanted to leave them was definitely a break in his plaster.

"You think. I'm out of here."

Jason opened his eyes and watched Russell dash in the direction Lauren took. The gallery was crowded. Steve's show a success. Steve got the head nod. He took a breath and tried to figure out how to revive his own masterpiece.

Chapter Three

"Laurie!" Jason called after her.

"Let's talk." Russell tried this time.

Somehow, she would never know how, Lauren managed to dodge both Russell and Jason in the gallery and slip into a cab. It was worth the forty dollars to not sit in-between them on the way home. She wasn't sure what sick joke they were playing with making blatant sexual innuendos toward her, but at least she knew she made the right decision.

Even with having to pay the cab driver, she managed beat the boys home by a less than a minute. She opened the

door and ran through the house as if monsters were chasing her. In the horror movie that was now her life, she collided with the door to her bedroom, the moisture on her palms making the knob slick. She began to shake, her breath short, and the wood door waxing and waning as she struggled for escape. At last the knob turned and she fell inside her room, swearing she felt a couple of stitches pop on the too tight dress that encased her.

Tears started the moment she kicked the door closed, running cold down her cheeks, chilling her body, attempting to freeze out her emotions.

The fact they played this game on tonight made her choice easy. She

dragged herself up vowing to forget those kisses, touches, and glances. The fantasy of having both of them was only that, a fantasy, now made worse because of a prank.

She stood glancing around the room Jason painted the perfect sea foam green, and the custom shelving unit Russell installed. The mirror Jason hung, and Russell hung again when it wasn't level. She walked across the space. Every single item was somehow attached to them. The photo albums and scrapbooks crammed full of their history, the pottery Jason made her, the computer Russell fixed. Even her clothes were products of them, each item telling the tale of where

she was or whom she was thinking about when she bought it.

Her body began moving on its own, her eyes glazing over, trapped in a stare as she went to her closet and pulled out a duffle bag, her suitcase was still in that godforsaken truck. Never blinking, she unzipped the bag, and focusing on the blank space on her wall she absentmindedly reached up and began pulling down any clothing that met her hand.

A knock on the door caused her muscles to seize, her fingers tightening around one of her favorite shirts.

“Lauren!”

Russell threw her name out like a bomb. It landed on her and exploded,

leaving a crater right in the center of her chest.

She shut her eyes and continued packing.

“Laurie.”

Jason’s tone was light and breezy, a feather floating to land where it may and make everything better.

“No.” She wrapped her arms around herself.

“I have the key to your room,” Russell reminded her.

“Don’t tell her that,” Jason’s voice interjected.

“I want her to know we can go right in.” Russell raised his voice. “We can go right in,”

“A man would say they would break the door down.”

She opened her eyes at Jason’s remark.

“We’re coming in.” Jason knocked again. “Open up or it’s going down.”

“Lauren, we’re serious,” Russell joined in.

Part of her was dying to know if they would have the guts. Fine, all of her wanted to know. She stayed paralyzed with her suitcase in front of her. This joke, this teasing, this experiment, or whatever, went too far. She needed to tell them to leave her alone.

A light rap on the door interrupted her. “Lauren.” It was Jason again. “Open

up, okay?”

She swallowed, pressing her hand to her stomach. Jason never used her full name. “Please go.”

Silence answered. They left. Deep down she didn’t need to be told she wasn’t door-kicking material. After all these years they never tried anything like this before. With a breath, she stood up straight. She would finish packing. She wouldn’t stay here tonight. Not one more night.

The huge bang coupled with two men’s shouts joining her own scream let her know they did indeed kick the door down. The noises combined made her cover her face, preparing for the walls to disintegrate.

“Lauren.” Russell caught her, taking her shoulders and dragging her up.

Her heart hurt from the hurried beats it made trying to recover from her shock, and with no air left in her lungs, she gasped, only to have her mouth covered by Jason's.

Or was it Russell's?

No, it was Jason, parting her lips, tangling his tongue with hers, the taste of champagne still lingering, daring her to lap it up—and she tried. No doubt it was Jason, even with four hands caressing her and her eyes closed, it had to be him. Only Jason would taste like sin and decadence, the cheesecake in the middle of the night you couldn't take one bite of,

but you had to sit on the floor of the kitchen and have the whole cake.

Wait! Her mind screamed. Four hands? No one, not even the most spoiled ate cheesecake with two forks, and she forced herself to put her hands on his chest and push him away. She didn't need the last bite. It was time for a diet.

Damn him, he had a smile. A broad smile that said he won, it was the same smile he had when he beat her in a game, or bested Russell in some major life issue. She raised her arm, preparing to slap him across the face for giving her the morsel of what she couldn't have.

"Do it Russ." Jason kept his gaze affixed on hers.

Russell? He was talking to Russell?
She opened her mouth.

"Now Russ." Jason stepped aside.

The men looked at each other.

"We have to," Russell spoke, but
Lauren wasn't sure whom exactly he
addressed.

Before she could ask him, tell him to
explain, he pulled her in, wrapped his
arms around her and kissed her.

Russell's kiss was different than
Jason's playful passion. His kiss was
demanding, it told her what he wanted,
and it said he wanted her. Jason may be
an indulgent dessert, but Russell was a
main dish. Strong, hearty, comfort food,
the kiss that let you know you were

home.

Jason rejoined them, his lips landing elsewhere, teasing her ear, trailing down her neck, and her stomach spiraled. Dreams were made of this moment. The one where she didn't have to choose, but they both wanted her. This couldn't be real.

Her knees gave out when Jason sneaked in for another kiss on her mouth. He held her up to explore the rest of her, his hand trailing down her side, then up to cup her breast.

She should protest, stop them, but didn't. Not when Jason unzipped the back of her dress, not when Russell moved her dress down her shoulder and let his mouth settle there, and especially

not when her dress dropped to the floor.

Two mouths on her, four hands exploring, and her one mind trying to wrap around what was happening. All she could do was let her body take over. The fire running through her from the fiasco in the gallery morphed into a heat that radiated from each one of their touches. It was all she could do to try and dole out even a tenth of what they were giving her, kiss them back, run her hands over them.

"We need to feel her up against us." Jason pulled back and lifted his turtleneck over his head.

Her breath caught somewhere between her heart and her throat. Yes,

she had seen Jason without a shirt before, but she always tried not to look at what she couldn't have. This time she stared. If his face was enough to cause a traffic jam, his chest was a multi-car pileup consisting of miles of smooth skin and a gridlock of muscles.

He caught her gawking and lifted only one side of his mouth in a smile as he stepped back to her. His gaze traveled down her body causing her to hold her breath, and he took her hand and placed it on his chest. Russell came up behind her.

She swallowed and allowed her hand to travel across his tight skin, making sure this was real, but it had to be, even her dreams couldn't conjure images and

sensations like this. She turned to Russell. Were they really going to do this?

Russell wasn't smiles and naughty looks. He was intense stares and conviction, and he took her other hand and guided it to the buttons on his shirt, telling her that yes indeed, they were doing this.

She took his cue and with trembling hands unbuttoned his shirt, where she was treated to a completely different, but no less magnificent landscape. Long and lean, Russell's chest boasted the scant right amount of dark hair on his chest and stomach which led to that sexy line of hair starting right at his belly button

and leading down below the waistline of his pants.

She had to touch him. Had to. She left his shirt hanging open and ran one finger down the center of his chest. His strength and his smarts radiated through him. He was a true man, one that would emerge from any disaster and rescue his lady. She moved her finger lower, down to that sexy line of hair and assessed the bulge in his jeans with her palm. Yes, he was a man.

"Oh yeah." Jason moved his hand down her back, pushing her gently toward Russell. "Touch him, Laurie."

"Lauren." Russell grabbed her shoulders and crushed his lips to hers.

Every kiss either of them gave her

made an aching need rise right in her center, but when Russell's bare skin rubbed across hers, she knew without a doubt, she would go through with whatever these two concocted.

Leaving consequences behind her, she did as Jason directed and reached down to the front of Russell's pants. Even through the fabric, she noted his thickness. His erection snaked down the leg of his pants. Far down the leg of his pants.

"I need you, Lauren." He put his hand over hers. "We need you."

No matter what was truly happening and even though this was only for tonight, those were the magic words.

"Yes."

"Get her to the bed." Jason took his hands off her, went to the bed and tore off the bedspread. "Over here." He took off his pants, leaving him only in a pair of red boxer briefs.

Almost like they were in a movie, Russell lifted her, making the room spin along with her mind. He set her down. He also undressed, shimmying out of his shirt and pants, and placing his glasses on the nightstand, leaving him in nothing but his blue boxer briefs. Her breathing came erratically as he lay down next to her.

Jason joined them both, and while Russell kissed her, Jason went exploring with his mouth and tongue.

She didn't know where to put her focus. Should she concentrate on how Russell's mouth worked hers, or did she try to keep track of Jason and how he unhooked her bra, kissing and nibbling each one of her breasts?

"Her boobs are incredible." Jason leaned up and touched her tight peak causing her to jump. "Russ, look."

Russell turned to Jason. "They're perfect."

"You haven't tasted one yet." Jason moved his hand to the breast nearest him and lifted his chin toward Russell.

She watched this interchange. The fact that Jason invited his best friend to partake in her chest made the moment

when Russell dipped his head down even more incredible. With each man paying their own type of attention to her breasts, she squirmed beneath them, tangling her hands in their hair. Russell's technique was gentle, his touches and kisses light, precise as if he were taking great care like when he handled one of his vintage toys.

Of course, Jason was different. He took her nipple between his teeth, tickled and taunted, and would stop to examine if his ministrations created the desired effect. When at last he was satisfied, he took Russell's hand, put it on the breast he tended to, then glanced up at her, and moved lower.

He kissed his way down her stomach,

and she held her breath, unable to move or react before he pulled her panties down and ran his fingers over her. "She's soaking wet."

Wet wasn't the word for it, drenched was more accurate. Heat rose in her cheeks at his declaration. "Jason." She covered her eyes with her hand.

"It's awesome." With the words out, he placed his mouth on her.

His tongue swirled around her most intimate spot, and she gasped. She always pictured Jason to be the type to know how to pleasure a woman, and her instinct was spot on.

Russell moved her hand away and looked right into her eyes. "It's hot that

you want us."

She always wanted them. Always. Both of them, and they were here. "Russell." She needed to ask him what they were doing. He would have the answer. Before she could get any words out, Jason slipped two fingers into her. All she could do was grab the bed sheet and brace herself against the pleasure that began to coil itself right in the middle. She couldn't go over the edge this quick, she hadn't even touched them yet. "Let me." She reached for Russell.

Russell took her hand and kissed it, stopping her before she could touch him. "We want to make love to you." Though a statement, it felt like he was asking permission.

She nodded and bit her lip. If that was what they wanted they better hurry, she was becoming desperate for relief and trying to hold back.

"She's so ready." Jason didn't let up. "Get a condom."

She bucked her hips when Jason spoke, the vibration hitting her in all the right places.

"Russell, come on." Jason got up. "I want to watch first."

"Ahh," she cried out in protest as Jason's mouth and fingers left her. Her body throbbed. How were they going to pull this off?

She received her answer with the telltale crinkle of a cellophane condom

wrapper being opened and the bed shifting as the men changed places. "You don't know how long I've wanted you." As Russell entered her, his voice hitched.

Her body put up no fight in allowing him access. Over the years, they shared almost everything, and finally this last barrier was crossed. "Russell."

She wrapped her arms around him and closed her eyes, blocking everything else out except having Russell inside her. She took in his skin, the way his muscles tensed beneath her hands, and how he moaned when she began to move with him. She swore to herself she would never forget this second where he worked to bring her to satisfaction. His

lovemaking felt tailor made to bring her to her end, everything she fantasized about, yet surprising at the same time. His strokes were even and steady, starting slow with a grind of his hips and building, becoming faster, more urgent.

"That feel good, baby?"

Until Jason spoke she almost forgot he was there, and she opened her eyes to the most surreal sight. Russell on top of her, his hair now loose and hanging down in his eyes, and Jason lying next to her.

Jason pressed his body along the length of hers and took her chin, moving her face up to his. He kissed her, and she tasted herself on his lips. "Does it?"

"Yes," she choked out.

"Tell him, tell him how good he feels." Jason slid his hand across her chest until his fingertips found one of her nipples.

Somehow in this circus Jason became the ringleader.

"Russ." She spread her legs wider, embedding Russell even deeper inside her. "You feel good." She was making love to Russell. God. She was making love to him and Jason was right here.

Russell pushed her knee back and sped up. "You're incredible. Damn, Lauren." He grabbed her hand.

"Do you know how hot you look getting pounded by my best friend?"

Jason whispered in her ear. "Move with him, show me what I have to look forward to."

Jason being there, guiding them, and participating, edged her closer to her end, and she did as he commanded. She lifted her hips to Russell, meeting him stroke for stroke. She cried out, not a word, she didn't think she could form a word. The pressure built, demanding relief.

"Don't stop, Lauren." Russell lowered his head.

"I think Russell needs to come," Jason whispered and sucked her earlobe. "Do you?"

"Jase." She needed an anchor, something to hold on to, she was

walking on a tightrope with no net, and she grabbed both Russell and Jason.

"Do you need to come, Lauren?" Jason's tone both teased and directed.

She shut her eyes, once again taking the time to concentrate on Russell, the way he moved inside her. It was that one moment right before her orgasm, that second when she could block everything else out because her body insisted on being heard. "Yes!" She was close, right there, all she needed was one, maybe two more strokes. "Russell!"

"Now, Lauren." He slammed his hips into hers. "Now!" He pulled back and repeated his action.

His last thrust did the job. She cried

out and succumbed, her body pulsing in bliss in time with his.

"Damn." He stiffened and panted his release. "That's good." His muscles relaxed and he fought to catch his breath. "So good." He bent down and kissed her lips, her cheek and her lips again. "Lauren."

He stayed inside her while her body subsided its glorious contractions. She pressed her head back in her pillow and tried not to think about the fact that one of her best friends just created the best orgasm she'd ever experienced. Nothing would ever compare.

"That's exactly what I envisioned." Jason's voice interrupted her post-coital haze.

She wanted to know what he envisioned, how often he fantasized it, if Russell had the same thoughts.

Russell moved off to one side, making a noise as he disengaged himself from her.

"There's just one thing missing." Jason took her hand, pressing a condom into it.

Possibly only two minutes before, she came with an orgasm intense enough to have normally satisfied her for days, but the sheer thought of having Jason right after Russell stirred something inside her.

He took her shoulders and turned to his back.

She straddled him and finally got a chance to see all of Jason.

Once again, Jason was different. His completely shaved skin gave her a clear view of his entire offering, and it was a lot. In fact, in keeping with her traffic jam theme, he was an entire semi-truck, the kind that took up more than one lane on the freeway.

She glanced over at Russell. He leaned back on his elbows, his focus on her.

"Laurie." Jason rubbed her legs. "I've waited for this too."

His voice was deep but soft, the irreverence and joking undertone gone. It was so rare he was serious, and now

she had to have him.

She reached out, her fingertips grazing his skin, tracing the slight right hand curve his cock made.

"Oh yeah." He squeezed her outer thighs.

The burning began again, the one that could only be quenched by riding him, her second man in one night.

"Laurie, please." He arched his back.

No more prodding was necessary. She ripped the condom wrapper open with her teeth, taking care to sheathe him.

He moaned and moved his hands up to her hips.

She resisted. "Jason." With Russell he was on top, she wasn't as exposed,

wasn't on display.

"Russell, help her." He motioned toward his friend. "It has to be this way."

Russell pushed himself up to his knees, came around behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Jason wants you as much as I do." He lifted her as Jason guided her down on him.

She lowered herself down on every last inch of him, her reemerging arousal caused her to grind against him. The second act in her personal fantasy now fulfilled.

"It's so hot. I can feel how open you are after coming on Russell, but you're

still tight." He directed her movements with his hands. "Lean back, baby. Russ, rub her."

His raunchy words only succeeded in turning her on more. She wanted him to make love to her after Russell. It seemed right.

Russell pulled her toward him causing Jason to become buried even deeper inside.

"Keep grinding, this is perfect," Jason breathed. "Russ, help me make her come again."

Russell trailed his lips down the side of her neck and pressed his palm over her mound.

"Ah." Russell's hand gave her something to grind on. She moved

faster, harder, careening right toward another orgasm.

"Like that, Laurie." Jason held her tighter. "I want to feel you come on me."

"Russell." Her head fell back against his shoulder.

"Do you need more?"

Unable to speak, she nodded. Another orgasm was upon her and she needed both Russell and Jason for it to come to fruition.

Russell obliged her, taking two of his fingers and rubbing right on that magical spot. He found the perfect rhythm, and she moved against them both.

Now the only sounds in the room were her moans in time to the slight slap

of Jason's skin hitting hers. Her body trembled preparing itself for satisfaction.

Jason broke the silence. "I'm going to come." He held her hips in place and thrust up into her, a series of short, hard pulsing pounds. "I'm there. Laurie. I'm there." His cock thickened and he yelled out.

"Come on, Lauren. You have to." Russell kissed her, opening his mouth and finding her tongue.

Jason's body tensed and he raised his hips, driving into her. "Yes!"

At last she gave way, overcome with a flooding wave of ecstasy. She struggled to breathe, her body directing all of its attention and resources toward

her pleasure.

"Come here." Jason held his arms out to her.

The wave subsided and her body gave out. Russell released her. She possessed no more strength. Everything she had was for both of them. She dropped onto Jason. "Oh my God."

He wrapped his arms around her. "Don't move."

She shut her eyes and concentrated on how his chest heaved against her, how he was still inside her, how he ran his hand through her hair. "Jason?"

"Just give me a second." His hands roamed down her back to her bottom and back up again. "Just a second."

She always pictured him to be the type to bound out of bed, but they lay there for a few seconds until he turned them to their sides.

"I'll be right back." He gave her a light kiss and didn't jump away, taking his time as he left her and touching her cheek before he went to the bathroom.

Without a word, Russell spooned her, kissing her shoulder and working his way up to her ear.

She could only lie there and wait for the next unexpected happening.

Jason returned, making a point of covering them all up and taking her back into his arms.

The three of them were now in bed

together, her in the middle. It was perfect, exactly what should happen after making love to these two men.

She tensed. Her body resisting the ultimate relaxation that came after not only one but two orgasms. She made love not only to two men at once, but her two best friends. Both of them at one time. Together.

"What's wrong?" Russell tapped her.

"Nothing at all." Jason threw his leg over hers and yawned. "I think I can finally sleep tonight without jacking off at least twice thinking about this."

"Not you." Russell sat up. "Lauren."

She attempted to avoid thinking about Jason masturbating, especially since she was no stranger herself. Instead,

focusing on the fact that she had sex with both of them. She had sex with Russell and Jason, came twice, and was now lying in bed with them like they were in some sort of bizarre relationship.

"What's wrong with Laurie?" Jason raised himself up on his elbow.

"What are we doing?" She needed to ask. Maybe this was their way of saying goodbye.

"Something we should have done a long time ago." Jason nodded.

Not sure what his answer meant, she twisted around to Russell.

"Let's not question it tonight. We all wanted this." Russell smoothed her hair down. "We have the weekend.

Tomorrow I'll make breakfast."

"That will take five hours." Jason laughed. "Let's sleep and we'll get bagels in the AM, and don't say you're not eating carbs, I've now seen and felt all there is, and it's awesome."

"I agree." Russell found her hand.

Not sure if she should say thank you, or that this week she was eating carbs, or that Russell's breakfasts tended to turn more into lunch, she settled herself on the bed, though she was unsettled.

Apparently, these men didn't hear her when she said she was leaving. Maybe they thought sex would prevent her from leaving, or they chose to ignore her. Since there was no future beyond tonight there was no point in asking.

Jason held her, and Russell encompassed her from behind. Their position reminding her of the last sculpture she saw before running out of the gallery.

Somehow her dream was handed to her, maybe even better, but she knew what happened to dreams when she woke up. They vanished.

Chapter Four

Russell smiled at the hand tickling its way down his arm, and moaned to give Lauren audible permission to continue. His morning erection swelled as the night before rewound in his mind. He questioned Jason's plan from its inception, still did, but he didn't see a way around it without losing one of them. He also needed to face facts. Last night was the best sex he ever had, even if it was with his two best friends.

With his needs overpowering his exhaustion, he lifted his hand, put it over hers and intertwined their fingers.

Wrong fingers. Too thick, too rough, too long. He opened his eyes right into Jason's.

"I'm horny." Jason squeezed his hand.

"Where's Lauren?" Russell swiped his hand away and sat up. The room was fuzzy and he reached over to the nightstand to find his glasses. The moment they were on everything became clear. "Oh man." The door hung on one hinge, clothes were tossed everywhere, a table was turned on its side, the bedding was in various states of disarray and the room reeked of sex.

"I would say she went on calls." The bed creaked when Jason sat up. "I mean

she always goes to work on Saturday morning. Lots of doctor's offices are open now."

Lauren never left her bed before ten o'clock on Saturday, let alone be of the house at eight. Her absence this morning, coupled with the obvious, deliberate act of leaving without waking them, told him they made a grave error last night. If she wanted to leave before, now she had every reason. "I think your plan was a bunch of crap. We should have talked to her first." As he turned to Jason, his hand brushed against his cock. "Damn it."

"There's too much talking in this world. We needed to act." Jason raised his chin. "Let me see."

"See what?" Russell fell back on the pillow. Again, he needed to be the one to fix Jason's plan. He always played the role of the human mop.

"Your woody. We can't really do anything until we take care of business, our heads won't be clear." Jason grabbed the edge of the sheet. "I'll show you mine."

"I don't want to see yours." He squeezed the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes, trying to focus on how to preserve anything with the one woman who understood him.

"We were supposed to be inside her right now." Jason adjusted his pillow. "I wanted to go first this time."

"Be quiet."

"We probably should talk about this. Do you think there's a protocol? Or maybe we're setting the protocol." Jason chuckled. "I'm not even sure what I liked better, watching her or doing her."

"I didn't think I would like watching as much as I did." The image of Lauren riding his best friend entered his mind, and his waning erection became ridged again.

"When you made her come the first time I could hardly hold it in. I knew how wet she was going to be when she lowered herself down on me. I slid right in, no resistance."

"She was completely ready when I

entered her." He arched his back.

"I have to jack off, I can't even get off the bed. Damn it, we were supposed to be fucking her right now."

The bed started to shake, a rhythm every man knew all too well. "Asshole."

"I'm so hard just thinking about last night. Come on."

It was always Jason. Jason who got him to skip class. Jason who got him drunk when they were sixteen. Jason who decided they should both be with Lauren.

"Oh God this feels good. Lauren's mouth would be better though. I want to see her suck you off." Jason inhaled. "I gotta slow down, you need to join me."

Russell faced him. Jason's erection and hand tented the sheet.

He balled his hand into fist. In the course of thirteen hours he had sex with one of his best friends and helped his other best friend have sex with her. Masturbating with Jason pushed the limit too far. "Raise your hands!"

Jason instantly obeyed, in the process flinging the sheet off himself, and giving Russell a one member salute.

"Cover yourself." He shook his head.

"You need to decide what I'm doing. I really thought of all mornings today I wouldn't be jacking off, or trying to." Jason retrieved the sheet. "Don't worry, I have a plan."

"No...You...Don't." He managed to get those three words out through clenched teeth.

Jason stretched. "Everything here is not only completely fixable, it is going to be better."

It may always be Jason, but not this time. "You are insane. Do you know that? You are insane, and not in that awesome artist insanity that makes you cut off an ear, you are the kind of crazy that should be in an institution." He pointed at his best friend. "This couldn't be worse, and it's not fixable."

"Why do you always have a little black rain cloud over your head?" Jason wiggled his fingers over his head.

Russell rubbed his forehead, pausing to try to think of anything positive, but only summoning the vision of a picture Jason drew of him in the fifth grade with a little black rain cloud above his head. "Let's analyze this."

"Don't play computer consultant with me." Jason laughed.

"Do it for me." He lowered his voice.

As if giving him permission to go ahead, Jason held out his hand.

"Lauren told us she wanted to move out." He held up one finger.

"We had sex with her last night." Jason shrugged.

He held up a second finger. "We

destroyed her room."

"We had sex with her last night."

"We made her cry." Russell held up his third finger and put his hand in Jason's face.

"We had sex with her last night." Jason flipped him the bird.

He raised his fourth finger. "She's not here now."

"We had sex with her last night." Jason repeated again.

"We had sex with her last night!" He put his hand down. "Exactly, we had sex with her last night." He waited for Jason to process his words.

Jason strummed his fingers on the bed. "Great sex."

With no retort, Russell blinked, still

wanting an epiphany from his best friend who orchestrated this mess.

Jason put his hands behind his head and reclined. "Tell me it was not the best sex you ever had."

He grabbed his lower lip and remembered the last time he had sex. It wasn't great. Okay, maybe it wasn't even good. No it wasn't good. It was average, but not bad. He came.

"It sucked, you told me so yourself. Don't try to justify it because you had an orgasm. It doesn't take that much for a guy to get off. If you would have let me continue this morning, I would have got myself off in five to seven more strokes."

Fine, it sucked. He found it strange that he could come but it not be fulfilling, but what stuck out more than the sex that night was how he laid there for hours trying to figure out how not to date that woman again.

"What do you want right now?" Jason sat up again. "If Lauren was here would you have been trying to figure out how to repair our friendship after we took it too far, or would we have been all enjoying each other?"

"You already know the answer to that." The best sex of his life took place with his two best friends.

"Then what would have happened?" Jason kept going. "Would we have had

this great weekend?"

Yes, he pictured this incredible weekend. He didn't dare think of what were to happen beyond the weekend, he never imagined it would get this far, but right now he wanted it back. For once, deal with the repercussions later. "She's probably walking up and down Rodeo trying to figure out her life." Did they go get her? Could the three of them go out in public? He didn't really think about that either. The gallery was one thing, but the real world was another story.

"She probably wrangled Anne to go to that store she likes, and then she will drive around looking for apartments listening to vintage hair band ballads." Jason filled in the rest.

Both of them nodded in unison.

"We need to find her, get her to come home." That was the sum total of Russell's own great plan. "We need to talk to her."

"You think small."

"No?" He narrowed his eyes. "Your plan on just reacting on our instinct hasn't worked out so well. In case you haven't realized, Lauren isn't here and she still wants to move out."

"I say if she wants to move out we let her." Jason gave him the grin. The grin where only one side of his mouth lifted. The one where Russell always got into trouble.

"We're going to let her move out?"

His best friend was truly out of his mind.

Jason kept the grin on his face and got out of bed. "We had sex with her last night."

He groaned and climbed out of bed as well. They weren't getting anywhere. "This room is a disaster area of our making."

"Let me be the silver lining to your little black rain cloud." Jason bent down and picked up a pair of jeans. "I think these are yours." He tossed them on the bed. "Let's clean up."

He took his pants. "I'm not taking a shower with you."

"I thought we were going to walk down Rodeo." Anne Blumefield crossed her arms.

Lauren glanced up at the street sign on the corner. "We're on Rodeo." She adjusted her sunglasses, touched the top of her head and winced. Maybe she should have brushed her hair before she forced it into a ponytail. "What's wrong?"

Her girlfriend shook her head. "You are a mess. What were you doing?"

She sucked in her cheeks preventing any words from exiting her mouth before she was ready. What was she doing? Well, last night she had sex with her roommates. She followed that

extravaganza up by waking up between them. Somehow she managed to shimmy away without waking them and drove around for three hours before calling Anne to ask if she wanted to stroll Rodeo with her while she tried to think of where to go after she moved out tonight. "I was at corporate yesterday."

"Oh." Anne came over and hooked her arm in hers. "I hate when I have to go up, its two weeks of memorizing and training the latest drug rules. All you have to do is learn about the stuffer or fluffer. You have it easy, you're not a real pharm rep."

"I sell to doctors." Lauren took a breath.

"You sell cosmetic fillers. They like

to see you. You make them money because they sell your stuff. Plus the staff vies for your attention to get free vials of filler." Anne sighed and put head on Lauren's shoulder. "I sell antibiotics and beg for prescriptions. The staff only loves me if they're sick, and I can't even give away pens anymore."

Lauren straightened up. Aesthetics was the crown jewel of pharmaceutical sales. "I am more of a practice consultant."

Anne faced her. "So what went on at corporate? Is everything okay? You're so busy maybe they should split your territory."

She mustered up a one sided smile.
"Raise and new title, sorry."

Anne put her lower lip out. "If you were celebrating last night, why didn't you invite me?"

They walked down the street. "I wasn't celebrating." Some would disagree. Her body would disagree. The two orgasms she had with the two men she wanted since college would disagree.

"Oh." Anne patted her back. "You had to fly, poor baby. Well, it's better than your driving."

"Driving in Los Angeles isn't easy."

"There's a reason for the saying nobody walks in LA. You can't even

parallel park."

She was going to remind Anne that she didn't have to parallel park, her company paid for valet parking and she wasn't required to troll for meters, but they stopped at the corner. The corner. The corner with the store. "Oh my God."

Anne groaned. "Let's go in and get it over with."

She swallowed and glanced up at the golden letters that made out the store's logo teasing all the patrons of Rodeo drive to step inside and gaze at the unattainable. "Jacques."

"Come on." Anne tugged her.

"I don't look right." Maybe along with combing her hair she should have

put on something other than a pair of jeans and Jason's t-shirt hidden by a black jacket. She tilted her neck from side to side trying to relieve the tension. For the ten seconds it took to talk about her job she didn't think about them, but she was certain if she held the shirt up to her nose it would smell like Jason's soap and Russell's cologne.

"You look so bad that maybe they'll think you actually have money and they'll show you one of the purses." Anne let go of her and opened the door. "Leave your sunglasses on."

The best part about walking over the gilded threshold was the scent of leather, silk and cash overpowered anything that

would waft up from under her jacket.

Anne headed straight to the counter.

"Wait." Lauren lunged for her, trying not to make a scene. Every time she came in here she felt like a five-ton elephant walking through a bakery asking for a cupcake. Everyone knew she didn't belong, but no one would dare tell her.

"We have to ask." Anne slapped her hand down on the glass.

A sales lady in a grey suit and wearing one of the store's impossible-to-get belts turned to her. "Can I help you?"

"My friend has a question." Anne pointed to her.

Lauren tensed, her body unable to

carry her the three feet to the counter. Her mouth dried out.

"Miss Redmond." Anne prodded.

She straightened up and stepped forward glancing down at the bracelets, the small leather goods, and the pens all kept pristine behind glass. Everything with the logo that told the world you didn't just make it, you really made it, or more likely your husband made it. One had to go about asking for the purse in the right way. There was a protocol. "May I see that pencil please?"

The sales person opened the case, took out the writing implement and handed it to her.

She held the pencil emblazoned with

the Jacques logo and a design definitive of this designer. "Does this go through a normal sharpener?"

The sales person nodded.

She was about to ask if it were a number two pencil, but held back. Only in this store would a pencil cost more than a hundred dollars, and she handed the pencil back. "You know instead of this I would like to see a Valerie bag please."

Anne leaned over the counter.

The sales woman pursed her lips. "We have none in stock."

"Liar." Anne coughed.

Anne had no fear and no filter, which was exactly why selling antibiotics from a prewritten script suited her, but Lauren

was the filler sales person to the stars, or at least the star's doctors, and this sales person should be thrilled to serve her. She cleared her throat. "A Valerie bag. You must have one in the back."

"There is a six month waiting list. The deposit is \$10,000 and the person in charge of the Valerie bags is not here. You must make an appointment." She held her arm up and motioned toward some purses on the shelves behind her. "I have many other bags."

No. There were no other bags. "Thank you, I will think about making an appointment." She backed away. "Come on, Anne."

Anne shrugged her shoulders and

followed her out. "Wimp. You know they have one, you should have asked for the manager."

She returned to Rodeo and walked to the corner of Little Santa Monica. The store wouldn't be nearly as grand if it weren't on the grand street. "What color would you get?"

"What?" Anne stopped next to her.

"What color Valerie bag? Would you get black to go with everything, or would you get a statement color?" She touched her head once more and sighed. Along with combing her hair she probably should have washed it.

"Does the color matter as long as an MD buys it? More like Dr. Dalton." Anne elbowed her.

Dr. Dalton. Dr. Gregory Dalton. *The* plastic surgeon, with *the* practice and *the* clientele. He was young, virile, well-off and her number one account. Before her mother died she told her to marry a doctor and she would have a good, stable life with no worries. Dr. Dalton fit the scrubs she was after. "Whatever." She needed to remember it wasn't the purse, it was the purse purchaser. She would never have anything if she didn't move out and away from temptation and now she knew how tempting. She swore she could still feel them throughout her body. "We should have gone to Orange and gone antiquing."

"Orange County?" Anne moved in front of her. "What is your deal today?"

"I think I need to go apartment hunting."

"What?" Anne grabbed her shoulders. "What happened to the boys? Is Russell okay?"

Somehow Lauren thought her friend should be asking if she were okay. "Russell is fine. I just think it's time for me to move on. I'm never going to have a boyfriend if I don't move out." Jason and Russell were guy repellent, especially if she wanted a man like Dr. Dalton.

"You're still talking to them, right?" Anne gripped her tighter. "Russell is

going to the charity ball, right?"

"Yes, everything is fine." She opened her own bag and found her car keys. No, not a Valerie, a bag Jason picked out for her because it fit all her items, and was made by an artisan in Hollywood. He said it was a real one-of-a-kind. "It was just a thought."

"Well maybe if you moved out not only would you be more available, but Russell would be as well." Anne chuckled. "I'll go hunting with you. I think there are some cute places by mine, or did that raise of yours net you something in the heart of Beverly Hills?"

She wanted to tell Anne she not only got a monetary raise, but two others, and one raise was one Anne would die for -

Russell's. "You know I think I'm going to go home and clean up. I'll call you later."

"I'll be glad to help you. You should move out." Anne grabbed her arm.

She stared at her friend and swore the woman was fighting a smile with the way the corner of her mouth twitched. "I'll let you know."

This was something she was going to have to do alone, or at least with her and some vintage hair band ballads playing in the background.

Chapter Five

The lights on the houses illuminated her path, each one uniform as if all the owners planned a trail of golden beams to lead her to her home on her last night. They rented the house in West Hollywood one week after graduating college. By then Russell had his job at the financial firm only six miles away on Wilshire, she had her first job as a sales rep in the Los Angeles territory, and Jason insisted Hollywood inspired his creativity.

On their first night, Jason complained about the lights, called them boring, and

the next day she and Jason drove to three different stores to find a purple light bulb to fit their lamp. Every night since, the golden lights led her to the one purple outcast, and when she saw it, she knew she was home.

However, tonight no purple glow met her. The house stood dark. No purple glow, no lights from inside, nothing. In all the years of living with her men she never remembered coming home to a dark house.

She pulled into the driveway and rested her head on the steering wheel. This couldn't be her home any longer, and they weren't her men. All day she drove around trying to figure out what happened. With no answers, she knew

she needed to buck up and grow up, cut herself loose. They coddled her, and now she had to move on, or one day she would be left alone.

Yes, the house was empty, and it was better. Now she could avoid seeing them and answering questions. After last night they were destroyed anyway.

Though somehow she thought they would be there.

Maybe it was hope.

Before getting out the car, she checked the envelope she prepared while attempting to fill out an application at an apartment building today. Every time she looked at the empty blanks on the form, or tried to

compose a letter to them, her hand trembled, allowing her only to write out a check for the next six months' rent and toss the application in the trash.

She got out of the car and ran to the door, nearly twisting her ankle when she tripped on nothing. With her vision blurry and her heart on fire, it took her three shots to hit get her key in the lock, and two tries to turn the knob.

Her envelope lagged behind in joining her keys on the floor when she saw the house.

The darkness that greeted her outside didn't match the inside, and she didn't need to pack.

They packed for her. The lack of light outside came from the mix of boxes

and her belongings piled so high they blocked the windows. She didn't even realize she owned this much. The boxes seemed to bow and retreat making her dizzy, causing her to kneel down behind a row of cardboard to catch her breath. At least the memory of having them both for one night would forever be marred by them silently agreeing she needed to leave.

She wrapped her arms around herself and made a plan. Tonight she would just grab some clothes and essentials and figure out how to get the rest out later. They didn't even label the boxes.

“There are two paths.” Russell's voice intruded on her solitude.

“What?” She turned, trying to find him but only seeing the never-ending wall of boxes.

“It’s your choice.” Jason spoke this time. “One path will lead you out the back door where we have a moving van set to take you anywhere you want to go.”

Moving van? Choice? "Jason?"

“The other path leads to a different destination.” Russell took over again.

"Russell?" She forced herself up and took in the space. The boxes weren't haphazardly piled up as she first thought. There were indeed two makeshift tunnels made from the boxes, one led toward the kitchen and the back

door, and the other toward the bedrooms. "Where does the other path lead?"

"To us." Jason answered.

Not understanding, she pressed her lips together.

"You take that path, you don't move out and we see what happens with the three of us." He answered her question.

The three of them? She shook her head. Could they want her for more than one night of bad timing? As her focus darted from one tunnel to the other, she put her fingernail in her mouth contemplating her options.

She could leave, show up at Dr. Dalton's or any other Dr. Someone on Monday morning and try to restart her

life the way her mother wanted her to, or she could go to her men and see what they meant by the three of them.

Her first instinct was to ask Russell. He knew every answer, even to the strangest, most bizarre random questions. "No." This decision she had to make on her own. She got on her knees.

"You need to choose." Russell's tone told her there would be no more information until she picked her path.

She glanced toward the boxes that lead to the kitchen. A secure, planned life waited at the end. Then she turned toward the path leading to the bedroom. Down that road were the two men she

loved since she met them. How could they offer her this and she not take it? Twenty years from now when she was someone's wife with her two kids and a dog would she still be kicking herself for not exploring the three of them. A little secret for only her.

She swallowed, biting her lip as she peeked at both options. No doubt, in twenty years they would have all gone separate ways with their separate families. Would she hate herself for going after what she wanted, and delaying her future? Would the memory haunt her forever, a ghost following her everywhere, leaving a hole in her heart? Was it better to leave this forgotten and finished, or did she take one decadent

detour?

She chose her path and began to crawl. It was then she realized that one of Jason's works of art surrounded her. One designed especially for her and her choice, but it had Russell written all over it as well. Not only had he allowed the house to be turned into a full-fledged disaster area, but it had to be his engineering that allowed the tunnels to stay put.

There weren't many tunnels in Los Angeles, at least not ones she went in. Tunnels were confining, narrow with speeding cars. She always felt as if she were going to hit the sides, and as she inched through this makeshift passage

she swore this tunnel was longer than the one from the 105 freeway to LAX.

At least at the end of this tunnel she didn't have to get on a plane...or load her items into a moving van.

"Lauren." Russell caught her shoulders.

"Laurie." Jason grabbed her arm and helped her up.

Her legs struggled to hold her, her knees weak, sore from pulling herself over the tile in their entry way and the carpet through their living room.

Unlike the night before, Russell kissed her first, and unlike the night before it was a soft kiss. Not the blur that got the three of them into bed, but a welcoming kiss, the kiss one would give

their partner when they returned home after being lost.

Russell pulled back and Jason took her chin and repeated his best friend's action. While she expected his kiss to be more playful than Russell's, he surprised her by brushing his lips against hers causing the welcome Russell gave her to wrap around her and hold her tight.

Jason moved his lips to her cheek and then her ear. "I think I can speak for both of us when I tell you that we are happy you didn't choose the moving van."

She braced herself on both of them, something she had been doing for years. "So, what are we doing?" She glanced

between them, but settled on Russell.

For the first time in seven years Russell didn't answer.

"We are doing what we should have done since about junior year in college." Jason nodded.

She touched the top of her head needing to make sure she still had her mind, grimacing when she remembered she still hadn't washed her hair. She didn't know what to do, how to act. How could both of them want her? "What now?" She tried again.

Both Russell and Jason stared at her. How could they have an answer when she didn't have one herself?

"Look we found everything we needed." Jason held up a pair of Lauren's panties and a sock. "Well, we don't need this." He tossed the sock over his shoulder and tilted his head at the red and white striped panties with lace trim. "Maybe we don't need this either."

"Maybe we should have not really packed, or maybe we should have labeled the boxes like I suggested." Russell shook his head. "Maybe mixing all her stuff up so she would have a hard time unpacking if she chose to move away was a bad idea since we wanted her to stay. Now we have to deal with the aftermath."

"See, there's the black rain cloud." He held up the panties again. "It's Saturday night and all we found for her to wear is this."

"You do have a point." Russell shrugged his shoulders. "But what happens now?" He mirrored Lauren's question from before.

His best friend's insecurities poured out of him, but at least he wasn't backing out. "Now we join her in the bathroom." Russell shocked the hell out of him when his neat-freak friend sent Lauren into his prize bathroom to clean up. Russell's bath boasted a deluxe whirlpool tub. He guided Russell to their destination.

"Do we just go in?" Russell held his hands out, shielding the door.

Jason patted his skittish friend. "We slept with her last night, we're going to sleep with her again tonight. You sent her in here. You even found bubble bath and put it in the water for her. I personally checked the temperature and found a towel. I think we've earned the right to see the efforts of our hard work." He reached around Russell, gave one warning knock and turned the door handle.

He opened the door a crack and tried to spy Lauren in the reflection of the mirror, but everything was steamed over. "Can we come in?" He raised his

voice trying to sound inviting.

"Okay," Lauren called.

"Jackpot." He turned back to Russell, grinned and entered. At first his plan was to charge in there, disrobe and jump in the tub and convince Russell to do the same, but he stopped at the vision before him. If he needed any inspiration, it was right here with Lauren in the bathtub.

The copious amount of bubbles hid yet revealed her form, and her slicked back wet hair allowed him to focus on her face. Even with no makeup she was a beauty, and the heat in the room made the color rise in her cheeks. The blue of her eyes stood out, sparkling against the white tile around her. Her lips seemed especially lush, and perfectly pink.

He cleared his throat. If he tore his gaze away from her face, he could take in the curves of her leg. Only one dew dropped leg snuck out from the mounds of bubbles. He wondered if she just shaved. His creativity flowed like the water from the faucet.

"Are you okay?" The water splashed around her.

"It's kind of hot in here." He swallowed. No, he wasn't overwhelmed with the need to jump in the water. He was just overcome with the need to be near her.

"I think it's perfect." She smiled and lifted her leg a bit higher, resting it on the tile wall.

He licked his lips and glanced over at Russell.

Russell swallowed, his Adam's apple traveling up and down his neck twice before he took off his glasses, wiped them on a towel and returned them to his face.

The three of them didn't say a word, only stared at each other.

"Do you want to scrub my back?" She lifted a washcloth out of the bubbles.

"Yes!" they said in unison and rushed to the edge of the tub. Their race ended in a tie, and they both reached for the cloth as if they were begging for a scrap.

"It's my bathroom." Russell set his

jaw.

"If we share a bed, we share a bath." Jason wouldn't be bested by his best friend because he had the best bathroom in the house.

Lauren bit her lip.

"I am the one who had to open fourteen boxes to find the scant clothing she has now." Russell put two fingers on the wet washcloth.

"Is she here in this bathtub now offering us the opportunity to bathe her?" He mimicked Russell's actions. "The box sculpture worked." He winked at her.

Her gaze ping-ponged between the two of them, following the banter.

Neither of them budged.

"We are going to have to figure this out." This could easily turn into a competition and that wouldn't work, but he couldn't surrender.

"How about you both do it." Lauren reached around and found a sponge.

Leave it to Laurie. "You may pick what medium you want to work in." He elbowed Russell.

Russell took the sponge and added soap. He slid over and began washing her back.

Jason watched for a moment before taking his washcloth. Rather than joining Russell, he moved down to her legs, taking the one that was already out of the water and deciding to pay it some

long overdue attention. Last night things moved fast. He didn't get enough time to truly relish in what he finally won.

"Where did you go all day?" Russell moved her hair aside and rubbed the sponge across her neck.

He wanted to ask that question himself, but now he could listen in as he made his way from her ankle to her knee. The way the water glistened off her smooth leg told him she definitely shaved.

"It's so stupid." She closed her eyes and her voice lowered.

The silliness of arguing over who got the sponge or the washcloth faded. Russell must have felt it too. He dropped the sponge and put his hands on

her shoulders.

"Lauren." Russell turned her toward him.

She opened her eyes but kept her gaze down. "At first I went out with Anne."

Jason couldn't help but groan. He never understood what Laurie saw in that woman. It had to be a case of opposites attract.

Russell wrinkled his nose at the mention of the woman who wanted him. "After Anne what happened? You were gone for eleven hours."

She paused and inhaled, exhaling her words as if she needed to get them out as fast as possible. "I drove around and I looked at some apartments."

Russell pressed his lips together until the color disappeared, while the cords down his neck did an appearing act.

"You're staying here." At the mention of her apartment hunting, he threw the washcloth aside making a splash.

"I was really confused all day." She shook her head. "What are we doing?"

Earlier when she asked the question, she looked to Russell for the answers, but Russell never answered. Hell, Russell even asked the question himself. Though this time she didn't single either one of them out as the man who had the solution, Jason knew Russell needed to speak. His answer didn't have the clout

his friend's did. He poked his fingers into the bubbles watching them dissolve.

Out of the corner of his eye he watched Russell hook his fingers under her chin and lift her face up. "Lauren, look at me."

She complied, glancing up at him through her lashes.

"I think Jason was wrong."

Jason raised his head. He fought the need to pound his fist into the side of the tub. Of course he was wrong. Russell took every opportunity to tell him today, but they were all here now. Yes, this could implode on them, but they had to do this. They were stagnant like his art.

"I'm glad we waited until now. I don't think we could have handled this in

college." He smiled. "I think he was right that we needed to give this a try."

"Do you mean it?" She put her hand on Russell's arm.

He nodded and turned. "Jason?"

With the spotlight on him, he needed to say something as amazing as his best friend. "I've wanted you since college." He took a breath. His words didn't come out exactly how he wanted, but she still reached for him. Without a second thought he moved up.

She held her hand out to him. "I think you're both right."

Lauren understood. Russell may be the man with the answers, but Lauren was the woman with the intuition. He

got up on his knees and took his opportunity to kiss her.

This kiss was different than the night before. Less than twenty-four hours earlier he and Russell burst in on Lauren and moved forward on a quest to join them together. It was his plan, they didn't have time for extended foreplay, they needed to act and sort it out later. While last night was hot, it was also laser focused. Pinpointing on one spot until everything combusted.

Tonight, they could start slow fire. Let things happen in the perfect ebb and flow.

Tonight he finally got the chance to truly kiss her, and exactly like when he started any other art project, he made

sure to block everything else out and concentrate.

Her mouth melded to his, but even though they knew each other forever, and they slept together, still her lips trembled. She was unsure, but willing, and he needed to make her secure and comfortable. He started slow, took his time to open his mouth. Taste the peppermint toothpaste lingering on her tongue, and smile at the way she gasped when he deepened the kiss.

She kept up with him, matching his movements as if they had spent years kissing. Maybe in some way they did. However, the reality was much more vibrant, full of depth and color and that

extra spark that let him know he had much more than dime store art, but a masterpiece.

His body heated, the burn taking residence right in his jeans. It took every bit of his strength to keep his promise and take his time. He pulled back, and she paused before opening her eyes.

He never broke eye contact with her. Once again their history worked in his favor, and he knew Russell stared at them. His job was not only to make sure they savored this but to keep things moving. "I'm not sure Russell has properly kissed you this evening." He moved aside.

In the moment where Russell leaned

over the edge of the tub and took Lauren into his arms Jason knew exactly how deep his best friend's feelings ran for the woman in the water. For that matter Jason also knew how deep Russell felt for him. His traditional buddy would never opt to share the woman he wanted unless this meant everything to him. However, in this case it wasn't sharing. They had synergy. The three of them were definitely better together.

Russell kissed her, and Lauren wrapped her arm around his neck. She arched her back causing her breasts to emerge from the water. A perfect picture.

Before he could send Russell the

message to touch her, his best friend's hand cupped her breast, his fingertips brushing the already hard nipple.

She moaned and snaked her hand up to grab the hair at the nape of Russell's neck.

They became lost in each other. Taking full advantage of what had been denied them for nearly a decade. Jason took his opportunity to move back down to his original spot, and let his hands continue where his washcloth left off. With her wet skin he had no trouble sliding his hand up and down her leg, taking the time to admire each curve. He made sure he explored every inch, working up to her inner thigh where he stopped just short of his goal.

"Oh." With her eyes shut, she moved her hips toward him.

His erection swelled as his fingertips came closer.

Russell moved down to her neck, her chest and then encompassed her nipple with his mouth, and she bit her lip.

She spread her legs, giving Jason his invitation. He swiped the bubbles away spying her well-groomed racing stripe, and his mouth began to water. At last his hand delved for the treasure he really wanted to find, but allowed only one finger to travel down her folds.

While Russell took care of her mouth and breasts, he concentrated on what the two of them could do to bring her

pleasure.

He grazed the one spot he searched for.

She gasped and arched her back.
"Jason."

"Something wrong?" He focused on her face and repeated his action. A feather light touch made even softer by the water. He rubbed her in a slow circle causing her to writhe beneath him. "Aren't we doing a good job?"

"Yes." She grasped the edge of the tub.

Russell switched breasts, taking the other in his mouth.

"Russ, please." This time she called out to him.

Russell tossed his glasses onto the

counter. "Please what?" He found her lips once more.

"Jason." She breathed into his mouth.

At the way she tattled on him, Jason's cock strained in his jeans. He teased her a little more, giving her a bit more pressure and then retracting.

She braced her leg on the wall.

Russell turned down to him, then back to her. "What's wrong with Jason?" He took one of her nipples between two fingers.

She moved her other leg up, her knee peeking out of the water.

Yes. This was precisely what he wanted. Russell involved, not relying totally on his prodding. He ignored his

own needs. Now was time for his build up and her release. He leaned over and kissed her knee, opening his mouth and sucking the soapy water off her.

She glared at him almost as a dare, then turned to Russell and pulled him down in another kiss.

"There we go." This whole thing was too hot, and he gave in, pressing his hand to himself as he indulged her with only one finger.

"Ahh." She attempted to grind into him.

Her body was slick, ready and needing release.

"Better?" Russell let out a low laugh. She shook her head.

"Jason." This time Russell said his

name, but more than his name, it was a demand. A command to satisfy their girl, and now he would act.

He added a second finger.

She opened right up for him. "That's better."

He started slow but steady his two fingers thrusting in and out of her, making sure his thumb did his job of giving her plenty of sensation.

Though he may have lived with Lauren, seen her in almost every situation, knew she preferred butter pecan ice cream slightly melted over any other flavor, and knew she would secretly watch musicals and sing along, he didn't know exactly every move to

make her come.

Now he learned she liked him to alternate between hard, fast strokes and slow deep ones. She wanted Russell to use a bit more force when toying with her nipples, and as she neared her end she panted.

He wanted to tear off his jeans and tear into her, and his best friend felt the same way. Though this morning Russell wouldn't give into his teasing about jacking off, now his free hand rubbed his groin as he continued to kiss and fondle their girl.

"Oh," Lauren cried out. "Oh now." She held onto Russell's shoulders.

"Let go." Russell stopped pleasuring himself to wrap both arms around her.

She moaned and moved against him.

"Come, Lauren." He thrust his fingers faster.

"There!" She sucked in her breath.

"Now!" The water splashed with his sharp movements. "Come on, baby."

Her body tensed and she cried out as her orgasm hit, her muscles contracting on his fingers as if she wanted to draw him even deeper.

She gasped as the waves of pleasure died down, her body relaxing.

"Feel good?" He left his fingers in place, ensuring she rode out every last bit of bliss.

She nodded and hid her face in Russell's shirt. "I can't believe this."

He removed his fingers, separating himself from her and watching her breasts bob up and down as she caught her breath. "We love making you come. This is what we were meant to do." With the years of need and trust, there was no room for embarrassment between the three of them. "Tell her, Russ."

Russell brushed her hair back. "This is what we need to do."

She peered at him over Russell's shoulder. The smile permeating her face full of satisfaction and desire, but once he caught her gaze she shifted her eyes again.

"This is what we need to do." Russell blinked several times.

"You have two men who waited a long time for you." Jason stood and got a towel. While he knew his buddy wanted this, those were the blinks of doubts. Laurie was also unsure or she wouldn't have left today. He had to keep them moving. Inspiration finally found him, and he wasn't wrong about this.

No he wasn't.

Chapter Six

"What are you reading?" Russell leaned over and ran his lips across her shoulder.

Lauren inhaled at the shivers Russell created and held up her magazine. Thank God the magazine consisted mostly of advertisements and pictures. She had no energy for reading. Again, the three of them rushed home from work and made love. In the last four days she'd more orgasms than the last year. She had no time for anything but her job and her men. Her life was like

swimming in a bowl of hot fudge. Dripping with decadence and deliciousness. If she wanted to live the fantasy, she was doing it in big, gluttonous gulps. She only prayed she didn't end up in the hospital with food poisoning, no doctor would ever compare to her pair of paradise makers.

However, with every bit of paradise reality snuck in. Around this time every night she began wondering about the sleeping arrangements. Since their first night, they slept together in the same room. Still, with her history of men gone wrong she took nothing for granted. In her case she had two men, only doubling her chances of failure.

"Fashion." He nodded and leaned

over to look at the page with her.
"What's new in the world of fashion?"

"Matte nail polish and a smoky eye."
She tilted the page toward him and
glanced at the screen of his laptop.
"What's new in the world of vintage
toys?"

He paused, actually taking the time to
look at what she read. Russell always
paid attention, even if he had no idea
what he was paying attention to, such as
matte nail polish. "Nothing, they're
vintage." He turned his laptop to show
her an Internet auction for a 1960's
racetrack.

She laughed and leaned over to see
the details. The holidays were on the

way, and these two men were radically different. Russell was the easiest person on the planet to buy for. All she had to do is peek at what vintage plaything interested him at the moment. Last year it was robots, and she went down to the antique district and bought him a dusty, partially working robot with a remote. The thing didn't work, which made it even better because Russell spent two months fixing it, cleaning it and fabricating parts for it.

Now Mr. Robot, as she called it, lived in the corner of his room on a little pedestal. He moved, he spoke, and he did his tricks. As a bonus Mr. Robot had the box. She learned five years ago never throw the box away. Never. She

frowned trying not to remember the box she tossed. She may as well have told Russell the robot ran away from home. Boxes and toys were not kept together, that may ruin the box. Boxes were stored in bins with special things to keep moisture out and put in the garage.

The racetrack that caught his eye had the box, and she did a quick scan. "All four original cars and controllers and extra pieces of track. You will probably have to replace the brushes at the bottom of the cars so they make contact with the track."

"Oh my God." Russell let his head fall back on the pillows.

"What's wrong?" She turned to him.

"The way you're talking is turning me on." Russell flung his hand over his eyes.

"What did she say?" Jason returned to the bedroom carrying three bowls of ice cream.

"Nothing. You wouldn't get it." Russell lowered his arm and held his hand out for his treat.

"Nothing for you if you don't tell me." Jason backed up. "It's the rule, you have to tell me."

Lauren pursed her lips at the comment about the rules. Were there any for what they were doing? She would never admit it, but she even tried looking their situation up on the Internet. All she got

were links to porn sites. Fine, she peeked at the porn. It gave her some ideas. After all, she was sleeping with two men.

"She acknowledged that the racetrack I'm trying to bid on has all the cars, extra tracks and needs brushes." Russell wiggled his fingers.

"Yeah, that gives me a woody." With a shrug Jason gave him the bowl. "Chocolate with chocolate chips."

"Thanks." Russell dug in.

"Butter pecan." Jason handed her the next bowl.

"Yay!" She cupped her hands around her dish. Carbs were not her concern. She figured she was getting such a great workout every night she could indulge a

little.

"And a scoop of each for me." Jason bounced on the bed with his. "Don't get me a racetrack for Christmas."

"Of course not." She stirred her ice cream. No, where Russell was easy, Jason was not. He didn't have a hobby like Russell. His career was his hobby, and he was particular about his art supplies. She couldn't buy him clothing because she could never quite figure out the mystery of how Jason chose his apparel. He was the only man who could walk into a seemingly normal store with normal items and come out extraordinary. In fact, she loved it when he bought her clothes. His talent in

selecting just the right item didn't only pertain to himself. She agonized over his presents.

"Just you and Russell in bed and some bows in convenient spots is all I need." Jason took a huge bite of his ice cream and turned on the television.

"You never use anything I buy you." She continued making her ice cream into a whip.

"I love Lauren's gifts." Russell's voice came out muffled by the ice cream in his mouth.

"That is absolutely, one hundred percent not true." Jason flipped through the channels. "I love your gifts, too."

She ran down a mental list of years of unused or forgotten presents. "What

about the designer shirt I got you last year?" In her last attempt to get Jason clothes she went for a label instead of style.

"I don't want to wreck it. It's hanging in my closet."

"What about the shaving kit?" She never knew a man who liked to be as hairless as Jason. Now she knew to what extent. He shaved everything.

"I didn't want to destroy it. It's in the bathroom." He threw the remote to Russell.

"What about the pencils I got you that had something like five hundred colors?" She stirred her ice cream one more time and deeming it the correct

consistency, spooned some in her mouth. Her special mixture dripped off onto her chest. "Do you have a napkin?" She went to wipe up the mess with her fingers.

"Hold up." Jason put his bowl on the nightstand and caught her hand. He looked into her eyes and curled his body around her, taking his time to lick the ice cream off her. "There, all clean."

Russell yawned, put his bowl down and began playing with her hair.

She didn't think she would ever get used to the three of them in bed talking about nothing, eating ice cream and fooling around. Rather than letting the moment take her, she tensed. What if she never got enough time to get used to it?

Everyday she tried to wipe these thoughts out of her head, just like she tried not to worry about where they would sleep. "What happened to the pencils?"

Jason rested his chin on her shoulder. "I have them. They're on the third shelf of my bookcase in my studio."

She narrowed her eyes. For a man who hated her gifts he sure knew where all of them were.

"You gave them to me on our third Christmas, and I never opened them."

Russell closed his laptop. "That was the Christmas you got me the futuristic train set."

She turned to him. Did these men

really remember every gift?

"I think I'll set it up this weekend."
He kissed her nose. "I love that train set."

"You got me my bracelet and Jason got me my earrings." Though she tried not to read too much into those gifts, she did anyway, toggling between which one of them she wanted to end up with. She still wore those gifts at least a few times every week.

Jason moved her hair away from her ear. "I never used the pencils because I didn't want to take the chance of using them up. I didn't know what was going to happen and I had a horrible crush on you."

Her heart raced making it hard for her

to breathe. "Way back then?"

"I had a crush on her first." Russell took her chin.

Now, she couldn't breathe. She knew she loved them, wanted them, but couldn't fall in love. They were only acting out what they needed to for years, getting it out of their systems. Hell, she didn't even know where they were going to sleep tonight.

"You only voiced it first." Jason put his hand on her bowl. "Are you done?"

She glanced down at the melted mess. The ice cream, the caramel, the pecans. Three ingredients that when swirled together made an amazing combination, a taste sensation. Her

mind wandered. Back in college if either of them voiced their crush would they have ended up together? Which couple would they have been? Would they be together now? Would the third person still be in their life? There were no answers. She nodded.

"Great." He gave the ice cream a final stir, and held the spoon up above her chest.

"What are you doing?" The frigid liquid hit her chest, and she arched her back.

"Since I've known you you've made your ice cream into a soup, and it always bothered me." He bent down and licked one dripping trail off her chest. "Now I see this is the way to eat it."

His tongue made her hot, his words before warmed her. "Jason!"

"You are going to make everything all sticky." Russell yanked the sheet down, revealing her breasts.

"Russell, if you don't like Lauren being sticky, I suggest you clean it up." He looked right in her eyes, raised the spoon again and allowed the creamy liquid to fall in a ribbon across her nipples.

Russell glanced down at her and swallowed. The airport may be his nemesis when in the car, but a sticky food mess in bed was an enemy, one where he may lose.

"It's the rule that we have to share."

He moved back to give Russell access.

This was the second time Jason mentioned rules. Since they began he seemed to have the answers where Russell didn't.

"You know you want to. Trust me, she's delicious." Jason raised his eyebrows.

Jason pushed them all to their limits and she knew Russell was actually shoved. She wanted to tell him not to go further, she only wanted to know where they were spending the night.

"What are the rules?" Russell put one finger up and with an exaggerated movement dipped it into the ice cream.

She gasped, not only at the question, but the action. He was learning to break

the rules all himself. One small finger in the ice cream for most men, one giant leap into the land of the sticky for Russell Sinclair.

"What do you mean?" Jason wiped up one errant dribble and put his finger in his mouth.

"Rules. What are they?" Russell scooped some up as well. "You seem to know everything. What do we do next?"

Lauren pressed her lips together. She couldn't have voiced it better herself.

Jason clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "I say the rules are we make them up as we go along."

"I don't understand." The cords on Russell's neck stood out.

She didn't understand either, yet here they were.

"Well, right now the rules are we clean up Laurie, and then we go to bed. Tomorrow's rules will find us soon enough." Jason put out his hand as if inviting Russell to take part. "We both crushed on her bad, and here she is with ice cream dripping down her boobs. Tell me you never pictured that."

Russell turned to her. "I can say in all honesty I never pictured this." He put his finger to her lips.

She fought a smile, and allowed Russell to place his fingertip in her mouth, pursing her lips around him and giving him a light suck.

Russell stared at her.

"I pictured that." Jason lowered his voice.

"Me too." Russell lowered his head to her chest.

She shut her eyes. Russell cleaned her up, licking, kissing, and sucking. She never wanted anyone more, unless that included the other man next to her.

Jason took her hand and worked her neck. "We're just going to make the rules for ourselves."

"Let's stay in here tonight." Russell mumbled as he gave her another series of kisses across her breast.

They both rid her of the butter pecan ice cream, replacing the silken, sweet

treat with a heated core that made her try to forget all the questions, all the rules.

Her body relaxed, relishing in the attention, the comfort, the closeness with the only men she ever wanted. She could only pray she didn't replace butter pecan for rocky road.

Chapter Seven

"Come on, baby." Russell licked his lips and held his breath. He knew she could perform.

The room was completely silent except for the moan from his beloved.

"You can do it." He reached out and ran his hand down her side. "You can."

He waited. Any second now she would succumb, she had no choice, he had done everything in his power. "Please. I love you."

Right as the words left his mouth, she lit up and hummed her satisfaction.

He inhaled, spun around in his chair

and held his hand out. "Pay up."

"You are a total asshole." Ken Donaldson shook his head and crumpled up a twenty-dollar bill, throwing it across Russell's desk.

Russell raised his eyebrows and focused on his other naysayer.

Tom Snyder glanced down at his lap. Without looking up, he tossed Russell his wallet. "He's the computer whisperer."

"Yes, silicon chips bow to my every command." He put his hands behind his head and rocked his chair back. "Do the tally."

Ken leaned up and pulled a tattered red miniature spiral notebook out of his back pocket. He flipped through the

pages. "Looks like our boss has quite a run going on." He pulled his pen out of his shirt pocket, making his notation in the book.

"Stop calling me your boss." Russell fought a flinch every time they referred to his promotion. The three of them conducted their daily challenge since the summer after college when they began working in the computer configuration department of Managed Solutions. They all worked their way up, providing their customers complete turnkey computer systems. Two months ago, he broke out of the pack with a promotion to Solution Architect. Suddenly his friends were his employees. Still, certain traditions

needed to be kept, especially when it came to resurrecting technology from the 1990's or putting something together out of discarded parts. Lauren got a kick out of what he would bring home. He patted the putty colored machine as it purred.

"What gives?" Tom pushed his hair out of his eyes. He stood and leaned over the desk to inspect the computer. "For the last week you have been on a roll. Are you getting laid or something?"

He froze. Was it that noticeable when a man had sex? Of course, they didn't know the type of sex. When Jason conjured his plan and promised Russell the best sex in his life, he wasn't kidding. The three of them together was incredible, yet he wondered what Ken

and Tom would do if they knew that for the last six nights he slept in bed with his two best friends.

Yes, for the last week he went home, more like rushed home, and the three of them continued where they left off the night before. Every morning they woke, usually in his room, but once in Lauren's, and once in Jason's, and smiled that smile that only lovers share. Lovers?

Thankfully, the rumble of his cell phone vibrating against his desk jolted him out of his thoughts. As if on automatic, he picked up the square of glass and metal.

What up? Jason sent the text to both him and Lauren.

No, Jason and him were not lovers. *The computer I just managed to fix.* RS. He tapped back and made sure to add his initials, a habit he started a long time ago.

LOL. Lauren came in next. *Profit for the doctor I just left. Jase?*

"Chicks like a dude in a suit." Ken came around to his side of the desk.

"Whatever." Russell forced himself to speak. Jason and him were not lovers. They were just lovers with the same woman at the same time. "At least I'm not wearing dirty khakis and a stained short sleeved white button down." Jason always made sure he didn't dress like a computer geek. No,

Jason did not dress him and they were not lovers. His phone buzzed again.

I'll tell you what's up. Jason piped in.

Okay. Jason was telling them both about his erection or erection potential, but the fact that it gave Russell some potential of his own did not make the two of them lovers.

I say we start our evening now. Let's repeat last night. Jason continued to text.

Russell pushed his glasses up. Last night they started in Lauren's room and went for round two in his room. This morning his muscles ached as if he spent two hours working out. Lauren had to be sore. He fought a smile. The few yoga

classes Lauren took paid off, she was exceptionally limber. Damn it, he was working. He couldn't leave to join them.

Them.

There was another red flag word. Not her. Them.

"Maybe women don't like to be called chicks and that's why you're dating your hand." Tom elbowed Russell and laughed. "What does your gal pal think of your new found fling?"

"Gal pal?" Russell slapped Ken's hand away from the computer and glanced at his phone again.

Russell is playing hard to get.
Lauren added a smile to her text.

He wanted to answer, preferably using the word hard. No, what he really wanted to do was take advantage of his promotion and leave early.

Tom twisted around to face him. "Yeah, Lauren. If she's lonely let me know."

Russell took a moment to process what his friend said. He didn't realize he grit his teeth together until that horrendous scratching sound reverberated through his skull. A month ago, a comment like Tom's would have had him giving a fake grin and telling his friend to go for it. However, now he had Lauren, and Tom wasn't touching her, or thinking about her. She was his.

Well, not only his. He shared her with Jason. "She's fine." They were all fine.

"She's always done the boy toy." Ken's finger made its way toward the floppy disk drive. "It's always been the boy toy and the gal pal."

In an effort to stop himself from grabbing both Ken and Tom and slamming their heads together, Russell pounded his phone and typed the next message.

I'm not hard...yet. RS. He would show his friends who was getting some. Though not one to kiss and tell, he was going to break his silence and tell them exactly who was doing the gal pal besides the boy toy.

RS is sexting. Jason sent over a wink

face. *Talk about getting hard.*

Maybe Jason was getting hard over his "sexting" but his stomach tightened when he realized that if Ken and Tom weren't here, he would be as well.

I may not be getting hard, but I'm getting something else.

Lauren's text caused him to arch his back. He didn't have anything to prove to anything to anyone.

RS better not say he can't come cause he's having some contest. He's the boss, and we can have our own contest with a lot less silicon and a lot more hardware.

Russell swore Jason could read his thoughts. He pursed his lips trying to

figure this out.

"Jason's not doing her." Tom took his turn to hit Ken's hand.

Russell stopped his texting or sexting or whatever to hear Tom's reasoning.

Ken crossed his arms. "It's so obvious."

"Then it's obvious you know nothing." Tom sat back down in his chair. "Jason isn't into Lauren."

Russell hit his head against the back of his chair and lifted his phone to read Lauren's response.

If RS leaves now, we will COME home at the same time.

Jason answered. *The two of you better be on the way. I'll get everything ready.*

Russell swallowed. His male best friend was preparing them for a night of lovemaking. Even sicker was he already had dinner in the crockpot.

Screw this. As the boss he could go home if he wanted. Before he typed his response, the insane conversation continued.

"Expound on your theory." Ken pointed at Tom.

"The boy toy only plays with other boys." Tom nodded.

"Jason's gay!" Ken hit the desk. "I always thought he looked at me funny."

"What!" Russell shot up out of his chair causing it to roll back and hit the wall. "He is not gay." If anything he

knew, he slept with the man.

"I think thou dost protest too much."
Tom winked at him.

He opened his mouth, but his phone went off again.

Russ? Lauren texted.

"Dude, hey. I was just joking." Tom held his hand out. "Even if Jason is gay it doesn't make you gay. You're getting laid."

Yes, he was getting laid. Laid with his two best friends, one who happened to be a man. What did that mean? More than that, what did the three of them mean? Once again the phone vibrated.

I think I need to finish some calls.
Lauren let him off the hook. *Russ needs to work.*

He didn't need to be in the same room as Lauren to know she had her lower lip pursed out even if she was trying to smile. All he wanted to do was go to them. Both of them.

Russ needs something else. Jason prodded.

He nodded. Yes, he needed something else, but he wasn't sure what. This wasn't as easy as bringing his ancient components to life. *I'll be home in twenty-five.* RS

Jason glared at his phone when Russell's ring tone chimed. His friend better not

be on the way here. Actually, Russell shocked him by agreeing to throw down his tie and leave. He supposed it was testament to what great orgasms could accomplish.

He tossed his pencil aside, stepping back from his canvas to assess his work. The creative juices were literally and figuratively flowing ever since little Laurie crawled through his trio tunnel. His two best friends and sex combined better than oil on canvas, or should he say were stunning in oil on canvas.

The only problem was, this wasn't supposed to be what he was creating. Not technically.

He didn't have enough art for a show, and his agent continued to try to get him

to do contract work. Art for hire.

Yes, he considered the projects, especially after his disastrous exhibit. Of course, for weeks he didn't even enter the studio. He couldn't create a thing, not even a straight line.

Then one Sunday afternoon inspiration hit. Not that he didn't think of this before, but this Sunday possessed a different energy.

That Sunday they all hung around the house and decided to watch movies. He tried to paint, sketch, anything, but ended up in the family room with his two best friends. He noticed the three of them went out solo less and less. Lauren sat between them, her arms interlinked in

both his and Russell's. An innocent gesture, probably one she made a million times over the years.

At Lauren's touch, he relaxed, put his feet up on the coffee table and almost reached down and grabbed her hand. It was natural, right, and he leaned up to find Russell staring down at her hand as well.

Since second grade they shared everything.

Well, almost everything.

Neither of them ever had a successful relationship, maybe because they didn't share.

The moment he cemented the idea in his head he went to the studio to draw.

His phone went off a second time

jolting him out of his thoughts. He prepared himself for battle and read the text message.

*You said you'd get everything ready .
Home in ten open the wine. RS*

Don't text and drive. He typed back and shook his head. To this day, Russell felt the need to initial all his texts as if they were an official correspondence. He made one quick swipe with his pencil, covered up his latest masterpiece in waiting and dashed out of his studio. They decided to eat before the night's festivities.

Stop light. Turn off the crockpot.
RS

K. He hit send and went into the

kitchen, pulling the crockpot plug out of the wall. Lauren only used the crockpot about two times a year when she got on some housewife kick. He didn't really understand the crockpot. No matter what one made, or the ingredients used, everything tasted exactly the same, but this was the first time Russell used the crockpot.

He lifted the lid and let the steam out trying to figure out if Russell knew some magic about crockpot cookery when his phone went off again.

Put the lid back on. RS

He slammed the lid down, almost dropping it as to not to get caught by the crockpot police and backed up toward the cupboard to get the wine. How did

Russell know these things? More importantly why did Russell use the crockpot?

This morning he came out of the shower to find Russell playing happy homemaker dicing onions and cubing beef. Jason wanted to suggest they all go out tonight, they hadn't really left the house all together since they went to the art gallery. Both he and Russell made milk and condom runs, and every time Russell went he came back with some sort of ingredients to make dinner.

He got the corkscrew and pondered the week's menu thus far. Steak, spaghetti, chicken Marsala, breakfast for dinner, and tonight's crockpot

extravaganza. Why did Russell use the crockpot? Dinner was way too planned.

Once more his phone needed attention.

Home in five I hope we have wine : -

)

He ground his teeth together. Lauren should not be texting and driving. When she drove she shouldn't be doing anything else but driving. He even toyed with the idea of taking the mp3 player out of her car. Something about Lauren and driving didn't mix. Over the years she suffered her fender benders and close calls, and her job consisted of a lot of driving. Everyday he cringed when she left. There was many a day he went with her to work knowing he

would worry until she returned. The anxiety became worse ever since they were together.

He lifted his finger and went to chide Lauren for texting while driving, but then decided not to fuel her female mind's need to answer back. Instead, he opened the wine, got down the glasses and stalked the door.

Exactly ten minutes after Russell texted he would be home, his car came down the street, and he pulled into his spot in the driveway.

The slam of Russell's car door echoed outside, and at last the jingle of his keys.

Jason crossed his arms.

The door opened and Russell stopped short right in front of him. "Hello."

Jason pointed at him.

"Did you open the wine?" Russell swatted his hand away and put his bag down.

He nodded.

Russell took off his suit jacket. It used to be that after setting his laptop case aside he would yank his tie off, but since Monday Lauren had been taking the tie off, and now his friend waited for her to do it.

"How's dinner?" Russell reached up for his tie and stopped in midair.

"Why don't you tell me? You made it." He grinned.

"Did you already dip into the wine?"
Russell leaned forward.

He met his friend nose to nose. "Why did you use the crockpot?"

Russell swallowed. "Because I thought we might be hungry for dinner."

Before he got the chance to ask why they couldn't go out to assuage their hunger, the alarm beeped on Lauren's car. They both turned like dogs in heat anticipating their master's return. He frowned at his own analogy and then remembered why he really frowned. Miss text and drive.

Lauren bounded up the porch stairs. "Hi!"

Russell held his arms out. "Honey

you're home."

A joke from Russell coupled with crockpot cookery made Jason wonder if maybe his best friend was nesting. Russell was a man who needed to be in a relationship.

Rather than giving Russell a hug, she hoisted her purse higher on her shoulder and grabbed his tie. She pulled him down and gave him a peck while she unknotted the tie, pulling it out from around his collar.

Russell rewarded Lauren's attention by giving her another kiss, this one a bit more than a peck, followed by him taking her bag.

It was always weird watching a couple do their thing, but in this case

Jason was part of it, and he straightened up in anticipation of his own homecoming ritual.

Normally, or what was the new normally, Lauren would come up to him, ask him how the art went, and brush his bangs aside. Bang brushing had been done his entire life from a variety of people except for the one summer he shaved his head and the winter it took to grow it back. However, Lauren's technique was special, she used her nails and licked her lips. Talk about getting those juices flowing.

After she did her tie removing and her bang pushing, they would have dinner and head straight to the bedroom.

It wasn't a bad routine, but they were becoming routine. He wondered if anyone else noticed.

She went to him, her arm lifting, nails primed for premium bang brushing. "You didn't answer my text."

Shit. The text. The text in the car. "Yes, speaking of the text." He caught her hand.

"What text?" Russell put her bag down and closed the door.

"The text she sent me asking me if we had wine and telling me she was five minutes away." He held her arm up as if he were playing keep away, but in this case he was only playing keep away with himself and his bangs. Therefore, this was a game he was losing, but like

the crockpot, it needed to be dealt with. "That would mean she was driving when she sent the text."

"Lauren Marie Redmond!" The use of her full name coming from Russell said it all.

She flinched and pursed her lower lip out.

"Tell her to put that away." Russell pointed at her mouth.

He wanted to tell her to get to licking her lips, but in order to have her lick her lips, he needed to make sure she remained attached to them. "We don't want you texting and driving."

"Or looking at your phone and driving." Russell began counting items

off his fingers. "Or touching your phone and driving."

"I'm a sales rep." The pout left and she lifted her chin. "I have work to do on the phone."

"Speaking of which." He elbowed Russell. "She shouldn't take orders while driving."

"You guys are crazy! I have a job to do, orders to take, texts to write, calls to answer." She struggled to get her hand back.

"I've seen how you write orders." He brushed his own bangs back to wipe the sweat off his brow. "You never have a pen, then there's the paper issue, and then there's the actual writing where you struggle to make it legible."

"Jason!" She shook her arm.

"Last time I watched you take an order in the car you wrote it in lipstick on your window and swerved, and that doesn't count the ticket you got for being on your phone without a headset or when you rammed into the curb because you were reading a text and my dad had to get rid of the dent before your boss found out." This was also around the time he started going to work with her.

She gasped. "You promised not to tell!"

"Oh my God!" Russell took her other hand, held it up and turned to him. "Why would you tell me that?"

"Because I know and now you have

to know." He puffed out his chest.

"This is going to make me crazy. Now I'm going to be at work picturing everything Lauren can do in the car to try to get herself hurt, injured or killed!"

"Hurt and injured are the same thing." She tapped her foot.

"That's not funny." Russell pulled her closer and spoke in a low tone one would use for laying down the law to a teenager who missed their curfew. "No more anything but speaking on your headset in your car, if they need to order they will understand you are driving and will call back."

She didn't say a word.

"Lauren." Russell narrowed his eyes. She shifted her focus up to the

ceiling.

"Do we make ourselves clear?" Jason stepped into the role as well.

"You told Russell after you promised not to." She sucked in her cheeks.

"*We* won't have you getting distracted while driving, we like you alive." Jason wagged his finger at her. "Things are different now."

Though she didn't brush his bangs back, she did lick her lips. She lowered her eyes and stopped fighting them. "I love that you're upset. I won't do it anymore."

Both he and Russell took a breath. They nodded at each other and released her.

"I made dinner and we do have wine." Russell rubbed her shoulder.

"We've turned into quite the homebodies." Lauren laughed. "I don't remember the last time we went out."

Jason went to push his bangs in his eyes and let Lauren tend to him while he guided her into the dining room, but paused. Apparently he wasn't the only one getting a bit home bound.

"Who needs to go out when we have everything right here."

Before Lauren answered, Russell pulled her in and kissed her, complete with bending her back and opening his mouth.

Jason got his answers. Up until this

moment, he was the instigator of their sex life with Lauren coming in second. Russell lagged behind but always caught up.

This wasn't a sexual or romantic kiss. He knew his friend well. This kiss was a topic changing kiss, one to catch Lauren off guard and make her forget what they were talking about.

"Russell." Lauren's face lit up with color, and she pressed his palm to the side of his face.

"I missed you today. Why do you think I came home early?" He gave her a light peck. "I don't know about you, but I could use that wine."

Lauren nodded.

"Well, since we're starting the

evening like this, let me get in the act." Jason took her into his arms and kissed her. After being primed by Russell, her mouth was already hot and ready, but the chilly evening air still clung to her clothes.

"Let's eat." Russell clapped. "As I said we have everything right here."

Jason held out his arm, and watched Russell trot into the kitchen. His instinct was right. Russell didn't want them to leave the house. Interesting.

Lauren took his arm, but before they followed she tugged him.

"You paged."

She stood up on her tiptoes. "Do you really think things are different now?"

He raised his eyebrows at her question. Their girl threw out her hook and went fishing.

"Yes, things are different."

The smile she gave him could have been seen on a star three light years away.

They joined Russell in the kitchen as he dished out his delicacy.

"Wait until you see what I have planned for dinner tomorrow." Russell handed Lauren a glass of wine. "We have everything right here."

Yes, interesting.

Chapter Eight

One shard of sunlight cut through Russell's eyelids. Not ready to wake up, he squeezed his eyes shut. Last night in their haste, they forgot to close the blinds all the way. His internal clock told him they had to get up soon. With Lauren's head on his stomach, he lifted one knee to shield her from the light that tried to kill him.

He caught his hand in Lauren's hair. She moaned, a mixture of sleep and satisfaction, and curled her leg around his causing his morning erection to swell.

Weekday mornings in their house were chaotic with everyone trying to get ready and rush to start their day. They hadn't explored any AM escapades yet, maybe because it took too long with three of them involved. It was a 33 percent increase in orgasms that needed to be achieved from normal two-person sex. Of course, it was probably a 100 percent increase in enjoyment.

He forced his eyes open and turned. Jason had one arm slung around Lauren's waist. If his friend were experiencing the same morning he was, his erection would be pressing right on her backside.

"Oh man." Now with visions of orgasms in his head, his cock became

fully engorged. His only hope was to unravel himself and rush to the shower. He would never be able to work like this, and there wasn't enough time for three orgasms.

He moved the covers aside.

"Russ." Lauren held him in place.

"No."

Her hand was right near him making the ache even worse. "Let me take a shower and I'll make breakfast."

"That will take forever. Just stay here." She shook her head, her face rubbing over his stomach.

He arched his back. "Lauren, I'll be fast." Yes, right after about two strokes in the shower.

She ran her hand down his side, her

forearm grazing the head of his cock over the sheet.

"Okay, time to get up." He pushed himself up on his elbows.

She pulled the sheet down causing his erection to stand at attention right in her face. "You're already up."

"Lauren."

"Do you always wake up like this? Is that why you rush out of bed every morning?" One fingertip circled over the head as she teased him. After their week together she knew exactly how he woke up.

"There's never enough time." He leaned his head back as she trailed her nails up and down. Light enough to

make him shudder, not hard enough to satisfy. "I'll get up and make some breakfast."

"You can't go to work like this." She wrapped her hand around him. "You'll be all cranky. We can have a quickie, especially if you thought there was time for your breakfast."

He was going to protest, say he wasn't cranky, explain to her his theory about thirty three percent more orgasms, or reach over to the nightstand and grab a condom, but before he could do anything she encompassed him with her mouth. "Jeez!"

"You do wake up hard every morning." Jason yawned, leaned up and moved her hair aside. "So do I."

"Oh God." Both of them watched her suck him off. Her head bobbing up and down. Her mouth was slick, warm and tight around him. He squirmed as her lips and tongue tickled and taunted him.

Jason dipped his head down and kissed the back of her neck. "Suck him harder. He's so horny right now."

Lauren obeyed Jason's command, using her hand to grip him, extending each stroke.

Perfection. Her technique spot on. The right amount of slip, the way she let the sensations grow. "Like that."

"The question is if Lauren wakes up wet. Let's check." Jason's voice lowered. "She's soaking."

Lauren's groan vibrated through his cock, and he knew Jason fingered her.

"Our little Laurie likes sucking you off." Jason reached over and found a condom on his nightstand. "She's needs relief. Let's help her out."

Russell garnered enough strength to snake his hand down to her breast. Her hard nipple greeted his fingertips.

Jason moved her leg up and spooned her, and Russell knew he entered her by the way he grunted and how Lauren grabbed his leg.

The talk stopped as they found their rhythm. Each time Jason thrust into her, she moved down his shaft. As Jason retreated, she did as well. The act of

watching Jason only enhanced this already incredible morning.

The sensations built at a perfect rate, his balls tightened, signaling his release was upon him. "Lauren." He was going to have to let go and needed to warn her.

She didn't let up. In fact, she seemed to suck harder, edging him on.

He shut his eyes, trying to hold off. Did he come in her mouth? He wasn't sure. Neither of them had finished that way with her yet. He twisted the sheet in his fist, he was there, it was going to happen. "Lauren."

"Oh God." Without warning Lauren gasped.

"She's going to come." Jason pounded harder.

"Lauren!" He had to finish. "Lauren, please!"

Once again her mouth was upon him. She went after him, and stiffened as her orgasm hit her, any noise she made stifled by his cock in her mouth, and that was his undoing. He couldn't hold off and released right into her mouth. "Yes!" He lifted his hips and allowed the pulsing relief to take over him, made only more intense by the way she swallowed what he gave her without missing a beat.

"I'm there." Jason pushed himself into her and hung his head down. "Shit." He collapsed off to one side.

The fact he knew that Jason came in

the woman who still had him inside her mouth would have made him hard again if he wasn't spent and satisfied.

The three of them lay there, catching their breath and unraveling themselves from one another.

"Thank you." He didn't want to move. The thoughts about the morning ritual of getting to work didn't matter.

Lauren laughed and turned back to Jason. "Well then I guess I should thank you." Russell stared at her as she rested herself back on his stomach. Her hair was all over the place, her cheeks flushed, and her lips swollen from the workout she gave herself.

"Then I thank the two of you for making my morning boner prize

winning." Jason flopped back on his pillow.

"What is it?" Lauren tilted her chin at him.

"You look nice like that." He frowned not wanting to sound like some tool.

"Aw." She grabbed his hand.

"She looks awesome, and she is solely responsible for two men's orgasms. I bet she sells a ton today." Jason got out of bed and headed for the bathroom.

Russell nodded. "That would be fifty percent more orgasms than the average woman has to deal with on any given morning."

Lauren smiled.

"Well, since she doubled her quota, I say we reward her and take her out for a date tonight," Jason yelled from the bathroom.

Her smile widened.

The relaxation that took over his body instantly vanished. He tensed, but tried to show no sign. What would be expected on this date? How could they both date her? What would people think? He tried to think, but he couldn't refuse. "Okay." He forced his answer out and swallowed.

"That will be fun." She kissed his chest and got out of bed as well.

The sunlight that wanted to murder

him this morning glowed over Lauren outlining her form. "You look nice like that."

She turned to him. "You know. The three of us have thirty-three percent more orgasms than the average bear. I mean bears."

Damn it, she always got it. He wished they didn't have work and could spend the day here raising their quotas. He wished they could just stay here away from everyone and everything.

Jason stuck his head out of the bathroom and held up a washcloth. "Laurie was right, this was a quickie. We have just enough time to soap her up."

Lauren turned and trotted into the

bathroom.

He couldn't refuse.

A rep's lunchtime was sacred, the one or two hours in the middle of the day reserved for the most important accounts or new business. Medical offices closed for a few precious minutes and decision makers were placated with the promises of free sandwiches and sodas.

However, the most coveted of lunches was with the doctor off site. If the MD could be lured to a restaurant, the account was assured. Of course, the dinner ranked above the restaurant

lunch. If you got the dinner, you entered into the physician's inner sanctum, a place only the select few got to visit.

Now, as Lauren sat in a swanky restaurant known more for their name than their food, she realized how many parallels her job had to dating. No wonder she hated dating. The process was merely a means to an end.

She glanced around the custom designed restaurant, waiting for the man who up until last Saturday, she had set her sights on as a potential ending for herself.

Yes, until she crawled through a tunnel of boxes to the two men who meant the world to her, Dr. Gregory Dalton would have been her dream

dinner date leading to her dream man. Now, instead of flutters and jitters at how she would catch his attention as something other than his plumper provider, her stomach cramped in dread. Was she giving everything up for fantasy?

Oh, but what a fantasy. Her body heated at the slightest thought of what was going on in her home after hours. Even now she flooded with a need that only the two of them could quench.

"There's my favorite rep." Flanked by a waiter, Dr. Dalton joined her at the table. Though most everyone else in the restaurant was in a business suit or designer outfit, he sauntered in with his

black scrubs and white doctor's coat. "Sorry I'm late, I needed some air and it started to sprinkle on my walk."

"No worries, I'm used to waiting for doctors." She tried not to make eye contact and reached for the menu.

Dr. Dalton intercepted the shields and handed them back to the waiter. "I can't have anything heavy when I still have thirty patients to see. We'll have some sparkling water with lemon and lime, please make sure it's fresh, and two of your grilled salmon salads, vinegar only. Don't put any bread on the table, and bring us a bowl of the wild strawberries I know the chef puts aside for me." He waved the water away, put his elbows on the table and stared at her.

Before she gave in and glanced at him, she mourned the loss of her lunch. Last time she and Russell went here they shared a gourmet pizza and peach cobbler, and laughed at how they both had to roll back to work.

"I didn't want to spend my limited time with you talking about the menu."

Fine, she peeked. Damn, he was good looking. No, not Jason gorgeous, stuck somewhere between a rock star and a model, and not Russell's chic geek who had no clue how hot he was, this was Dr. Dalton. The man manufactured to be attractive.

Everything about Dr. Dalton was planned, from his slicked back brown

hair, to his flawless skin that wouldn't dare get a blemish or heaven forbid, a wrinkle, to his fit, but not overly muscular body. He didn't fit the mold, he created the mold. Anyone who tried to duplicate him would never be as perfect, only a faded copy.

"What do you want to spend your time talking about?" Her question came out much more high-pitched than intended.

He sat back as the food was served. "Tell me how to make more money."

Every time she sat with this man it turned into a business meeting. Of course, this was business, but until today, she always wanted it to have that little spark, or flirtation that told her to

push the line. Today, a sad bit of relief took over her. At least for right now she was spoken for and by more than one man.

"Last time we met, we talked about including a free syringe if the patient pre-paid for the year. It will get the patients committed and keep them coming in." She sprinkled some vinegar onto her salad and dug in, though she loved blue cheese dressing and hated salmon. Maybe on the way home she would grab some of that yogurt the three of them loved and they could have it in bed. "You'll need to order two-hundred to get the free syringes." The adrenaline rush of a sale took over the fact she

wasn't having dressing, but an ingredient, on her salad.

He took several bites of his dish and nodded. "Do it."

This sale would make her quota, and this was the plastic surgeon every other plastic surgeon tried to emulate. The celebrity doctor who worked on celebrities. Once she let Dr. Dalton's purchase slip, every other Beverly Hills Plastic would be calling her for the same.

"Make sure you make a time to train the girls on how not to screw this up." He squeezed lemon and lime into his water and pushed the plate of wedges toward her.

"I'll do a full training and order some

custom posters." She followed his lead and sipped the sparkling water. The tang of the two different citrus fruits coupled with the bubbles ticked her tongue.

"Refreshing?" He laughed.

"Why do you ask?" In the two years she knew this man he rarely asked questions about her.

"You look like you discovered something." He pushed his plate aside and leaned forward. "Actually, you look different. What are you doing to your skin? You're not cheating on me, are you?"

"Cheating?" She touched her cheek. The only thing she was doing differently

was two men. She fought a smile. Maybe double the amount of orgasms aided the complexion.

"You're not going to Dr. Lawrence are you?" He strummed his fingers on the table.

She supposed professional jealousy was better than nothing, and she shouldn't be even thinking about this with Jason and Russell. "You know I would never let another doc treat me."

"I never treat you." He narrowed his eyes. "You never ask for anything, Botox, laser, not even a microdermabrasion. Why not? Every other rep always asks me to work on her...or him."

Yes, she should be happy. If this

conversation took place last week she would be calling Anne and telling her how Dr. Dalton wanted to work on her.

"I'm not like every other rep."

He rubbed his chin and gave her the bowl of strawberries. "Maybe I should have ordered you some whipped cream."

"Excuse me?" Though she heard him, she asked anyway.

"Have you had any work done?"

Her stomach spiraled at the way he didn't repeat his words. She should be thrilled. "No. Just sunscreen."

"I need to get going. Do you mind driving me back to the office?" He motioned for the waiter and stood.

The waiter rushed over and she

handed him her credit card. "Sure."

Dr. Dalton checked his phone and waited for her by the entrance while she signed the check.

The valet brought her car around, and they got in. Had she had known she was going to have the doctor in the car she would have borrowed something from the Jason's parent's dealership. No, she wouldn't have, she had Jason and Russell, or did she? She wasn't sure how this was all going to work once they got past the running home and having sex stage. Was this the only stage? How were they going to do this? Questions began to build up in her mind, and she didn't realize she rolled away from the curb until the honk of a horn stopped her.

She slammed on her breaks. A blue sedan swerved around her, and she closed her eyes. Jason. Russell. Dr. Dalton in the car.

"That guy's an ass." Dr. Dalton put his hand on her shoulder. "Take a breath, you're shaking. Look at me."

Her whole body trembled and a weakness took over her, but she managed to face him.

"Take it slow and then come back up to the office for a while." He patted her. "Don't worry, you're with a doctor."

She inhaled and somehow managed to pull without hitting anything. One day she would learn to concentrate on

driving.

"Make sure you go to Vegas for the Plastic Surgery trade show." Even in the rainy weather, he put his sunglasses on.

Her boss had given her the option of going to the show with the Nevada rep, but with her sales she could opt out and she hated manning the booth. "Why?"

"Let's plan on doing dinner up there." He lifted his phone to his face.

The inner sanctum.

She should be happy.

Chapter Nine

A blast of icy, wet air jolted Jason up from the couch.

"Hey!" He caught sight of a dripping Russell out of the corner of his eye, rummaged around for the remote and turned down the tunes. "It's raining?"

Russell looked back out the door. "It's been pouring since about lunch."

"I never heard it." He pursed his lips and watched the water coming down in a near solid block. Rain meant traffic. Traffic meant they would have to leave earlier for their night's activities. "Go change."

"I'm beat." Russell dropped his computer case. "I hope Lauren's okay."

"She probably got caught on a call." He pointed toward the direction of the bedroom. "Dry clothes are that way." They had no time for Russell to wait for Lauren's tie untying. Somehow Russell took longer than Lauren to get ready, and Jason had a full night planned, dinner out, a trip down to the club where some of their friends of friends were playing some tunes, and then home for a little triple play.

"At six thirty?" Russell dug his cell phone out of his pocket and walked away.

"What?" He turned toward the

clock. Last time he checked it was 4:30. He was in his studio and decided he needed to clear his mind, got ready and turned on the music to wait for his other halves. Well, other thirds. He returned to the couch to find his phone in the cushion. A pair of headlights glowed through the shade right as he went to call Laurie.

He threw his phone aside, opened the door and waved her in. "Come on it's raining."

A blur of black bulges trudged to the door, it didn't say hello to him or brush his bangs away. It only passed by, dropping a handbag, a coat and a tote bag on their tile entryway.

"Where have you been?" Russell

returned and tossed Lauren a towel.

"Why are you in sweats?" Jason waved at him. Weather or not, his friend wasn't getting out of going out.

"Three hours to get home." She caught the towel.

"I had a feeling. Why didn't you answer your phone?" Russell took the towel from her and began drying her hair.

"It slipped under my seat, and I was having such a hard time seeing I didn't want to reach for it." Her voice came out muffled by Russell's ministrations. "You made me promise not to mess with the phone."

"Why aren't you dressed?" Jason

slammed the door and joined Russell in Lauren's hair drying. At least their woman listened to them about the phone.

"I am dressed." Russell peeled Lauren out of her sweater. "She's soaked and needs to change."

Jason licked his lips at the sight of Lauren in her beige work bra. He went to remove that as well. Maybe they could forgo dinner, help Lauren warm up and then go out.

"I'm dying." She trembled. "I think I'm dying."

"Go get into something not wet, and I'll pour some drinks." Russell rubbed her back.

"Can I put on your eagle sweatshirt and the blue pants?" She looked up at

him.

"If that will make you happy." Russell bent down, kissed her nose and wrapped the towel around her neck.

"It will help." She kissed Russell in return and dashed off.

"Why did you tell her to get into erection killing clothes?" Jason crossed his arms. He didn't even get his bangs tended to and he purposely wore them in his eyes. "Speaking of which, why are you in erection hiding clothes. We have plans."

Russell held her sweater. "If our plans consist of dinner delivery, work and bill paying then I think these clothes will do fine. I am behind on everything,

this is the perfect time to catch up."

"Just wait for Lauren, she will talk you into it."

"Talk who into what?" On queue, Lauren returned in the oversized under sexy outfit.

"The Degenerates are playing in the valley, I thought we would grab that German food you love out there." No doubt the promise of apple strudel would persuade her. "It's that or bills and business in sweats." He inhaled getting ready to watch her grab Russell's arm to drag him back to the bedroom to get in something more appropriate. Heck, he would help them change.

"Can we get spaghetti and cannolis from DaVinci's?" She wrapped her

arms around herself and her hands disappeared inside the sleeves. "Then maybe after we settle our financial affairs we can cuddle and watch our show in the bedroom. They're having a marathon tonight."

"That sounds like a deal." Russell high-fived her.

A marathon of reality television and takeout trumped the night he planned? Not even their normal rush home, eat and have sex? "No, there is no deal. That is not the game we are playing."

"We cannot go out tonight." Russell shook his head.

Jason was no stranger to his tone. If Russell decreed they weren't leaving,

they weren't leaving. He didn't even have Lauren to back him up. Now she was wiping her face and yawning. Once he got them going they would be fine. "You guys just need a second wind."

"The wind blew away with the rain and the lightning." Russell crossed his arms.

"Fine." He tried his plan and it failed. They would never go out together. Screw this, he would go out alone. He sat around all day waiting for them while they were out, now it was his turn. "I think I'll call Steve, you guys are exhausted and I'm wound up." Maybe he didn't need them to go out, maybe he just needed some air. Maybe with the threat of leaving they would come.

"I'll call DaVinci's, I left my phone in the bedroom. See you later." She glanced at him, then Russell, and left.

Without making any eye contact, Russell reached around him to get his computer case. "I have work to do."

Great, now he had the great walk away without looking at him. "You're pissed." Jason checked his pocket for his wallet.

"Why would I be pissed?"

He ground his teeth together. The sheer question meant Russ was pissed, and now stupid Jason had to decipher some great esoteric reason. "We don't all have to be together every second."

"No, we don't." Russell answered

too fast as he put his bag on the back of the couch and pulled out some papers.

Lauren may be freezing, but heat overtook him. "You're a jerk. We could all just go, but you have to send everyone to change into a pajama party!"

"I'm a jerk?" Russell threw his bag aside. "How exactly am I a jerk when I work a ten hour day, drive over an hour to go less than six miles to get home, and I still have shit to do?"

"I just wanted to go out with the two of you." He fought the urge to grab Russell and shake him.

"Lauren drove three hours in the rain!" Russell faced him. "Didn't you see how tired she was? She's going to be asleep after a half of a cannoli and

the second episode in her epic marathon. She's been out since before you got up, but I'm assuming you still expect her to perform acrobatics tonight."

"Don't say you don't want that." He backed toward the door.

"See you later." Russell plopped down on the couch.

"Later." He was allowed to leave the house if he wanted.

Russell started flipping through his mail.

Jason opened the door, the rain fell hard enough to cause water to pool up the first step of the porch. He spied his car. It looked like paint dripped down,

distorting his image of his vehicle. It would be a bitch to get to the club. Los Angeles fell apart in the rain, it was as if the inhabitants of the city couldn't believe that the forces that be would allow water to fall from the sky. Lauren drove home from the north valley in this? "You know, I was in the house all day."

"Then you should go out." Russell tore an envelope open.

"Are you sure you don't want to go?" He grabbed the doorjamb.

"I wasn't in the house all day. I'm exhausted. I may not even make it through my whole cannoli before I crash." Russell unfolded a paper. "Do you have your stack of bills on the

desk?"

"I can get it." He turned to go back inside.

"Don't bother." Out of nowhere Russell brushed the mail aside and stood. "I think I'm going to take the night off."

"Maybe we can take a rain check for tomorrow night." He needed something from his best friend, any sign he would be seen with them.

Russell only stared at him.

"I'll be back." He inched toward the door.

Without another word, Russell raised his hand and went toward the kitchen.

Jason walked into the rain.

"Hey!" Steve waved and made his way through the crowd to Jason's table.

Jason lifted his chin and shook his friend's hand as they both sat. "How's it going?"

"This rain is insane." Steve pulled off his jacket. "I was happy for the pit stop."

"I thought we would go over to the valley and see the band." His voice washed away like his enthusiasm for this night.

The drive six blocks away took him twenty-five minutes. Even with his

wipers in high gear, visibility was low, or more like nonexistent. The image of Lauren and Russell driving in this made him itch as if he were about to break out in hives. Then again, him thinking how tired they were and how he hoped they were okay turned the hives into blisters. What happened to seeing what would happen? Doing this because they needed to and to open his creative mind?

Steve narrowed his eyes. "You want to go to the Valley?"

No. "Yes." He downed the rest of his beer.

"Dude that's going to take forever, not to mention we'll probably get killed driving over the hill, not to mention I got to get home." Steve motioned for a

waitress and pointed at Jason's drink.

"What do you have to get home for?" He strummed his fingers on the table. They were both artists and set their own schedules.

"You know, the usual, work, bills, all that." Steve took his drink from the waitress.

Was Friday night bills and boring night? "What did you do all day?"

"I went to a gallery to set up a show, I did some work in my studio."

Jason chewed on his lip while he considered Steve's answer. "That's it?"

"What did you do all day?" Steve returned the question.

What did he to all day? Watched TV,

took a shower, listened to music, made a can of soup, stared at the studio, took a nap. He sat up. Hold on, there had to be more. "I worked on some concepts. I got some offers for contract work." He couldn't even get the words out without the sting of vomit threatening the back of his throat.

Steve laughed. "So you did nothing?"

Not wanting to see what was in front of him, he shut his eyes. It wasn't Steve, it was the fact that he did nothing all day. If he rewound the last few days, they were all the same. He didn't even pay his own bills. Russell managed them.

A high-pitched beep caused him to open his eyes.

Steve lifted his phone. "Dude, I hate to cut this short." He stopped talking to type something.

"What?" Jason reached for his own phone, nothing. No wonder he wasn't tired or rain weary.

"This girl wants to know if I want to get out of the rain and watch some reality show marathon with her." He grinned. "You understand."

"A girl?" Now the reality show marathon sounded amazing. Warm, dry, Lauren, Russell. This whole going to the club thing lost its luster right around the time Lauren looked up at him with those big, weary eyes.

"Well, I had to move on once your

Lauren dissed me." He shoved his phone back in his pocket. "Speaking of Lauren."

Jason stared straight ahead. If he had done something, anything, rather than nothing, he would have been tired tonight too. Instead of running into the rain, he could have been licking cannoli cream off of Lauren's fingers, not sitting here having a soda in sub arctic temperatures.

She came home looking like a wet puppy. As always, Russell stepped in and took care of the situation. Warm clothes, towel-dried hair. He wanted to do that as well. Tonight he should have been the one rushing around to get them comfortable. They worked all day.

Them? They? He put his hand to his forehead.

Steve snapped his fingers.

"I thought you were leaving." How did fun and experiments turn into warm clothes and cuddles? His stomach bottomed out. The other night when Lauren went fishing she wanted to hear they were together, the same night he realized Russell wouldn't be seen in public with both of them.

"After I get an answer."

"Fine." Jason looked inside his soda glass. If he took one more sip he may chuck the whole thing up. Were she and Russell together now eating in bed and watching that show? Were they

sleeping? Where they paying bills? Maybe they decided to forget all of that and make love without him. He pounded his fist to the table. "What?"

"Are you and Lauren..." Steve gave him a toothy grin. "I mean it's about time, but..."

"But what?" But, he wasn't good enough for her. But, he left her to come to this stupid diner. But, he did nothing all day.

"I always thought it would be Russell, but..."

"But what?" There were too many buts in this conversation, and he was an ass.

"The night of my exhibit I could have sworn it looked like both of you..."

Steve raised his eyebrows. "Is it a duo or a trio?"

Wait. This was what he wanted. What he waited for, the questions, the speculation, the rumors. He looked down at the table. This is why he wanted to go out. Not only to get Russell out of his shell, but to see what would happen. "What do you think it is?" He fought the need to shake his head at himself.

"I know what I hope it is." Steve laughed. "Though I always thought two girls would be better."

He was about to tell him not to knock it until he tried it, but Steve filled in the blanks.

"But if you really liked the girl, watching her get it from someone else would be hot."

Hot wasn't the word for it. Beyond hot, a scorching volcano that turned rocks into liquid in its path. This was the type of conversation he should be having. "Have you ever done it?"

"No." Steve scooted his chair closer to the table. "I always knew Lauren was wild. Does she come with both of you?"

Sometimes more. Her orgasms seemed different with each of them and he wondered if they felt different. With him she screamed, with Russell she tended to grab him. He rubbed his chin.

"Holy crap you are both doing her."

Steve slid his glass aside. "Do you do each other too?"

Jason was still back on the question about her coming for both of them.

"It's okay if that's how you swing, I always thought so." Steve's voice became low. "I've experimented with that."

Jason swallowed. This may be more than he bargained for.

"You know erotic art is hot. It is what's in. Sex literally does sell, and it seems as if you have a whole canvas in front of you." Steve licked his lips. "Have you taken it there?"

Visions of Steve's exhibit flashed before him. The show was packed, people clamoring to see the work.

Erotic art was indeed gathering a ton of attention right now. Yes, Russell and Lauren were inspiration. Their situation was opening up his mind. He did a little sketching, but never with thoughts of doing anything further. His mouth dried out. What would his other two thirds think?

"Maybe that's what you need to get you out of your slump." Steve hit the table.

Jason grabbed the arms of the chair. Erotic art, but truly erotic. Three times as erotic. A hit.

Exposing them like that would be a violation in every way.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." Jason struggled to get the word out.

"Where are Lauren and Russell now?"

"Home."

"Oh." Steve turned away.

"What's that for?"

"Do you guys go for twosomes too? Like are they home now doing each other without you?"

Up until a few minutes ago, he never considered Lauren and Russell together without him. It was the unspoken rule they did this together, or so he thought. Actually, the only rule was they made the rules up as they went along. He crossed his arms. "You know, I'm free to

go out if I want to." Rules denoted a relationship, not fun, not art. Nothing erotic.

"Dude, as long as you're cool with it." Steve shrugged his shoulders. "So what are you going to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're sleeping with your two best friends, its obviously more than some grand experiment or you would be spewing your guts right now. How do you go out? What's it like?"

Steve voiced every one of his, Lauren's and Russell's questions. He didn't realize he stood until he stared down at his friend. Maybe it was also the unwritten rule they hung together and he left. Could it also be the unwritten or

written rule that he do something other than sit all day? "Don't you have some marathon to watch?"

"That I do." Steve stood and tossed some bills on the table. "I got this, I couldn't rent your kind of entertainment."

Entertainment, art, creativity. Life was a lump of clay waiting to be molded. "I have to go." He stepped away from the table.

Steve caught him. "If you need a fourth let me know."

"Thanks for the drink." He left with a little more than he planned for his grand artistic work.

"You're not watching." Lauren poked Russell's shoulder.

"I'm not sure this is something you have to watch. You sort of absorb it, like poison or smog." Russell gave in and decided to pay the bills, but he did it in bed with Lauren, spaghetti and a drink. He was fun personified.

"You know you like it." She put her plate on the nightstand.

"All they do is argue, and the producers put them in situations so they fight. It makes me thankful you are not one of them." He shook his head. "On the other hand, they could go film in my family's house and get the same result."

"We could be a reality show," she whispered. "An x-rated one, but a reality show."

"Hey." He moved his laptop aside and took her hand. "You okay?" Since Jason left she barely spoke unless it was about the television show.

She nodded.

Her lack of words told him she wasn't okay. "I think this situation is just going to take some getting used to."

"Is that how you feel?"

He stared at her. If he honestly thought about it, since this started he wondered what it would be like if it were just the two of them. He thought it would be better, but now he would have

to admit he felt as if something was missing. The house was too quiet, the sizzle in the air dialed down to a simmer, and the magic vanished. There had to be something wrong with him. "Come here." He pulled her to him not wanting to give her any more details.

She scooted over and studied him, her eyes darting to different parts of his face.

"What is it?"

She removed his glasses and smiled.

He blinked her into focus. "Now, what is it?"

She tilted her head left then right. "I'm not sure if I like you better with or without your glasses."

"What do you mean?" He put his

palm to her cheek.

"Well, when you have your glasses on, you're Russell, the man who is a Solution Architect. Computers bow to your every whim."

He focused on her lips. "What about with them off?"

"When you have them off, you're usually going to kiss me."

"Am I allowed to kiss you without Jason here?" He ran his thumb along her lower lip. Right now, he should be devouring her. Not sure what stopped him, he moved his face closer to hers.

"I don't know, are you? Maybe we should ask Jason."

"Jason would say its one of the many

things we need to figure out."

He retrieved his glasses and found their missing third in the doorway holding two bags.

Neither of them moved.

"You know you were right, the rain is a bitch, couldn't get to the Valley." He approached the bed.

Russell ground his teeth together. Leave it to his best friend to come in like nothing happened. The man couldn't address a thing, not even an envelope.

He put the bags down and pulled off his jacket. "Just the few miles I drove exhausted me."

Russell focused on Lauren. She stared down at the blanket fingering the satin edge. "Try it in rush hour."

"Touché." Jason kicked off his shoes and reached down in the bags. "I think what I meant to say was the Valley wasn't the same without you." He stood up to reveal a bouquet of flowers and a six-pack of imported German beer.

Lauren glanced at him and then to Jason.

Jason held the flowers out to her.

"Thank you." Lauren took them and put her nose in the center.

"Sorry I bailed, but maybe I needed to I find out where I needed to be." Jason handed him the beer.

Russell nodded and grabbed the bottles. This was meant for him, Jason preferred Japanese beer.

Jason reached in his pocket, handed him a bottle opener and motioned toward his side of the bed. "May I join you for cold spaghetti and a hefty dose of reality television?"

"The bed is big enough for all of us."
Lauren pulled the cover down.

Jason tossed his pants aside.

The bed bounced as he joined them. Jason put his arm around Lauren and flicked him in the head.

"What?" Not sure what emotion to have, he swiped Jason's hand away. He didn't want to be won over with flowers and beer. Jason needed to do something other than push and placate.

"Just wanted to do that." Once more

Jason reached over the edge of the bed. "Now to the matters at hand. I have some things to do tomorrow."

A flash of yellow caught the corner of his eye, and he turned to find Jason holding a yellow pad and pen. "Did you go to the office supply store?" Except for college, he never saw Jason with anything other than art paper. Jason at the office supply store on a Friday night concerned him.

"No, the lady at the liquor store gave it to me when I asked her for a bag to write on. I stole the pen and took a penny from the take a penny thing."

Both he and Lauren leaned over to see what Jason wrote.

"He has very neat writing." Lauren

grabbed Russell's leg.

Russell scanned the list. "If you're going to be painting you'll need canvas."

"Nope, no canvas." Jason held the pen. "Where do we need to go?"

"You don't have any blank canvas." While Jason may placate, Russell managed

"I am aware, but I thank you for looking out for my inventory." Jason hit the pen against the paper. "Does anyone else need anything tomorrow? I am about errands."

"I need to go office supply store." Lauren wrinkled her nose. "And you don't have any canvas."

"I am not painting on canvas, there

are many mediums."

"Jason." Something was up and he squeezed his fist tight.

"I want to repair Lauren's room from our get together disaster, and then I thought I would do that paint detail work on that car model you found."

Lauren's mouth opened, but no words exited. Russell was sure his expression matched hers. It had been so long since he asked Jason to paint his vintage model that he put the car away and cycled to another project. As far as the room painting, he hadn't even begun harping on that one.

"I actually tried to remember everything I promised either one of you, but feel free to add to the list." He

flipped over to the second page of the tablet.

This list consisted of major and minor deeds he took on but didn't complete. Fixing a tile in his bathroom, helping Lauren put photos in her photo album, buffing out the scratch in Russell's car, returning a car to his parent's dealership.

"Jason." Lauren twisted the blanket in her hand.

"Are you sure you want to do all that this weekend?" Russell still didn't know what emotion to have.

"Actually you know what I want to do?" Jason took Lauren's flowers and moved them to the bottom of the bed.

"What?" Lauren stared up at her blond god, stars in her eyes.

"I want Russell to finish what you started before I walked in here." He licked his lips.

"What are you talking about?" Russell handed him a beer.

"Kiss her, so I can." Jason took the beer and tilted his head.

"What are we doing?" Maybe Jason knew the answer where he didn't. Why were they upset when he left without him? Why didn't things feel right until he was here? Why was Jason remembering every errand?

"We are doing this. Then tomorrow we are going out on errands together and

next week the two of us are going to escort Laurie to her annual charity function. It will be our debut." Jason rubbed his hands together.

Finally, Lauren smiled. More than a smile, she glowed. The light coming from her could illuminate Los Angeles.

"Kiss her." Jason clapped.

Russell froze. Errands meant public places with the three of them on a whole new level. While that may be okay, what about the party? What about a debut? The sweet warm sensation that surrounded him while Lauren assessed him with and without his glasses, and dare he say the relief that encompassed him when Jason returned, turned to a knot right in his stomach. They would

be a freak show.

"For the record, I think that we need to reserve this for the three of us." Jason motioned between them.

"Even though I take both of you to that party every year, I would love to go off show with the two of you this year." Lauren pursed her lips toward him.

Lauren didn't mind, why should she? With two men, she would be the envy of everyone there. On the other hand, people wouldn't think the same of him and Jason. However, he couldn't keep them hidden if he wanted this.

Her perfectly plump lips lured him. Unable to resist, he connected their lips with a light kiss of confusion.

"Damn it, Russ, kiss her. How are we going to get her out of that sweatshirt with a peck? We have to warm her up." Jason pushed him back and crushed his mouth to hers.

He watched his best friend take hold of Lauren's chin. Their mouths opened, and he could tell the exact moment that Jason guided her tongue to his by the way she moaned and tightened her hold on his hand.

As if his body was trained to react, his erection began to swell. The simple act of watching both satisfying and arousing. They did need to reserve this for the three of them.

Jason broke the kiss and motioned

toward her. "I've primed the pump for you."

This time he went for it. One moment her lips were on Jason, the next on his.

"I'm glad we waited for Jason." She spoke into his open mouth.

"Me too." He helped Jason rid her of his sweatshirt. Yes, they had to wait for Jason, it was the three of them or none of them, and he wanted this.

He better get ready for their debut.

Chapter Ten

The morning right before Jason opened his eyes was a magic time. With the day not yet begun, and reality still at an arm's reach, the universe held potential. Creativity blossomed, creating colors and images he could later recreate on paper or canvas.

Today was one of those mystical mornings. The steady breathing of all three of them wanted to lull him back to sleep. He opened his eyes to find Lauren slung over him, her hair over her face creating a delightfully distorted

viewpoint of the world. Fuzzy and off kilter, shining gold and brown, and in a flash, inspiration was born.

He brushed her hair aside and slid out from under her, kissing her hand before placing it back on the bed and covering her up.

"Jase," she moaned.

"Studio." He didn't need to say more.

She gave him a thumb up and turned over into Russell's arms.

He backed out and nodded. Though he wanted to stay with them and take in the couple of hours before their work called, art wanted him. A welcome alarm clock.

With one pit stop into his room to pull on pants and a sweatshirt, he made

his way into the studio.

He sat down at the table, took a fresh piece of parchment and a handful of pencils, and resisted the need to turn the computer on. Now was time for art, and he ran his hand over the paper.

The pencil hit the parchment and he closed his eyes. The picture in his mind remained, and he drew a line. No, that wasn't right. His vision didn't have lines. No corners or sharp edges. He erased the line, hating the way the shadow of the mark remained, but reminding himself this was merely a sketch. There would be time to refine later, he only needed to concern himself with getting something on the paper.

He changed colors to a peach pencil. The mark of the other pencil remained. Maybe he should start by covering it. His heart began to pound, his muscles tightened.

"Wait." He put the pencil down. Before he started, he needed to think of a theme. What was he going to show? He took a breath, moved his neck from side to side.

He sat back. The paper was one giant pool waiting for him to jump in, but there was no water. There was no plan, no theme. If he wanted an exhibition he needed to have a cohesive message.

"Damn this." He looked around his studio. Touches of the three of them

were everywhere. A picture of the three of them in college at a toga party in a silver frame on a shelf, a sketch Lauren made of him when she decided to dabble in art, and the pencils she gave him that Christmas. The first computer Russell put together that Jason decided was an antique and must be kept. The thing was huge and dwarfed modern machines.

Where did the moment go? It was just there, as tangible as if he could hold it.

He forced himself to turn to the paper over and pressed the pencil point into the parchment. A small piece of graphite broke off and made a sad crumb on his pristine page. He clutched the drawing implement tight enough to cause

the wood casing to crack.

The picture living in his mind in the bed with Lauren's hair and Russell's breathing refused to travel down his arm and onto the paper. It vanished in a poof. He almost saw the small cloud of dissipate before him, not leaving as much as a raindrop for him to work with, he didn't dare dream for a rainbow.

"Draw anything!" At last the pencil snapped in two, the colored core jutting out from the wood, one half still between his fingers, the other falling on his page off to one side.

He brushed the soiled paper off the desk and found his sketchbook. If he couldn't do his work, he would do

something free form. He rifled through the pages of pictures. There was no rhyme or reason to the drawings, just the little things that entered his mind. He seized some more colored pencils, drawing what he should have waited for that morning instead coming in here.

At first the streaks of color meant nothing, it was crap, but he forced himself, adding in some shadows, two male naked forms, one blond, one dark haired, a woman in the middle.

He drew them in a blatant erotic scene. The three of them intertwined with each other.

The image came out natural, right, and unique. Everything he wanted.

The three of them was supposed to

spur his creativity, remove the block. Instead, it absorbed him. Maybe Steve was right.

"No." He slammed the book shut and turned on the computer, his email program opening up first. Unlike his two cohorts, he could go days without checking electronic mail. Lauren said she was jealous, Russell only shook his head as if he were shirking some great responsibility. But after a weekend of facing every mundane errand, he needed to stay on responsibility road and tackle business.

The emails loaded, the ones from Bette Terrance, his agent, piled up in bold face from not being read. Again,

unlike his cohorts, he didn't need to rush to read them. He already knew what she wanted. Was he creating? What was his inspiration? Did he want to meet? Did he want to take on some art for hire?

Of course unlike his cohorts, he seemed to be the only one who noticed they didn't go out together once during the entire weekend. Oh, they were together, but somehow the three of them never left the house all at the same time. He thought he gave Russell some time to deal with their situation with all the errands a week before the party, but Russell was raging his own internal battle.

He shook his head and clicked away from his email and into his game. He

began shooting his enemies, naming each one of the bad guys. Blocked, embarrassed, frustrated, lost.

At least in the mystical land of his game he had no pressures. No blank pages to be filled with artistic brilliance. No best friend avoiding that he lived an alternative lifestyle.

In this world he was a God. Master of everything.

A light knock on the door interrupted his adventure into the land of the witches, and he closed the screen not caring if he lost some points as long as no one caught him. "Enter." The emails from his agent taunted him.

He sat up as Lauren came in carrying

two mugs. In the house of boys she insisted on having a girl mug, and the one she carried he hand painted for her with different twisted flowers in various colors, and a red one with a white gas station logo. "Want some?"

He held his hand out and tilted his head toward the extra chair. "How's the morning treating you?" He took a sip. She prepared his coffee just perfect. A little thing, but one he appreciated. Strong Italian roast doused by a dash of half and half and two teaspoons of sugar. She looked cute and tousled in her robe and t-shirt and fuzzy slippers. He could make out a bit of her cleavage, she hadn't put on a bra yet. Talk about inspiration. He wondered if he could

convince her to get rid of the robe.

"I stopped Russell from making breakfast by saying I had to get on the road." She laughed.

"Do you have to get on the road?" He wanted to play hooky. Maybe he could find his missing muse. It seemed to want to hide out in the bedroom.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I do before Russell makes breakfast."

"Eventually we are going to have to have Russell's dinner, I mean breakfast." He winked at her. With how long that meal took, the three of them could satisfy each other twice, and still make it to the table in time for Russell's patented potatoes.

"Let me see the greatness." She scooted closer to him. "I was so excited when you said you were going to the studio."

He stared at her. Of course she was excited, she wanted a man who would bring home the goods, complete his work. Everyday Russell gathered his tools and his papers and went off to create components and computers, and every other Friday he brought home a paycheck. The pride on his face radiated brighter than his twenty-seven inch computer monitor.

Ever since the exhibit, pride flipped him the bird. The money he earned at the dealership for doing ads and such

was a fancy way of his parents continued support. To date, his art earnings wouldn't buy a wallet at the fancy store Lauren loved.

"Can I see?" She hooked her arm in his.

"It wasn't much." Thank god she didn't need anything at that store, or even a thrift store, he couldn't buy it for her, but his parents could.

"Did you sketch?" She leaned over the desk, setting the sights on his pad.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Can I look?"

Over anyone, Lauren would tell him the truth. Maybe what he drew wasn't as intrusive as he thought. Maybe she would be flattered. He put his hand on

the paper and was about to let her see, when Russell came in. The man was already in his full business regalia of a navy blue suit, white shirt and red tie. Ever since his promotion to king of the nerds his wardrobe changed, he had grown up.

"Lauren." He raised his chin in Jason's direction but went straight for her.

"Yes." She spun toward him.

"Since we were all about catching up on projects this weekend, I fixed this." He fished inside one of his pockets and held up her necklace. "You said you wanted to wear it the other day."

"Thank you!" She turned her back to

Russell and lifted her hair.

Russell looped the necklace around her. Before he fastened it he gave her a quick kiss on the back of her neck.

Jason nodded. The man may not be able to deal with them in the outside world, but he would not skip an opportunity to one up a fellow bedmate.

"You're giving me the shivers." Once more she spun around. This time with her lips pursed.

He glanced at Jason and gave her two pecks. "I wanted to know if you had time for lunch."

"Lunch sounds great." She returned the kiss.

Lunch was only for those who had a real job. It was a gift of an hour in the

middle of the day. He balled his hand into a fist.

"What are you up to today?" Russell smoothed her hair back, but looked at him. "Are you going to the dealership?"

He chewed the inside of his mouth. The thought of the dealership and watching the rich and spoiled rent cars to appear even richer and more spoiled made his stomach churn.

"Jason sketched." Lauren pointed back at him. "I wanted to see."

Now both of them stared at him waiting for the grand reveal.

He stared back. It seemed appropriate.

"Are you spending the day in here?"

Russell pointed to the floor.

If 'in here' meant spending the day playing his game the answer was yes. He clicked his tongue on the roof of his mouth. Catching up on promises was only one item on his yellow pad of failures he needed to fix.

"I don't think he's ready." Lauren jumped off the chair. "I better get going."

Russell pushed his glasses up and blinked. "Later."

"Later." No art was going to happen today, no car dealings, no lunch. Everything in the studio felt like it wanted to fall on his head. He needed to appear as if he were doing anything and clicked on one of the emails from his

agent. A quick scan told him he was right. She was once again begging him to take commissioned work. Drawings and sketches businesses needed.

"Will you help me bring a box to my car?" She pulled Russell's sleeve.

Russell had to go to work, he wore a suit and was going to lunch, and Lauren asked him to help her.

Art for hire. Not art for art. Not art for creativity. Art for money. A hired pen. He stood up. "I'll do it and I'll make the offer even better." He went to Lauren's other side and decided to test his friend. "I think I'll go on calls with you and then we can both meet our better

third for lunch." Two could play the challenge game.

"You hate going on calls with me." She narrowed her eyes.

"I think it will be good for the art." He grinned, using his teeth and everything. What would be good for the art would be making art, not pornography. He needed to clear his head and spend some time with at least one of his muses outside of the bedroom. Going to work with Lauren was sort of working. He glanced at Russell with his jaw set and his focus just beyond the two of them.

"Okay." She hugged him. "I suppose I could do worse than you as an assistant."

He embraced her back, and shut his eyes. He wasn't an assistant or a car salesman. He was an artist.

Chapter Eleven

"No worries, we'll catch you at home." Lauren hit end on her cell phone and turned to Jason. "Russ got called into an emergency meeting, he can't make lunch." Though not like him to cancel, his new job demanded a lot of his time. "Oh well." This would have been the first time she went out with both of them since they got together, but she still wasn't sure if they were even dating for real.

"Good thing you brought a spare guy." Jason held his elbow out to her.

She refused his peace offering and

began walking to their next call.

Jason ran ahead, skidding to a stop in front of her. "I apologized to the staff and the doctor."

Not wanting to get sucked into forgiving him, she tapped her foot. Normally, he served as her number one sales tool, today he was simply a tool.

He bowed his head. "I am sorry." Once more he held out his arm.

There was no staying mad at him, it was a silly waste of energy and she laced her arm in his.

They walked down Bedford Drive, or as she liked to call it, Plastic Surgery Central. Not only did this area drip with every big name Dermatologist and Plastic Surgeon, but there was an entire

building which housed only those two specialties.

"I don't feel like doing any more calls." As they strolled, she rested her head against his shoulder.

"Yes, dropping off flyers to three practices while you wear next to nothing and having every male kiss or paw you does make for a full day."

"Jason!" This time she stopped.
"You just apologized."

"That I did, but it doesn't make up for the fact that you are half naked and every man on this block has touched in some inappropriate way." He put his arm around her.

"Don't tell me you're jealous." She

let out a laugh. Maybe he should try hanging out with himself and every woman who wanted to fling their panties in his direction. "You didn't have to make a scene." Fine, she loved the scene he made when he pulled her away from one of her accounts, but she needed to keep up a front.

"I don't think all those men should be caressing you."

"What about Russell?" She grinned.

"I am speaking for both of us." He cleared his throat. "I am sure he would insist you get dressed."

"This is a normal business outfit." She put her hands on her hips.

"What happened to pant suits?" He reached down to the hem of her skirt and

tried to pull it down. "What else do we have today?"

"Stop doing that!" She swiped his hand away from her outfit and lifted her phone to access her calendar. The name of her next call may as well have stood out in underline, bold, italic and red. Her body stiffened, but she still tried to shut the phone off. "Let's get lunch."

"Wait." He captured the phone.

"Deli is just around the corner." She kept her eyes on the phone and did everything in her power not to grab it back.

"We don't have time for lunch, we have to go see Dr. Porter, Dr. Carter and Dr. Dalton." He nodded. "That last one

sounds familiar."

The problem in being with, or dating, or doing whatever, with her best friends was they knew too much. "I just saw him for lunch last week. I can go another time. I make my own schedule."

He shifted his focus to her. "Isn't he like your number one account?"

"Let's go get deli first." She needed to stop protesting.

"All right a short lunch break, and then off to Dr. Dalton's." He motioned forward.

"Okay." They turned the corner onto little Santa Monica. "Look, they keep opening up pop-up stores here." Small stores opening for a day or two in vacant storefronts were the latest L.A. trend.

Sometimes it was a famous designer, or electronics, or even home goods, but it was always fun to check them out.

"You turned this into a shopping trip." Jason moaned. "You can't stop the inevitable."

No, but she could delay it. "Come on." She stood on her tiptoes to get a view down the street. A new store popped up in the spot that sold tents and outdoors stuff only last week.

"Five minutes and you can't break Russell's budget."

"Like you even know the word budget." She pulled him.

Today the store had blacked out windows, and no name. Her heart began

to pound. Sometimes the top designers hid like this, offering only the most lucky or the most in the know a chance to buy specialty items at a fraction of the cost. "Jason!" She gripped his arm. "What if it's a secret Jacque's store?" There could be a Valerie bag in there. She'd heard of this. One of the bags with a microscopic scratch, not enough to be detected by the naked eye, but enough to be rejected by the stringent standards of the Jacque's craftsmen who designed the portable masterpiece.

"Oh my god, what if it's a Jacque's store!" Jason raised his voice to sound like a girl and held her.

"We have to get there." Her blood sped up, fast tracking her adrenaline

through her body and she jumped off the curb.

The screeching of brakes, the honk of a horn and Jason screaming her name caused her to freeze the second she landed on the asphalt.

"Lauren!" Jason yanked her back up on the sidewalk, away from the huge white luxury car that tried to decimate her.

The shaking started the moment his arms were around her. She kept her eyes shut and breathed in. No matter what, the smell of soap with a layer of some special shaving cream Jason bought followed him everywhere, but right now it was like being encompassed

in the comforter Russell just put on the bed to warm them as the nights started to chill.

"Are you okay?" He smoothed her hair down.

She nodded, but wasn't sure.

"Purse or no purse, we will only go over there if we use the crosswalk." He held her at arm's length.

"Okay." She wrinkled her nose. "The bag would look terrible with tread marks."

"The bag would look terrible without you." He tilted his head as if inspecting her. "There will be no more freaking out over phone calls and hand bags. We have to keep you with us."

At his words, she couldn't stop her

smile.

"You're not supposed be smiling. I'm trying to be firm." He wagged his finger at her.

"What is with you with phones and purses?"

Now she frowned. She wanted to be about more than phones and purses.

He blew through his lips, took them to the corner and with an over exaggerated movement pushed the walk button. "See the little walking man in green? That means we can go."

Phones, purses, outfits, and shopping. She stared down at the lines in the crosswalk as Jason guided her across the street.

“Hey.” Jason tapped her as they made their way up on the sidewalk.

She raised her head, once more taking him in. Neither Jason nor Russell were what she would consider materialistic. Yes, they liked their items, but they wouldn't have thrust themselves in front of a moving car in a quest for them.

“Don't you want to go in?” He pointed to the store.

She glanced at the blacked out windows, back to Jason and inhaled.

“Come on.” He held his hand out to her. “Let's just look.”

She closed her eyes and took his hand, choosing to look down at their fingers tangled together as they crossed

the threshold into the store.

They entered the dark space and when Jason gave her a squeeze, she finally took the store in.

No handbags, scarves or shoes graced the walls. No women scrambling for the latest find. Instead, she was presented with a makeshift art gallery. Black walls, strategic lights and silence perfectly framed the paintings inside. Nothing else was in the small space except for a desk in the far back corner and a few people taking in the art.

Without a word, Jason took her to the nearest painting.

After going with Jason from gallery to gallery for years, she knew when he was taken by what he observed. Right

now was one of those times. Instead of laughing, or searching for someone he may know, he became silent. His grip on her hand loosened, and he stood in front of the first piece, stepping forward and back as if to get a different perspective in the few inches he moved. Jason was about a lot more than the superficial. His world was art, meaning and nuance.

She chewed her lip. For that matter, Russell was always about learning, trying to do what was right, helping a friend. She sighed and moved closer him.

The art itself was interesting, depicting space, stars, planets and

otherworldly scenes. Lauren nodded, the décor of the temporary gallery made perfect sense.

“What is it?” Jason whispered.
“What do you see?”

Before she answered, opened her mouth and said something about how everyone looks good in black, Jason's last showing flashed through her mind.

The gallery that night was white, glossy and vibrant, the colors he used in his paintings seemed to bounce off the walls. Maybe his agent got it wrong. Maybe they needed black to absorb some of the hues, let the paintings stand out and glow. She wondered if Jason thought the same thing. “I just liked the way the gallery is jet black, like space.

It gives a good backdrop to the paintings.”

"Ah, a woman who understands."

Lauren turned to find an older man dressed in black standing next to her with his arms crossed.

He motioned toward the painting. "The finest art wouldn't look half as spectacular if it didn't have the proper back drop."

She fought a smile. That sounded like something Jason or his parents would say. Of course, Jason's parents would rearrange their home to display something their son created. The image of Jason's mother deciding that only hard wood would do for Jason's sculpture,

and Jason's father pulling out only a square of carpet to accommodate the request made her smile widen.

"The artist is a fan of science fiction. Before I took him under my guidance he was painting snowcapped mountain tops and sold his work for under a hundred dollars a piece to old ladies in Venice." The man nodded. "I asked him to paint to his passion, make a mountain top on an undiscovered planet." He leaned in closer and lowered his voice. "I just sold one of his works for over five thousand dollars, and this is just the beginning."

Her smile dissipated as she pressed her lips together. Jason didn't need to hear this. "Who are you?"

"Vincent Ingsby, Agent." He extended his hand. "If you fall in love with one of the pieces I wouldn't delay. I have been open since this morning, and will definitely sell out. I sent the artist home to get to work while his muse and adrenaline were in full force. He is a talent."

"I'll show you talent." In one swift motion she stepped in front of Jason and reached into her bag for her wallet. She was about more than material crap.

"Lauren." Jason uttered his first word since Vincent intruded upon them.

She knew Jason's warning tone. It wasn't as much as a tone as it was the way he didn't call her Laurie, but she

wouldn't be swayed. Planets and stars were fine, but the final frontier didn't best her artist. She unzipped her wallet and pulled out her old style photo holder, flipping past the picture of the three of them at college graduation with their caps and gowns, a picture of Russell as a teenager in front of his family home, and a picture of Jason with no hair in high school. "Take a look at this." She turned the plastic holder to the man.

"What have we here?" Vincent held his hand out.

"There are more." She gave it to him, but helped the man turn the little flaps to see all of Jason's art. "His style is realistic set against the

abstract."

Vincent lifted the photo and nodded. "I particularly like the artist's use of different textures."

"Of course you do." She stood up straighter, but out of the corner of her eye she saw Jason with crossed arms, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "Look at the next one."

Vincent pursed his lower lip. "The artist is trying a bit too hard here." He ran his finger over Jason's interpretation of a forest scene. Purple, blue and red shapes created the background for pine trees and a cabin.

A challenge. This was more personal

than when a doctor would tell her that her filler was too expensive. She wanted to visit this landscape that existed only in Jason's mind. In fact, that painting hung in her bedroom. "I think art is about pushing and trying. I think his use of color is exceptional. If it were framed correctly he could get ten thousand easy."

Jason put his hand to his brow.

"Are you an agent?" Vincent lifted his eyebrows.

"I am a consumer, the very one you sell to, and I know what I like." She put her fingers on her pictures.

Vincent kept hold of the art. "Who is the artist?"

She lifted her chin and turned to

Jason. He may be pretending to study the paintings, but the way his foot tapped let her know he was listening. "Jason Morgan."

Vincent returned the photos to her and walked over to Jason.

She held her breath.

"Mr. Morgan, are you being represented now?"

Jason nodded and shrugged.

"I see." Vincent reached into his shirt pocket. "Is it the showing or the lack of work?"

She wrapped her arms around herself and swallowed though it did nothing to moisten her throat.

"I have work." Jason's voice was

wound tight, as if it wanted to break.

"Interesting." He offered Jason a business card. "If you want to talk about how long you've been blocked, or something other than commissioned work, I'm doing a showing at the Eaves in West Hollywood in two weeks. An artist should only create what he or she is passionate about. Then they don't have to try."

Jason took the card.

Vincent glanced at her and left.

After a few moments Jason turned to her. "Are you ready for deli?" He ripped the card in half and shoved the pieces in his pocket.

"Jase." She went to reach for him. He caught her hand.

"I think you're an amazing artist."

"I think you're jaded." He pulled her toward him, dipped his head down and stopped just short of her lips.

"I wish Russell were here." She put her fingertips to his mouth. Her attempt to help failed, and now he wouldn't kiss her because of their rule.

"Me too." He kissed her fingers. "I'm can hardly wait to tell him you almost killed yourself by flinging yourself into the street for a purse."

No, she didn't help Jason, and she did almost kill herself in the quest for a handbag. "I wish Russ could have snuck out of that meeting and joined us. It would have been cool to go out all

together." Now she couldn't remember the last time the three of them did anything outside the house. She was that self-centered. All she did was come home and let these men tend her. "Why don't we call it a day?"

"Sorry, no can do." He reached down to the hem of her skirt once more. "But I do think we need to make a pit stop before we see Dr. Dalton."

She pushed his hand away and followed him out. The inevitable was here, and she still wasn't sure what they were doing.

Chapter Twelve

Russell looked up from his desk with enough time to watch Jason and Lauren zigzag through the cubicles towards his office. He stood as they entered, filling up the small space. "What's going on?" They were both here. Both of them. He clenched his fist and forced himself to open it. They had both been here hundreds of times. Everything was fine. He took a breath.

Lauren narrowed her eyes, jerked her arm away from Jason, and crossed her arms.

Jason pointed at him then pointed at

himself. "You and I need to talk about this." He pointed to Lauren.

Lauren tapped her foot. "I thought this was done."

"Weren't you on calls?" He asked though he knew the answer.

Jason put both hands on his desk. "I need to go to the bathroom. With you."

"What happened?" Russell swallowed and peeked out the door. No one was looking...yet. He walked around the desk and hit his door closed. "Maybe we should talk about it."

"He almost ruined a sale for me." Lauren tattled first. "I was talking to the doctor and he made a noise and tried to pull my skirt down. The doctor almost got a different type of show if he would

have yanked any harder."

"Why is she wearing a mini skirt to work?" Jason motioned toward the hemline of Lauren's outfit. "By the way, I can answer that question."

Lauren didn't appear any different. Before he addressed his best friend, he held his finger up. "Did you get the sale?"

"Yes, but only because I told the doc that I was taking Jason to get a refill for his tranquilizer and offered him a free syringe." She turned to Jason.

At the moment he needed medication to stop the headache that decided to make an appearance along with his two bedmates. "What's the answer to the

question?"

Jason straightened up and stared right at Lauren. "Her job is pornography and she is the star." With the words out, he held his arms up and backed away.

"How dare you!" Lauren stalked toward him. "So now I'm a porn star? I thought you liked it that way."

"Shhh." Russell wasn't sure if these walls were sound proof.

"Porn-og-ra-phy!" Jason clapped between syllables. "How far would it have gone if I wasn't there, huh?"

Lauren opened her mouth.

"Wait!" Russell pushed the button to lock the door and slipped in between them, putting one hand on Lauren and one on Jason. "What's the answer to the

question?"

They both faced him.

"I want you to finish out the afternoon on calls with our Lauren." Jason tilted his head and smiled. "You said you were busy for lunch, but it's after lunch and I need you."

He froze, careful before he made a move. "How can Lauren take both of us?" He exhaled and leaned against the desk.

"Our next stop is Dr. Dalton's." Jason crossed his arms.

Wait. He stood again. Dr. Dalton. Dr. Fix Your Face. Lauren usually swooned when he was mentioned, or on television, or the Internet, or a

magazine. "Dr. Dalton?"

With one eye narrowed, Jason nodded. "Dr. Dalton."

Lauren shifted her weight from one foot to the other and turned to the floor.

She didn't want him to go. Of course, up until five seconds ago, he didn't want to go. Now he didn't know what he wanted, except he wanted Lauren to want him to go. "Lauren?"

Suddenly, she raised her head. "Yes, dear Russell, come with us to Dr. Dalton's." She went to him, pressed her body to his, wrapped her arms around his neck and connected their lips.

She opened her mouth and searched out his tongue, sucking on it, causing him to hold her tighter and moan. Right now

he knew what he wanted.

As fast as she kissed him, she pushed him back. "Is that the kiss of a porn star?" She licked her lips and let her gaze travel down to the front of his pants.

He glanced over at Jason.

"Trust me on this one." Jason shoved his hands in his pockets.

"That's the last one either of you will get until I get a real apology. If you are so worried why don't you come with me?" She held her head high, spun on her heel and left.

"Okay." He motioned for Jason to go ahead.

Jason stopped in front of him. "It

would have been nice if the three of us would have gone to lunch today."

"I got called into a meeting." He turned away from Jason to grab his suit jacket.

"That's how you can just take off now."

He arched his back at Jason's words. "I'm not in a meeting now."

"I suppose Lauren's work is safe, what could happen there?"

Russell faced him. "Your jealousy brought you here. Lauren didn't want us to go."

"Jealousy doesn't live here." Jason motioned toward himself. "Neither does embarrassment."

"Maybe we should get going, we

don't want to make her late." He walked away. Yes, work was safe, and he needed to see the man Lauren didn't want them to meet. More importantly, no way would he be called on the carpet by the man who knew him better than anyone. Everything was a mess.

The moment the elevator opened, Jason knew this wasn't the typical doctor's office.

First, this doctor's practice took up the whole floor. Second, the patients in the waiting room didn't appear to be sick at all, in fact everyone there seemed to

have stepped directly off a runway. Third, the office wasn't an office. It was a showcase, from the marble walls and floors to the planned lighting and furniture. Everything planned to provide a perfect background for every masterpiece in the place, from the art to the patients.

After some hushed whispers to the front office staff, Lauren and the two of them tiptoed to the doctor's private office.

Maybe Russell was right. They shouldn't have come here, shouldn't have been privy to their competition.

However, it wasn't the books or degrees that told the tale of Dr. Dalton. Plenty of men earned their M.D.

It was the art.

Art connoisseurs came in only three flavors. Those who could both afford and love the art, those who loved the art but couldn't afford it, and those who cared less about the art but wanted to own it.

As they sat in the famous and infamous office of Dr. Dalton, Jason had no doubt which type of art connoisseur the good doctor was, with his mix of styles and fashionable choices. The selection here was eclectic, but deliberate. Designed both for maximum impact and impression, not because the art was appreciated.

He swung his leg and rocked back

and forth in the red leather chair waiting for the appearance of Lauren's number one account.

"Stop fidgeting." Lauren crossed her legs and spun her chair toward the desk.

Her skirt rode up on her leg, her bare leg. "Her skirt is too short.

She squirmed in her chair causing the skirt to rise even higher.

"Lauren."

Russell shook his head. He hadn't said a word since they left.

"Say something." Jason motioned toward his friend. The man was going to have to face a lot of things if he wanted this to work, including this doctor and their situation.

Russell opened his mouth

Jason nodded. Now Lauren would get it from the king of sanity.

"How can anyone even speak when we are in the presence of such beauty?"

Saved by the interruption, Russell shut his mouth.

They were finally face to face with who had to be Dr. Dalton, complete with the white doctor's coat, various medical instruments in his pockets, and a toothpaste smile.

For exactly one second he held out hope that this man may not be Dr. Dalton.

Exactly one second later his hope was gone, exactly like a wrinkle in this office.

"Doctor Dalton."

Jason whipped back around toward Lauren. Her voice was low, both breathy and breathless. He knew that voice. That voice belonged to him and to Russell. It was the voice she used when she wanted something, namely them, and she was willingly giving it to this Dr. Dalton.

"Lauren." He held his arms out.

Unlike the playful hugs he watched Lauren give to everyone from doctors to janitors throughout the day, this hug was different.

Along with the voice that was only for him and Russell, she also had their look, right down to her flushed cheeks

and plump, ripe lips. She pushed herself out of the chair and didn't jump, skip or dash to the recipient. Instead, she stood up straight, and with only one side of her mouth curling up in a smile walked straight into his arms.

She leaned into him while he wrapped his arms around her.

Jason moved to the edge of his seat, and glanced at Russell. The man hadn't moved.

Dr. Dalton and held her at arm's length. "Don't you love me anymore?"

Jason grabbed the arms of the chair. How could Russell sit there and do nothing? This man way too charming.

"Of course I love you." She patted him.

He knew pickup lines. In fact, he was both the recipient and giver of many a line. Was Lauren flirting in front of them?

"Then why so long since you've been here? What if I needed to place an order?" The doctor licked his lips.

"I'm only a phone call away. You can call me anytime." She purred her answer.

"Look up." The doctor took her face in his hand and moved her side to side as he seemed to study her.

Jason almost fell out of his seat, but Russell finally reacted by crossing his arms. At least it was something.

"Just about perfect." The doctor took

a long Q-tip out of his pocket and pressed it to her face. "When are you going to let me add the final touch? Let me make amazing, magnificent."

All day he was wound up, as if someone shoved a key in his back and turned it every time Lauren hugged someone, or showed too much leg. The art gallery only amped up his energy. But this was it. No one would call her amazing and then allude to her looks not being perfect. This man may be a doctor, but he was an artist, and he knew beauty. "Excuse me!" The chair tilted back when he stood.

Russell caught the chair before it hit the floor, and Lauren spun toward him with her mouth open as if she were going

to start yelling.

"The front told me you were training." The doctor lifted his chin toward them but kept his hand on her back.

"Lauren doesn't need any plastic surgery." He stepped forward.

"Jason!" She went into her full 'dare to say another word stance' complete with her hands on her hips and one foot jutted out.

He moved away from Lauren and held his hand out to him. "I don't think she needs plastic surgery either."

Lauren widened her eyes at him.

As if his hand had an anvil weighing it down, it pained him to raise it and

shake this man's hand, but he knew he better if he ever wanted to make up with Lauren. He swore the man's hand was wet, clammy, cold and untrustworthy.

"Dr. Dalton." He nodded and shook Russell's hand.

"Russell." Russell glanced down at the palm of his hand when the doctor let go. At least Jason knew it wasn't only him.

"I didn't mean to interrupt your day." Lauren focused her attention on Dr. Douche.

"Place my usual order, and double whatever you need to get my syringes to help your quota out, then when we're in Vegas you can take me out with that chunky commission check." He winked.

Vegas? He didn't recall any Vegas activities.

"Thank you." She gave the man another hug.

"Don't be such a stranger." He nodded at the two of them. "Watch her, she's the best." With that he backed out of the room and left.

"Let's go." Lauren looked between them, pressed her lips together and stormed away.

They both followed and managed to slip into the elevator with her.

She crossed her arms and waited.

One of them needed to say something. He hit Russell in the shoulder.

Russell cleared his throat. "I have to admit I didn't understand how personal your job really was until now."

Personal? He leaned back until his back hit the wall of the elevator. Personal? That's what Russell was going to call it. Maybe his best friend wasn't as into this as he thought.

"What does that mean?" She put her hands on her hips.

Russell glanced back at him. "What I meant is that there is a lot of closeness in your business relationships."

There were three times where Jason remembered being thankful for Russell's analytical and calm mind. Well, there were many times, but three stood out in

this moment in the elevator.

The first one was in math class in seventh grade where Russell spent five hours explaining pre-algebra to him. He never got upset but he never wavered. Russell only continued to repeat himself until Jason understood. The second time was in college where Russell somehow, someway talked his professor into extending the deadline for the term paper.

This would go down in Russell history as the time where he explained to Lauren, the woman they were sleeping with, that her job was pornography, and as their girl it was unacceptable. "Or prostitution."

"What!" Lauren went to him, standing

close enough to cause her to have to look up. "Did you just call me a prostitute?"

Not realizing he said the words aloud, he raised his eyebrows and tried not to look directly at her. "No, I did not, I said prostitution. Your job is not pornography, it is prostitution." He never did have Russell's way with words.

Russell covered his eyes.

The elevator door opened.

"Maybe you can see what its like then when you have to hail a cab home. I know you don't have any cash on you." She kicked his ankle and ran out of the elevator.

The point of her pump practically

punctured his leg, sending a sharp, searing pain up his calf and down to the sole of his foot. "Hey!" He bent down and grabbed his throbbing appendage.

"You're jealous." Russell patted his back and went around him.

"You're terrified." He rubbed his ankle. Jealousy was not an emotion that existed in the land of Jason Morgan. If jealousy did rear its green little head it was because someone was jealous of him, not the other way around. Fine, maybe he had a little tinge when Steve got his show, but that was professional jealousy. He definitely didn't have jealousy when it came to women.

Before the doors slid closed and trapped him inside this stupid building,

he hopped out. He joined Russell and Lauren at the car, straightened up and took her by the shoulders. "I was jealous."

They both turned to Russell.

"You were jealous too." Jason gave Russell the best friend glare.

He pointed to himself. "I never said I wasn't, I just said you were."

"You were jealous?" Lauren faced him again.

His nose wrinkled, meeting the smile Lauren fought. The corners of her mouth quivered, wanting to turn up. "You heard me."

The smile took over and she glanced over at Russell.

"I never said I wasn't." He opened the car door for her.

She got in the car. "Good."

Russell and him caught gazes from across the car. "I'm glad I went."

"We need to do more."

Russell nodded. "You were jealous."

"So were you." This argument was becoming washed out, like too much water in his paint.

"We weren't talking about me." Russell got the car.

He took a breath and caught sight of Lauren's profile in the car window, the reflection from the sun lighting up her hair, illuminating her skin. Yeah, he was jealous, jealous that his art wasn't

worthy to hang in Dr. Dalton's office,
and jealous that Lauren fit in there.

He needed to get himself together.

Chapter Thirteen

Russell rifled through his closet and shook his head. Something was off, and it couldn't be his count. However, somehow, on a Tuesday night, he didn't have a clean shirt or a clean suit for the next day. "This is impossible." The dry cleaner came Friday to pick up their items and returned them Tuesday, therefore, at this moment, he should be the proud owner of clean work clothes. Come to think of it, he also didn't have any casual clothes except for what he currently wore, and this t-shirt was Jason's.

He slid some clothes across the pole. Thus far besides a pair of leather pants he picked up along the way and never wore, there were also two pairs of Jason's jeans, one of Lauren's work suits, and a cocktail dress. He lifted the dress and put it back. "How did this get in here?" This one was black and beaded and still had the tags.

He chose to gloss over the pile of shoes at the bottom of the closet. The only shoes of his he could find were the ones he wore to work today and those were in the front hall.

"Lauren must have everything." He scratched his head, went over to his dresser and opened the top drawer.

Plenty of underwear was thrown in there. Thrown in? He spun toward the drawer. Gone was his neat pile of underwear separated into boxer briefs, boxers and miscellaneous. Instead, there were his variety, the same brand he'd been wearing since high school, and Jason's various brands mixed in. As a bonus there were at least two pairs of Lauren's intermingled. One was lace, red lace. He remembered those and smiled.

Curiosity alone made him open the second drawer. This drawer should have exactly five piles of socks inside.

Instead of the three stacks of white socks and two stacks of black socks, he was met with a sock salad. All different

socks were tossed together, including some pink fuzzy ones, and as a garnish, three of Lauren's bras. "Okay."

He backed away, glancing around the bedroom, taking in the unmade bed, the pile of towels in the corner, and a knit cap on Mr. Robot. The moment his back hit the doorjamb he spun around and ran toward the kitchen. "Lauren!"

"Laurie!" Jason came charging in from the other entrance.

"Where is she?" Russell raised his arms. The last time he saw her she said she was going into the kitchen with her laptop under her arm. They couldn't have misplaced her as well.

Jason shrugged his shoulders. "I need

to talk to her."

"I get her first." Her laptop was on the table, but she wasn't there.

"That was last night." Jason crossed his arms.

"Lauren!" Russell yelled again. They had to resolve some things right now, or more importantly, he needed to know something, anything. Everything was off kilter.

"Hold on!" Her voice came out strained from the laundry room.

They both looked at each other and ran forward, bumping into one another in their quest to see who could reach her faster. They collided at the doorway, and Jason slipped inside the small room.

"What's wrong?"

At Jason's question Russell squeezed in. Lauren was on her knees, and the contents of her purse were strewn across the floor. "What's wrong?"

She huffed and looked up at them, spreading her arms out over the mess. "I can't find my nude pump, my black pants, my flash drive and my pills."

"I don't think your shoe is in there."
Jason got down with her.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Why are you here?"

"I'm missing my favorite pen, my red t-shirt and my grey button down. I'm not sure where my underwear is, and I can't find my knit cap." Jason picked up her

makeup bag and unzipped it. "Did the laundry guy skip us or something?"

"Did he? Maybe he stole our clothes." Lauren's eyes widened. "I swear I have nothing to wear."

Russell noticed a trend and joined them. "I think your pump is in my closet, I now own everyone's underwear, and the knit cap is on Mr. Robot." He took Lauren's bag from Jason and dug through it.

"There's your shirt." Lauren lifted her chin toward him. "I guess Russell needed it."

Jason turned to him. "Cool."

"Here's your pen." Russell pulled a lip liner and Jason's pen out of Lauren's bag. "And here's the flash drive." He

handed each of them their respective possessions.

Lauren took her flash drive and kissed it. "I am also missing my black slip."

Jason took his pen and held it up like a torch. "I am the current owner of the black slip. I put it on the bed, I thought we could use it again in a bit." Then he held the pen out like a sword. "What did you need Laurie for?"

"Since I have most everyone else's things, does anyone know where my things are?" He pushed Jason's hand away.

Lauren raised her hand. "I have a pair of your striped boxers, one of your

white shirts and four ties."

"Ties." Jason nodded. "That was awesome." He leaned forward and began herding Lauren's items into a pile. "Let's go play tie again. I have a belt I can contribute, at least I know where that is." He held up his shirt to show them.

Russell turned up to the ceiling. While those ties weren't four of his best, the game was indeed awesome. He supposed he could wear the same suit he did today, and if Jason found his grey button down he could borrow it. Now come to think of it, the mess, the lack of knowledge, the total loss of control came in a distant second, third and fourth to playing tie. "We'll find the rest tomorrow."

Jason began scooping Lauren's paraphernalia into her bag. "Sweet. If we need to take a bath after I hid a towel away, we'll have to share."

He swallowed down any reaction to the towel comment, or the fact that a pile of towels was festering in the corner of his room, probably getting moldy. It was okay, they were going to play tie. He held out his hand to Lauren. "Shall we?" No, he wasn't thinking about the moldy towels and missing clothing.

Without answering, Lauren dumped her purse out again.

He bit the side of his mouth. Maybe they were a bit too overzealous for her. This could be her way of telling them

they needed to breathe, and she was right. They had things to discuss. The party was coming up. They hadn't even addressed that yet. Jason called him on it, and now was time to face it. "Are you tired?"

"Do you have your period?" Jason put his hand on her arm.

Lauren looked up, her mouth open and cheeks red.

Russell would have stopped him, but he wanted to know the answer.

"It's no big deal, we can put down our one towel." Jason elbowed him. "You're cool with it, right?"

He matched Lauren's open mouth. There was no good response to that question. In the last few days he had to

become cool with a lot of things. Every day he was pushed a bit more. They all were. Eventually they would go over the edge.

Lauren took a breath. "I don't have my period."

Jason gave her a thumb up.

"I can't find my pills." She stared at Jason.

"Do you have a headache?" Jason leaned over and put his hand on her cheek. "I have a sure fire cure." He chuckled.

She shifted her focus. "Russell, I can't find my pills."

Russell pursed his lips absorbing what she said. Since they had three

medicine cabinets full of pills, he assumed this was something unique to her, to females, for female things. "How long has this been going on?" He cleared his throat. Talk about being pushed. This was no time to panic. They used condoms.

"You're not taking your pills!" Jason lunged forward and took her by the shoulders.

"Jason!" She pushed on his chest.

"It's okay." He nodded. "It's okay. There's three of us, we'll make it work." He hung his head down.

It was a moot point to tell Jason they used condoms. At least the man was going to take responsibility.

His stomach spiraled, making him

more nauseated than the image of moldy damp towels on the carpet. How would they explain that pregnancy to their friends and family? He took a breath wishing he had Jason's attitude, but wondering how they would determine who was the father and who was the special uncle? Suddenly it was too warm in there, and he took his time exhaling. They used condoms.

She thrust Jason away from her and got up. "We use condoms!"

Jason blinked, wrinkled his nose and frowned. "Then why are you taking a pill?"

"Back up." She tapped her foot. "Double protection."

The chaos had to be getting to all of them. Russell tilted his neck from side to side. They weren't having babies they were only having a set back. But wait, what were they having a set back from? He couldn't define what they were. No one could, and there had to be a reason.

Consequences, repercussions and outcomes of their actions hit him head on, or more like slapped him across the face. With the need to act taking over him, he jumped up and wiped his forehead. Somehow, for the first time in his life, he didn't think about the final product of his actions, he kept pushing them into corners like the clothes and the towels, and now they seemed to bowl

over him at once.

"Russell?" Lauren went to him.

"We need to find your pills. How long has it been?" He had to get some order around him.

"Since yesterday, I just don't want to be off schedule. Everything feels all over the place."

"Yeah." Without even thinking he held his arms out. She gave him a hug and put her head in his chest.

He rested his chin on the top of her head and held her tighter. For years he waited for what he had now. Though he never pictured Jason as part of the deal, now he couldn't imagine them without him. He glanced over at his best friend, not sure if he liked the way he wanted

Jason to join them.

As if acting on some unknown force between them, Jason pushed himself up and hugged Lauren from behind.

"Russell?" Lauren's voice vibrated through him.

"Yes." He ran his fingers through her hair.

"I am a mess and the house is a mess and I think the laundry guy stole our clothes." She tilted her face up to him.

"I don't think the laundry guy stole our clothes, I don't think we gave him any." He needed to let the laundry guy off the hook. The three of them made the mess. He made the mess by allowing this. They looked to him for guidance and he

failed.

"When I get home I just want to..." She cut herself off by putting her face back in his shirt, well actually Jason's shirt, but it was on him.

He wondered if her end of the sentence was the same as his. When he got home he just wanted to be with her... with them. "What do you want?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I think I've been a little distracted with all that's happened."

"I'm distracted all day, all I do is wait for the two of you to get home." Jason shook his head.

"Aww." She pulled Jason over and the three of them stood in a small circle. "What do you want?"

Now was his chance. He could point out the error in their programming. Ask them the tough questions. Demand to know what they would do out in public.

"What do you want?" Lauren touched his lips. "Except your clothes?"

He studied her face, Jason thought she looked like a classical painting, but he didn't have those words to describe her. She was beautiful. Anything anyone could want, and they both wanted her. They both wanted her and they were best friends. Here, in their home, this was how it needed to be. Once again he had to brush aside what was bound to happen. Ignore the moldy towels. "I want us to figure out what bedroom

we're going to be in so we can get some order in the house."

"Let's pick Laurie's room, she has a four poster bed. All the better to tie ties with." Jason slung his arms around the two of them.

"My room is a shambles." She pursed out her lower lip. "I sort of spread my stuff all over. Well, actually into Russell's room."

"That's where I've been putting my stuff as well, it was easier." Jason grinned.

"Well that would explain why I'm wearing mostly your clothes." Russell noticed his room had become a prime accumulation spot. At night after everyone was asleep it was awesome to

have everyone there. All three of them. What on Earth were they doing?

"He has a better closet." Lauren leaned into him.

"I think we've been so busy doing other things that we sort of forgot we need clean clothes..." Jason glanced behind him toward the kitchen. "...and clean dishes."

"And a computer that works." Lauren gave him a toothy smile. "When we weren't dating we were much neater and got a lot more work done."

Well, he got his answer, at least in Lauren land. They were dating. In Lauren land that meant being together, going out. It was one exit short of a

commitment. How would they ever accomplish that? "Let's get organized."

Chapter Fourteen

Back in college there were two types of parties. The party to get a man and the party with your man. Anything else, themes, holidays or other events were only window dressing on those two distinctive parties.

Each party had its own strategy. At the party to get a man, you showed yourself off. At the party with your man, you showed him off.

Outside the hotel ballroom that hosted the charity pre-holiday bash, Lauren was flanked by not one, but two, men. She should be marching in with one on each

side and gloating, more proud than if she owned multiple Valerie bags. Instead, her face heated and she trembled.

Once Jason announced they would make their debut here, she envisioned this moment more times than she cared to admit. She wanted to watch the women drop their mouths as she held on to both of them, and she wanted the men to admire her for being able to satisfy two of their kind. She even wanted to make Anne jealous for snaring her beloved Russell. Yes, catty, but true.

However, as they walked in, her heart pounded a warning, and her stomach weighed her down even though they hadn't eaten yet. Something was wrong, she couldn't tell exactly what, but

something. The sensation was the same one as when she walked into a client site and knew they dropped her product, the same one when she entered a room and everyone knew a secret she didn't, the same one when something was wrong with your man.

Come to think of it, there were three parties. The man getting party, the man showing off party, and the worst one of them all, the man losing party.

Yes, she pictured the three of them walking in hand in hand and strutting her stuff. She never pictured Jason guiding her by her shoulders as if he were steering a car and Russell lagging four paces behind them while he did a variety

of things, check his phone, fiddle with the button on his sleeve, tie his shoe.

"I'll be the designated driver tonight." Jason gave her shoulders a squeeze. "Feel free to allow me to pour the two of you home."

She turned and tried to smile. In her vision of showing Jason off he looked exactly as he did now. Today he dressed as an alternative rock star in flitted dark blue jeans, a white t-shirt covered by a grey blazer, and that chain thing that hooked from one of his belt loops to his back pocket. Only certain men could pull off his ensemble and not appear as if they were trying too hard. Jason was one of those men.

"I was going to offer." Russell

uttered his first words since they left the house.

She bit the inside of her mouth. They both offered, apparently they both felt she needed to drink, and that indefinable voice in the back of her head agreed with them. Before they entered, she needed to check something. Maybe it had been so long since she went to a party with a man, or men, that she forgot. "Fine, then I'll get stinking drunk and then the two of you can take advantage of me."

"Vodka tonic?" Jason raised his eyebrows and put his hand on her hip. "Two of them?"

Okay the problem wasn't Jason, but

deep down in the same place where the sick feeling lived, she already knew. In fact, she already knew who caused the sensation, only she didn't want to admit defeat. She set her jaw and waited for Russell to respond.

"Let me get in line for the bar." With a spackled smile across his face, Russell dashed into the ballroom.

She forced her feet to stay put, refusing to be the girl who either chased him and put him on the spot to do one of two things, lie to her, or break up with her. Not that it mattered, he couldn't break up with her, they were only dating nothing more, a title she bestowed on them.

Before she succumbed to being a

female, she willed the lump in her throat away and remembered this was Russell. Russell her best friend, who idled at quiet and loathed parties and crowds of people.

She searched the inside of the ballroom until she found him in line at the bar. He was bending over and checking the cuff of his pants. She sighed. He hated parties, right? Maybe something went on at work. Normally, it would take a drink and at least a half hour of television to get him to fess up as to what upset him. Instead, she dragged him here expecting this grand romantic gesture.

She should be the one getting the

drinks, let him relax, and open up his own way. This was the first time they all went out together.

"Shall we?" Jason bowed to her.

"Yes." She tried for a true smile, and once more looked for Russell.

Anne and Russell.

Her forced smile diluted worse than cheap alcohol in a pool of melting ice.

Anne staked her claim, and rather than Russell shifting his weight from one foot to the other, and searching for her out to save him, he laughed and hugged her.

Though she told herself Russell was simply being polite, her own heartbeats drowned out her inner logical voice as she walked forward.

Before she caught up with them to save her best friend, the man she slept with every night, Russell bent down to Anne's leg.

Anne flipped her hair and lifted her already short skirt as Russell took her shoe off.

The lump in Lauren's throat doubled in size, and she stopped to watch them leave with Russell offering her his arm.

"I want my drink." She wanted about five.

"Consider me at your service." Jason grabbed her hand.

She let him lead her away and stared at nothing. "Bourbon, neat."

"How kind of you to come to a lady in need." Anne sat down in one of the chairs at the edge of the ballroom and smiled up at him.

Russell glanced around the ballroom, expecting it to turn into a black vortex that would take him straight to Hell. At least then he would have a destination. Tonight all he had done was wander aimlessly. Every step took him further from his goal, if he knew what he wanted.

"What's up, Anne?" At least Lauren couldn't accuse him of not being nice to her. He allowed her to hug him and drag him away to fix her shoe. Anne fit every

vision he had of a sales rep, though he wasn't sure if she should be selling drugs or used cars.

"Nothing until you got here." She tilted her head. "It's about time you flew solo."

He narrowed his eyes. Anne and Lauren were a strange pairing. They almost weren't friends, and he wondered if it was one of those girl things he would never understand. Anne wasn't ugly, but she wasn't pretty either. If he were set up on a date with her, he would have given it a try, but the minute she opened her mouth it would have been over. Everything she said seemed to have a hidden meaning.

"Who said I'm alone?" He reached

into his pocket and took out his Swiss Army Knife. Too bad he didn't have a tool to fix this night.

"You're not, you're with me." Anne wiggled her foot in front of him. "Can you fix it?"

He chose a screwdriver and dug in. Shoes he could fix, he wasn't sure about anything else.

What did Lauren and Jason want him to do? March into this party, bend her back and give her a kiss and then smile and point while Jason did the same? He wiped his forehead and continued.

The night of the art gallery was safe. They were only setting the stage, nothing happened. Years of wanting Lauren took

a toll on their friendship leaving one solution. But...

He held the shoe up and fit the heel back into the sole.

But they were here with professional people. But, it was his responsibility to protect them from themselves. But it wasn't supposed to be this good.

He slammed the shoe into the floor.

But, it wasn't supposed to be this good. The three of them together was the best was amazing, and yet it was off kilter, wrong. Wrong not in the way that he brought a girl home from the other side of tracks, but wrong as in no one would ever understand. They would be freaks.

Jason didn't care. He lived in a land

all his own with nothing to lose. Lauren was too starry eyed to realize what the three of them could do to her career. He needed to be the voice of reason.

He lifted the shoe and tried moving the heel. It held steady, exactly like he had to. "Here you go."

"You're my hero!" Anne slipped the shoe on, shot up and flung her arms around him, weighing him down.

Lauren and Jason caught up with them and he tried to unravel himself from Anne.

"What happened to the drinks?" Jason elbowed him.

"We got side tracked." Anne kept hold of his arm and gave him a kiss on

the cheek. "How are you, girlfriend?" She tilted her head toward Lauren.

He stiffened not only at the kiss but at the sight of who he really wanted kissing him. Lauren was gorgeous in her emerald green dress high heels, hair swept off to one side. Yes, gorgeous, elegant, that was his Lauren. The one who could calculate the percentage of anything in her head, make dinner in her business suit, cry during a sitcom and then put some lingerie with no panties and satisfy not one, but two men.

"Strange day." Lauren downed the rest of her drink.

She may as well have slapped him. Her words stung the same. Didn't she understand he was doing this for her?

"Let me return to my duties and get some refills." He gently pushed Anne back wanting to push his duties back as well, wanting to let it go like Jason, or live the fantasy like Lauren. Now she wouldn't glance in his direction.

"We'll go get the drinks." Once more Anne laced her arm in his.

"We'll all go." Jason put his arm around Lauren, stared straight at him and raised his eyebrows.

Yes, he felt Jason's warning, but later, much later, Lauren would thank him for not turning the three of them into the gossip of the hour.

"I need to take care of something." Lauren spun toward Jason. "Where's the

bathroom?"

Russell opened his mouth. On their way in, he already scoped out all the bathrooms knowing Lauren and Jason both would need them.

Jason held up a finger and turned left and right.

"It's out the front of the ballroom and down the corridor past the potted palm." Russell exhaled and got his arm back from Anne.

Lauren didn't acknowledge him.

He gritted his teeth together causing that horrible scratch inside his skull. They needed to talk. Lauren would understand.

Jason grinned. "It's out the front of the ballroom and down the corridor past

the potted palm."

"I'll be back." She planted a smile on her face. "Let's catch up in a bit." She nodded at Anne and left.

"You got it. So much to tell you!" Anne waved after her.

Both of them watched Lauren stop at the bar grab two shots and head out.

"I'm going to go check things out." Jason paused, giving him the code to follow.

No, he wouldn't allow Jason to berate him for doing the right thing. They would have plenty of time when they got home. All day he struggled and the moment he stepped into this hotel he had his answer to his dilemma on what to do

with the situation. The night this started it all made sense, and while amazing, incredible even, the fact was they couldn't be in public together and therefore they couldn't be together. Not like how Lauren wanted and deserved.

He swallowed down the sting in the back of his throat. "I'll catch you in a bit."

"Okay then." Jason clicked his tongue on the roof of his mouth and backed away.

"Shall we?" Anne leaned into him.

He forgot she was there until she spoke. "Shall we what?"

"Go get that drink?"

"Whatever." He motioned forward.

He followed Anne back to the bar.

It was always him. Always.

At the age of ten, Jason slapped Russell across the head for ratting him out when Russell decided to be truthful and told the teacher he was doing his homework. Russell tattled on him, and Jason got reamed out by his mother for hitting the boy he called his brother.

At the age of fifteen, Jason pushed Russell causing him to rip his pants when Russell wouldn't ask Susan Someone to the school dance because no other guys thought she was cool. Russell ended up going alone, Jason went with

Susan, and his mother gave him a hug for standing up for those who are different.

At the age of twenty-one Jason was done with hitting and pushing, but he didn't talk to Russell for two days after he got a trendy foreign four door and not the 1960's muscle car he craved. It wasn't that he didn't buy the car, but when Jason asked him why, Russell only said everyone had one of those cars and he wanted one too. No one would understand the muscle car. Jason told his father and the muscle car was purchased, fixed up and put into their arsenal. Russell never drove it.

Now, at the age of twenty-eight, Jason decided physical force may return to his repertoire as he watched his best

friend do everything in his power to not appear as if he was in a different kind of relationship. Better than anyone, except maybe Laurie, he knew Russell wasn't ready to come out, so to speak.

Actually, maybe he didn't need to hit or shove. Laurie appeared to be ready to do the job for him. That, or take of her stiletto and impale Russell on it. The last time he saw their girl, she had excused herself to the bathroom. Her cheeks were splotched bright red in complete contrast to her pale skin, and by the gloss of her eyes, he knew she was blinking back tears, only their Laurie would never cry in public.

She would never do a lot of things

other girls did, which was why they both wanted her. She gave them their fantasy, and tonight when it was time to reciprocate, Russell forgot his etiquette. He would have done better if he faked an illness. Of course, Russell could have manned up and faced his demons.

He downed his soda and glanced around. Laurie had still not emerged from the bathroom, but that wasn't who he was after.

"I haven't seen much of you tonight." Anne practically skipped over.

He shut his eyes. Laurie made them both promise they would be nice to Anne. Thus far only Russell kept good on his promise, too good. Maybe that meant he didn't have to be as nice, it

would even karma out. "What's up?"

"This is a great night!" She jumped in front of him.

"I guess your shoe is all right now." He shoved his hands in his pockets and studied her. It was good for his art. No it wasn't. Anne or Anne's essence was nothing that he wanted to depict in any sort of artistic expression. He wasn't sure what he didn't like about her. She wasn't bad looking but she wasn't memorable. She wasn't a bitch, but she wasn't sweet or sassy. It was an indefinable quality like when he heard nails on a chalkboard, or when something grossed him out that shouldn't be gross at all. Still, he arched his

back.

"Yes, Russell can fix anything." She lifted her foot to show off her footwear.

He pursed his lips. Russell could also break things and make mistakes. "What are you after?"

A smile appeared on her face and spread like mold. "I've been after the same thing since my best girlfriend brought me home for dinner."

He remembered that dinner. Laurie made something in the crockpot and told them to be nice. He was really starting to hate that appliance. In fact, maybe he needed to take the damn thing outside, smash it and make the pieces into an evil mosaic.

"Did you get what you were finally

after?" She moved closer to him.

"What might that be?" He wasn't the shoe fixer, nice man mixer Russell decided to be.

"I know you and Lauren finally got together." Her smile multiplied. Not a smile of joy for her friend, but a smile of triumph.

"How do you know?" He crossed his arms. The three of them never looked less like anything tonight.

She raised her eyebrows. "It was always you, even if she thought it was Russell."

He looked over Anne's shoulder and spied Lauren returning to the party with her head down and rushing straight for

the bar. This made for her fourth drink. One or two more and she wouldn't be hanging on them, instead, Russell would be holding her hair back while she yacked in the toilet. "Russell?" He clenched his fist.

"Yeah, I always thought it would be the two of them, but it's obviously not." She bit her lip. "Don't feel bad, you're the fantasy you know."

Wait, he was the fantasy? "What?" Maybe he didn't hear right. Lauren swallowed down the drink and grabbed another. She turned around the room and went to a corner with a bunch of women.

"You are the fantasy, the one everyone wants but can't have." She hooked her arm in his. "Figures Lauren

would get you, but at least that makes Russell available."

Her tone told him she fought the jealousy down with her internal pitchfork. With an over exaggerated movement he pulled his arm away. "How do you figure?"

"He seemed to wait for her, but now with you, he's forgotten her." She got some gloss out of her purse.

"So you would want him even if he wants her?" Without having to sample, he knew Anne's gloss didn't taste like a mixture of strawberries and sugar like Lauren's. Venom would be more her speed.

"It's just like sales." She dropped the

tube back into her bag. "They see Lauren and their money making opportunity, and all the glitz and glamor."

He pressed his lips together keeping the words in.

"At the end of the day, they still have to prescribe an antibiotic." She snapped her bag closed. "Maybe with any luck you and Lauren can have the house to yourself tonight." She pointed to where Russell stood and trundled off.

This party was done. Their first foray into the world a disaster on every count.

Once more, he watched Laurie. She stood at the edge of a group of women, as if she were engaged, but instead held

her phone up to her face.

He waited, even though all he wanted to do was swoop her into his arms and bend her back for the kiss Russell should be bestowing upon her. Girls needed to show off their guys like their jewelry or their clothes. A guy could be the best accessory or they could make the girl look fat, and Russell was acting like a pair of white pants that was giving the girl a camel toe. In her case, it had to be both of them or none of them, which is why she avoided him as well.

The phone illuminated her face and at last she smiled. Not a true smile, not the kind when Russell fixed something for her, or when he drew funny pictures on

her order forms. It was more of a combination of a nod and a smile.

Shit. She figured something out. Something no one at the party could give her. He turned trying to find the man responsible for tonight's implosion.

Russell was talking to people he didn't even know, something the man hated, but at least he didn't have to answer any tough questions. He never even backed away when Anne returned to him.

"Asshole."

Once more, he glanced at Laurie. She wasn't pretending that she was part of the group anymore, now she leaned on the wall with her head in her purse.

He rubbed his chin and swallowed.

If he didn't know her, he would think she was the lonely girl searching for that strawberry flavored lip gloss. However he did know her, and he knew she searched her purse for nothing, only gaining a bit of comfort from the smell of leather and makeup, and making sure she didn't misplace something she couldn't remember she forgot.

"Damn it." He took a breath. This was his fault. Maybe his best friend wasn't ready to seize what he wanted, wasn't ready to stand out. He always had to be the one to push them, but maybe this time he went too far. He hit his fist into his leg. Now what?

His phone vibrated and he knew what

he would find before he lifted the small screen to his face.

I'm not feeling well can we go soon?

He chewed the inside of his mouth. Lauren's eight word text revealed a wealth of information. This text was normally reserved for Russell, so she wasn't speaking to him. Also, he knew she felt fine, except for maybe her heart and her ego. Before he gave in, he decided to call her bluff. *What's wrong, can I get you something?*

Woman issues. I just want to go to bed.

Well, that told him the rest. He also knew she didn't have her period, but a woman could pull that card any time. It was the royal flush of being a girl, the

excuse that got you out of sex and talking in one winning hand. *Sure let me round up Russell, meet me at the exit.*

We need to go, Lauren is sick. He sent Russell a text as their girl rushed across the room, head hung down, purse to her chest.

Is she okay? RS

I don't know. Meet me at the exit.

Jason shoved his phone in his pocket and kept his eyes on her. He had a feeling he needed to keep her in his sights. This was right around when Laurie would pull a disappearing act.

Chapter Fifteen

"Here's the deal." Bradley Wilson clicked his tongue on the roof of his mouth.

Lauren lowered the volume in her headset while Bradley did his thing. Somehow she didn't think her boss understood that the noises he made amplified one hundred times through the cell phone. Not that it mattered, at this moment, any noise, any smell, any touch that wasn't right would send wincing chills through her body, much like when she scraped her teeth together.

Instead of screaming at her boss to

shut up, she forced her mouth into a smile and kept her focus on the Las Vegas strip in the horizon. She drove over the state line about twenty minutes ago, and the kaleidoscope of grand manufactured buildings grew as she approached. The strip with its pyramid, castle and even a miniature New York City personified the adult playground beaconing those intent on finding something they lost along the way.

"Don't worry about being at the show the whole time, I called Melissa and told her you would be there, but were only there to take care of Greg Dalton's account."

One phone call to Bradley about the dinner with Dr. Dalton netted her the

result she wanted, an all expenses paid trip to Las Vegas for the Aesthetic Plastic Surgery trade show. "Thanks."

"Take him out and make sure he gets a ton of syringes. Once he places the order, go play slots. The room is paid for until Sunday. You're doing great and the holidays are right around the corner." He hummed into the phone.

His hum vibrated through her skull.

"I hear the hotel is great, I'm surprised you didn't take me up on my offer to bring your significant other with you."

Two days ago it would have been significant others, not other. She stared straight ahead thankful the road was

equally as straight.

He whistled. "Take care of yourself, okay?"

"Thanks, Bradley." She hit the end button. Like a spy, she had her mission. Only last month she would have taken her directive without question, gone in more focused than a laser beam on a wrinkle. Today, she fought tears with the knowledge that Gregory Dalton was the only one who wanted to have dinner with her.

She swallowed and tried to take in the sights. The only problem with driving to Vegas was except for the strip, the Joshua trees and a bunch of flat there was nothing to take in except the voices in her mind. "Help me."

No, it wasn't Anne that caused her to call Bradley and run off. It wasn't Jason, or even Russell. It was herself. She needed to escape herself and the fantasy.

Somewhere in all of this, she forgot it was indeed a fantasy, one broken like a glass bubble when they finally went in public together.

Jason didn't care if he stood out, his life, his career, his credo was about being different. Showing up at a party with the two of them was simply another day in Jason land.

She was the dreamer. Where Jason teased Russell about having a little black rain cloud over his head, she lived in a

fluffy white cloud.

Of course, Russell was the realist. The one who knew what would happen. While he allowed himself this little bit of fun, he kept them in their safe tower. When he couldn't hide anymore he did the only thing he could.

In more ways than one, she had her directive. She did what she set out to do and had them both. Oh, it was glorious, better than what she could have ever hoped for, and for that she should be thankful. Only now her heart seized a little tighter, the nausea was a little stronger, the tears a little bigger.

She took a breath and glanced at her phone. There were three phone calls she could make, but only one she would

make. She hit the name in her contacts, partially hoping no one would answer.

"Is this my favorite rep?" Dr. Dalton's voice boomed through her phone.

The electronic chime of slot machines echoed in the background and she forced herself to take a breath. This was business and she couldn't sound like she was going to fall apart. Men like Gregory Dalton smelled weakness, and rather than coddling it like the other two men she knew, he would go in for the kill. It was time to turn the tables. "Only if you let me take you to dinner tonight." Yes, she sounded as if she was flirting. Sales and dating were definitely kissing

cousins.

"Only if you tell me you came to Vegas for me." He gave her a low laugh.

"I hate Vegas and I hate traveling."

"Then make the reservations and put my order in for whatever I have to buy so we don't have to spend the entire night talking about collagen production and natural results."

Somehow the thrill of the order far outweighed the thrill of this conversation. She must be out of practice. "Good thing you have your credit card on file at corporate."

"Good thing you have an expense account. I'll meet you in the lobby at 8:00." He hung up.

She tried to calculate how many syringes she needed to sell to beat the New York rep, but her mind continued to wander. "What did you think was going to happen?" She pounded her fist into the steering wheel.

Before she continued her commission count, she allowed herself to finally confront what she wanted to happen. No, it wasn't a few weeks of decadence as she coned herself into believing. "I wanted it all." Both men, a commitment, a life. Somehow she wanted them to figure it out, have a home together, and never leave each other.

Her eyes watered. She cleared her throat, and lifted her phone to call

corporate. The screen blurred and she blinked to make out the numbers.

The honk of a horn going by her and her tires tap dancing on the bumps between the lanes caused her to jolt her head up. "Oh God!" Her car straddled two lanes. Two cars passed her, one guy stuck his hand out the car window giving her the finger. She swerved, first too far into the other lane, and at last she jerked the car into one lane.

This time she didn't have Jason pulling up on the curb or Russell chastising her for looking at her phone, and she couldn't rely on them to be there.

She tossed her phone aside and grabbed the steering wheel with both

hands. No, she didn't need laser focus, her focus needed to be as sharp as a needle on one Dr. Dalton's syringes.

"Perfect, she's not here." Russell parked in the driveway, grabbed his briefcase, his groceries, his peace offering, and got out of the car. He would be completely set up before Lauren came home.

He balanced his items and let himself in, not getting the chance to step inside before Jason thrust a pink piece of paper into his face. "What's this?"

Jason shook the paper.

"What's going on?" Russell stopped.

Something was off. That indefinable quality when something was wrong encompassed him. Of course, he had that feeling since the party, since Lauren insisted on going home and complained of cramps the entire ride when he knew she didn't have her period. He put his packages down and reached for the note.

Jason held it up.

He wasn't going to play Jason's game of keep away. "Either give it to me or get out of my way."

Jason averted his eyes to the packages. "First tell me what all that is."

"I brought home some steak to grill for the three of us, and I bought Lauren a present." He could get Jason good and

held up a coveted green Jacques shopping bag. Lauren would carry her lunch in the store bag for months until it became tattered. "I know it's not the purse she wants, but I thought I would get her a little something." He reached inside and retrieved the store's green box tied with a purple ribbon. "It's just a keychain." A keychain there cost triple digits.

"It's just a guilt gift."

"You're an ass." He put the bag down, retrieved his groceries and went to walk around him.

"You're a jerk." Jason slid in his way. "That is a guilt gift."

His jaw stiffened, shooting a pain

down through his neck. If Jason was picking now to start a fight he better hurry, Lauren would be home soon, and he wouldn't allow his friend to ruin a Jacques gift for her. "What do I have to be guilty for?"

"Let me ask you something." Jason peeked in the grocery bag. "Why wouldn't we all just go out? Did we hit some relationship milestone that requires a five hundred dollar keychain? And if that is the case why didn't you tell me?"

The headache starting to pound didn't block out all the questions Jason hammered at him. "Am I not allowed to buy her something nice for no reason?"

"Not when there is a reason." Jason

reached inside the bag and pulled out one of the steaks. "Jacques and filet mignon?"

"Let me get started. Lauren will be home soon." He didn't need to justify his actions. The night Jason came home with flowers and beer, they took him back with open arms. He swallowed down the acid bile in the back of his throat.

"That will be one overdone steak." Jason put the pink paper in the bag.

He glanced down at the note written in Lauren's handwriting on top of his steaks.

"Read it aloud." Jason flicked the bag.

He balanced the bag in one hand and picked up the note in the other. "Hi guys."

"That's a bit impersonal to the two of us don't you think?" Jason tapped the letter. "We have sex with her every night. Well, every night but last night."

"Got called to the show in Vegas to help the Nevada rep." He walked in from seventy-five degree weather in the beginning of November, but still a chill took over him. "I'll be back Sunday. Lauren."

"Bradley never makes her travel unless it's to corporate. That means she asked to go." Jason filled in the blanks.

More questions than the amount of

dollars it cost to buy the keychain came to his mind. "Why didn't she call us?" he asked though he knew.

"To buy herself time." Jason breathed in as if he were priming himself for the next bit of insight he needed to offer.

He put the note back in the bag and scratched his nails across his forehead. "I wish she would have told us, maybe we could have gone with her."

Jason grabbed the bag and tossed it to the floor causing the steaks to scatter across the tile entryway. "Why? So she could sit in a hotel room staring at the two of us?"

"What the hell?" He watched the food skid to a stop and rushed forward.

Jason held his arm out. "If you won't take her out, she'll take herself out. Either that or we can all go out and you can pretend she's no better than your buddy."

He opened his mouth ready to prove Jason wrong and froze.

"Even tonight with your green bags and filet mignon." Jason got right in his face. "Was it just another way to keep us hidden so you can have your fun a bit longer? You need to think about what you want, but you can't torture her." With the words out he stomped away, kicking one of the steaks aside.

"Wait." For once he couldn't prove Jason wrong.

Jason glanced over at him.

"People aren't going to understand." He stared beyond Jason toward the hallway leading to their bedroom. Actually it was his bedroom, but they shared it now, who was he kidding? In the bedroom he didn't care about other people, they didn't matter. The world needed to be the same.

"People never understand anything. What should make this any different?" Jason rocked back and forth on his heels.

He rubbed his chin. "Does it bother you?" If Jason couldn't answer these questions no one could. This was his best friend, the one who he built forts with, who he had his first and only

cigarette with, the one who took the blame when he banged up his father's car.

Jason paced a couple steps up and a couple steps back. "I think you know I could care less what anyone thinks. I think you need to decide what you want, but remember you can't have it both ways. Lauren and I both deserve better. You deserve better."

"She wants it all." He pursed his lips. She wanted the romance and the relationship, the commitment and the security. She wanted both of them.

"What about you?" Jason crossed his arms.

What about him? He wanted Lauren, he wanted his best friend, and he wanted

them together. There was nothing like being with Lauren while Jason kissed her, watching Jason bring her to orgasm, or dare he even think waking up with her between them. For years, the three of them fought to stay together and now in the final inning he was striking out because no one would understand. As much as he tried to fit the mold, he always landed just outside. Jason didn't even bother with the mold, he kicked it aside like the steak on the floor. "What about you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Relationships." Russell may as well address it, though he sounded like a girl.

"Everything is what it is when it is.

Right now is now, but I know what I want right now." Jason shrugged his shoulders.

"How are we going to do this?" Jason turned into the answer man, his role since this began.

"Everything is what it is when it is."

Russell walked over to the bag and kicked it. Another steak flew out and to be joined by a potato and an onion. "I want to go get her."

"I have the information on the show, let's get out of here." Jason came over and picked up the groceries.

He was going to stop, tell Jason they needed to pack, they weren't prepared. Instead, he checked to make sure he had his wallet. "Let's go."

Chapter Sixteen

"Come, let me show you something."
Dr. Dalton hooked his finger toward her.

Lauren licked her lips and glanced up at the store. Jacques. Too many hours of her life were consumed with walking in this store and thinking about the treasures inside. Last time she thought she was near this store she almost killed herself. She held her bag closer to her, silently apologizing to it and to herself.

"Come on, there's not one self respecting woman who isn't dying to walk in here with a bona fide MD by her side." He held his arm out.

Damn the man for being right. Her heartbeat sped up in warning. How many nights had she laid in bed and dreamed about Gregory M. Dalton, M.D. taking her in this store? The answer was a lot, but that was before. Before when she was alone and not the filling in the most delicious sandwich cookie on the planet. Unfortunately, only crumbs were left in the box. Hesitation didn't happen at this moment, but her feet didn't move.

"Lauren?"

She forced herself forward, hooked her arm in his, and smiled. Though she set her resolve not to think about Russell and Jason, she couldn't stop. The more she tried, the worse it became. She

couldn't recall how many syringes she ordered for this man. Hell, she didn't remember what she had for dinner a half hour ago.

The door to the inner sanctum opened up to her with dinner and the introduction to some of his colleagues. Dr. Dalton even insisted they take a walk after their meal.

All she wanted to do was return to the hotel room.

Neither Russell nor Jason called her. Before she went down to the lobby to meet the doctor, she threw her phone on the far side of the bed. Now she regretted her actions, like she regretted a lot of things. What if they were trying to reach her? What if they weren't?

"Come on." He pulled the glass door open and guided her inside.

People spoke in hushed whispers in this store, as if it were a museum or a shrine. Several sales people stood at the ready, and the scent of leather and money swirled around her. She held him tighter for fear she would pass out.

Unable to focus, her attention darted between the jewelry, the belts, the scarves, even the fragrances. For the first time she entered with someone who belonged.

"I've been looking at these for quite awhile." Dr. Dalton's voice broke through her awe mixed with self-loathing. Maybe Russell didn't want to

take her out in public, not because they were a trio, but because her life centered on this store.

She blinked and glanced down at a case of men's watches.

"What do you think of this one?" He pointed to one with a huge silver face and metal strap.

A salesman stealthed in and without a word took the timepiece out.

Dr. Dalton held the watch up. "Tell me, Lauren."

Jason would think the watch was for a pussy. He didn't even wear a watch. When he wanted to know the time, he looked at his phone or asked one of them. However, Russell did wear a watch, a big one with a leather strap.

After she loosened his tie and he went to the bedroom, it was the third thing he dealt with after coming home. He took his wallet out of his pocket, emptied his front pocket of change, and took off the watch. "It's amazing."

"I collect them." He handed the watch back. "This is the brand, has been for years."

She nodded, her ears listening but her mind still running down Russell's habits. After the watch, he took off his shoes and then disappeared into the closet to change into jeans and a t-shirt or sweats. Russell changed clothes a lot. She smiled to herself. He used to wear sweats to bed, but now he wore

only boxer briefs and those usually vanished.

On the other hand, Jason was not a clothes changer. He slept with nothing, woke up and changed into whatever costume he deemed appropriate for the day, and he stayed in that until it was time to be in nothing again. The only time he switched outfits was if he were in the studio painting or sculpting.

"Lauren?" Dr. Dalton leaned into her field of vision.

Her heart jumped and she braced herself on the counter. "The watch is amazing."

"You said that." He reached forward and put his finger on her lower lip. "I think I know why you're pouting."

"Pouting?" Her lip brushed against his fingertip, but the friction didn't create any heat.

"I know what you want to see." He waved to the salesman. "Let us see one of the Valerie bags."

Warmth engulfed her body, but she still froze.

"Sir, we don't have any here." The man lifted his chin.

She exhaled, not sure if the calm that overtook her was disappointment or relief.

Dr. Dalton shook his head, reached into his pocket and handed the man a hundred dollar bill. "I'm sure this will cover the cost of a little window

shopping."

She opened her mouth, raised her hand, anything to stop this.

The man looked between the bill, her and Dr. Dalton. "She will have to come to the back." He snatched the money.

"Let's just take a look." Dr. Dalton put his hand on her shoulder and guided her away.

In dreams, or nightmares, things always moved at a surreal pace, either superfast or horribly slow. The walk to the back of Jacques store wasn't the red carpet she dreamed up. It was the nightmare of a slow trek to her execution.

The salesman led them into a gilded private room with two chairs and a

table. He went behind a secret door and reappeared carrying a huge lime green box. With much flourish, he put it on the table, took off the top and unveiled the most sought after handbag in the world.

"You have fifteen minutes." He handed the bag to Dr. Dalton and left.

"The first one you buy is never one right out of the store. You need to order it, get the color you want, the material you want." Dr. Dalton approached and looped the strap over her shoulder. "Everything should be custom." He put his hand on her chin and tilted her face up to his.

Dr. Dalton not only presented her with the bright red Valerie bag, he also

handed her the chance she waited for, planned for. She stared up at him. For three years she imagined this. The moment where a doctor would notice her, realize she could be the one. She would be the perfect doctor's wife, she trained for this career, sales was only the detour.

"I've always noticed you, but I wasn't ready." He leaned down, his eyes taking her all in, studying her. "You have very proportionate features."

Jason told her she looked like a painting. Russell rarely commented on her appearance, but since they were together he would take time out to look at her, stop what he was doing, put his hand on her cheek and give her a nod.

He didn't need words.

"Yes." Dr. Dalton moved his face closer, his breath brushing against her lips. "Very proportionate."

"Is that a good thing?" With his mouth less than two inches away from hers, she stiffened as if she were preparing herself for a shot rather than the kiss that seemed eminent.

"It is what everyone wants, what surgeons strive to give their patients." He took her chin and turned her face one way, then the other. "Beauty is all proportion and perception. With a tiny bit of help, you would be magnificent."

Sweat broke over her body giving her icy hot chills. The strange moment

before the drug took effect. "Help?"

"A little tweaking to give you the edge. You know the drill. You start out at suits bought at discount store at the mall and work your way up to designer section at the department store."

Right now her body may have well been pumped full of Novocain, everything was numb.

"Then you make your first few commission checks and get yourself the watch, the jewelry, the shoes. The little signals to let us know you are moving up." He ran his hand over her bracelet.

Jason went with her the day she bought the designer cuff and asked more than once why she wanted the one all her co-workers owned while Russell

shrugged his shoulders.

"Now you are in a holding pattern to go to the next level." He smiled, perfect lips showing off perfect teeth. "This is what you wanted all along, since the first time you stepped into my office in your buy one get one free suit. The bag, the Botox, and the baby."

He knew the drill down to the buckle on her shoe. "But..."

"It's a give and take. Don't worry about me. In return I get the secretary and the siren." He kept hold of her chin and kissed her.

His kiss started as a light peck, but his lips softened, his mouth opened, and before his tongue got anywhere near hers

all sensation came back to her body. Painful prickles of reality, no heat, no stomach drops and she stepped back.

"Oh, something unexpected." He licked his lips. "I like that."

"I have to be at the show early tomorrow." The pressure behind her eyes told her some unexpected tears wanted to escape. She unhooked herself from the handbag and handed it back.

He put the bag on the table. "I'm sure I bought enough filler to fill the Hoover Dam. It's Friday night in Las Vegas."

"I really need to be there." Her heart beat in protest and she put her hand to her chest. It wanted the impossible, while her mind screamed for her to be practical.

The salesman returned.

"As I said, I wasn't ready before, but I always caught your signals. Maybe back in Beverly Hills we'll do more than test drive the bag." He nodded at the man and took her arm. "I rarely get this kind of break from the office. We need to take advantage of these times when we have them. You'll get used to it, this is what you wanted."

She came to Las Vegas and hit the jackpot. All she needed to do was collect her winnings. "This is what I wanted."

"Did you know you can't get into someone's hotel room if you are not on the register?" Jason hit Russell on the shoulder.

Russell held up one finger and continued to fiddle with his phone.

"The man at the counter gave me a look like I was a mass murderer or something. I wish I would have got a lady, she would have succumbed to my charms." He leaned over to watch Russell type a text to Lauren simply saying to call him when she got this. "That's good, that's like girl narcotics." He pointed at the screen.

Russell hit send. "What do you mean?"

"You offered no explanation as to why to call her, didn't tell her we were here, she will have no choice but to call, she won't be able to take it. In fact, I will do the same. We will double do her." Jason got his phone, typed the exact same message and laughed. "Well, we already double do her, but I give her five minutes before she comes running."

"Don't you think it's odd she didn't answer the twenty times we called?" Russell shoved his phone in his pocket.

Jason shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Yes, he did find it odd, especially for the woman who slept with her phone as if it were a bizarre teddy bear. "Maybe there's a bad cell site

where she is." As the words exited his mouth, he didn't even believe them. When stuck with a substandard site, Lauren would walk out at least every fifteen minutes and they both would have received texts, emails and calls telling them about the cell site or lack thereof.

He stepped away and watched the people in the lobby, men and women together, a group of girlfriends, a bunch of guys with jerseys on. If Lauren would have taken them, they could have spent the weekend in Vegas and with inspiration. The lights in the lobby seemed to blare down on him. Right now, he couldn't create one of these gaudy bejeweled faux art pieces that hung all over this over designed

monstrosity of a hotel.

He stomped back to Russell. "This is your fault."

"We've already established that." Russell crossed his arms.

He opened his mouth wanting to continue.

"She's either busy with an account or punishing us, I mean me." Russell glanced down at his watch. "She's probably at dinner, I'll buy you a drink, and we'll figure out how to find her without modern technology."

"Fine." Without a choice, Jason followed him out of the lobby through the casino to one of the bars.

"Look, you'll like this place."

Russell took his position on one of the stools.

"Why is that?" Jason sat next to him.

"Look at the pretty art." Russell swiped his arm in front of himself as if presenting the art.

He scanned the dark area, strategically lit in hues of purple, fuchsia and cobalt. Cut outs in the walls revealed manufactured sculptures designed to be edgy and cool, and therefore were not either of those things to the trained eye. The faux house music pounded, and the place was starting to get packed. "I'd rather go to the jazz club." Lauren loved those types of places.

Somehow he was sure she would text

or call him back. Now he was stuck with an uncomfortable rock lodged somewhere between his chest and his stomach. "Whatever."

The bartender approached, placing two cobalt napkins in front of them and a bowl of mixed nuts.

"Two bourbons neat." Russell ordered for them.

Jason turned to him. "Asshole."

"What?"

"You won't hold Lauren's hand in public, but you will order for me at a bar. So much for being worried about appearances." He struggled to inhale. "What does anxiety feel like?"

The bartender put their drinks in front

of them.

"It feels like we need to open a tab."
Russell handed the man his credit card.

He gulped his drink down hoping somehow the alcohol would melt the sick sensation away.

"I suppose we won't be toasting to anything yet." Russell followed suit and motioned to the bartender for refills.

Life was not supposed to be anxiety ridden waiting for one girl. Life was supposed to be fun and artistic. Maybe he his artistic block came from trying too hard to make this creative endeavor work. Hell, he just made Russell drive for hours in his pursuit to have the three of them together.

This was insanity.

Once more he took in the bar, but not to take in the décor. Jason Morgan could get a different inspiration. He found it at the opposite side of the bar in the form of two blondes, one in a red dress, the other in steel grey.

After running here for one short, but missing, brunette, he needed to see if he still had it. He waited until the one in the red dress glanced over and he made the move, raising one eyebrow and his chin.

Unlike waiting for the never appearing text message, it took less than thirty seconds for both women to get up and make their way over to him. "Look." He elbowed Russell.

"Now Lauren will show up." Russell groaned.

"Let's just see what happens." Jason spun on his stool to find himself face to face with them.

The one in the red dress lifted her glass toward him. "The two of you seem lost."

Jason shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe we were looking for something."

"Oh maybe we can help you find it." Red dress sat down in the stool next to him, and steel grey pulled a stool over and sat between them.

Jason turned to Russell. He stared down in his drink, but lifted his head and

changed his focus to the woman's chest. Maybe this is what brought them to Vegas. "Well, first it looks like the two of you are in need of refills."

"Mojito," Red dress answered.

"Raspberry martini." Steel grey downed the rest of her drink and held her glass out to Russell.

Russell glanced at him before taking the glass.

After all these years together he could read his best friend's mind. The girls ordered pussy drinks.

"It's just a drink. I say we need another round all around." Jason finished his drink as well. Lauren would have ordered bourbon along with them. She spent a lot of the last eight

years trying to be part of them. She would have ordered scotch and then asked Russell for the location of the nearest bathroom. Russell's bathroom radar would kick in and somehow he would point it out, even if he had never been to the bathroom there. When Lauren returned from doing whatever women did in the bathroom, which he was sure did not include actually going to the bathroom, she would have spent the next ten minutes picking through the nuts or pretzels the bartender set out.

"So, what are the two of you here for? Are you with the doctor's convention?" Steel grey put her hand on Russell's knee.

Red dress leaned over and placed her hand on Jason's shoulder. "Are you with the convention?"

The stakes were claimed. The girls made their choice on who was with who, and Jason took his time to take in each one.

They were both blonde, at least today. He was certain the hair was fake, along with their breasts. Also, he wondered if they were artists themselves, both of them painted their makeup on with pinpoint precision. Not that any of these things were a problem, it was just that Lauren wasn't all that. Of course, she would have ordered a scotch.

The alcohol didn't help his anxiety, he swore it was actually amplifying it, and he pressed his hand to his pocket. He would have felt his phone vibrate. "We're not doctors." What was it with women and doctors?

Both women sat back.

Russell moved, causing the woman to take her hand off his leg, and he fought the need to pick this woman's hand off him. It wasn't the fact he knew they wanted doctors, once they heard he was an artist women usually melted. He simply didn't like the way this woman's hand felt on him. It was inorganic, didn't fit.

"No, in fact we're looking for

someone who is with the convention, that's why we're here." This was a terrible idea, he needed to get rid of them, and they both needed to scour the hotel looking for Laurie. Maybe she was hurt, or stuck under one of those trade show booths being crushed only inches away from her cell phone. Maybe that was why he had this sick stomach. They were connected.

"Are you waiting for doctors?" Steel grey swung her leg.

"No we're looking for the woman we're seeing." At last, Russell spoke.

Finally, Russell owned it and Jason high-fived the air. Russell didn't skirt around the situation or sprinkle it with sugar, instead, he showed his hand.

Steel grey turned the color of her dress, only a little less metallic.

"You mean the woman you're seeing." Red smiled at him.

Russell pushed his glasses up.

Jason paused. The last woman he officially dated was in eighth grade. Eve something was her name. It lasted two weeks, and when it ended she slapped him across the face. He had been talking to another girl at lunch because he was angry with Eve. "The woman we are seeing." No way would he stifle Russell's epiphany.

"You mean women?" Red tried to correct him.

"No woman. One woman, two of

us." He held up one finger, and then two fingers. With the words out, the rock in his stomach shrank to a bothersome pebble, but it was still there cutting his insides.

Both women stood. "I think we're good on the drinks, maybe you should give them to your woman." Steel gray shook her head.

"She's mad at us, well me, and she's here for the convention, but we can't find her." Russell ran his hand through his hair. "She's not returning our calls or texts, and I'm starting to get worried."

"Well, if you're here like this, it's no wonder she's silent, but I'll give you one piece of advice. If she's staying here, all you have to do is go wait by the

elevators. She'll have to show her room key before she goes up to her room, it's security." Red took her drink.

"How do you know that?" Jason wondered why he didn't think of that.

Red remained silent, and steel grey shrugged. "Maybe you should find your girlfriend. She must be something else."

"Thank you." He gave steel her drink, she earned it.

The women left.

"The woman we are seeing?" He stood.

Russell paid the tab. "It just came out."

"And it couldn't have come out before we couldn't find her?" He had to get that

one in. "I haven't seen anyone since..." He snapped his fingers trying to remember if her name was even Eve.

"Eve Burnside." Russell walked toward the exit. "She was your last monogamous relationship."

"Burnside." Jason rushed after him. "I'm not in a monogamous relationship, you're there." Is that why this worked? Why it was right? All he knew is he needed them both in order to create.

"The elevators are over there." Russell pointed in the direction they needed to take.

Jason glanced around, wondering why Russell had location radar, when the pebble in his stomach turned into an avalanche. Across the casino at the

craps tables Lauren stood with another man's arm around her. A man they both knew all too well. "That's interesting because the woman we're seeing is over there."

The cheers around the craps table vibrated Lauren's entire body, and she glanced down at her watch. The tier two designer watch that told the world she'd made it as successful sales rep. Once upon a time, she would have looked backwards up at Dr. Dalton, and told herself that someday he would be the one to give her the tier one watch.

Now, she looked backwards up at him and didn't know what to think. She was stuck. Trapped in a bizarre movie where home seemed far away. Every step took her further away. All she wanted was normal. Funny, normal would be the word she chose for her home life.

He stood with his arms on either side of her, his back pressing up against her. "You're bringing me luck." He kissed her ear and tossed the dice down the table.

Again the table went into an uproar and a huge stack of chips piled in front of them. He wrapped his arms around her. "Are you just about ready to call it a night?"

Shopping, dinner, gambling. They experienced just about all of Las Vegas. She took her first full breath in hours. "Yes, I have to get up early." Maybe Jason was still up, Russell would answer even if he were sleeping. She should have taken her cell phone with her. Pressure filled her chest. What if they were up, not sleeping, what were they doing? Look at her here with the doctor. The need to run overtook her, and she grabbed the edge of the table. What they did wasn't her concern. Not if she was here like this.

"I was thinking instead we could get a bottle of champagne sent up to my suite."

Well, she supposed they didn't experience everything Vegas had to offer unless he wanted to see a show. They didn't call this sin city for nothing. At his words her stomach coiled. Think fast her mind screamed. This man was still her account.

Wait! She spun toward him. "Dr. Dalton."

He smiled and bent down. "When we're not in the office call me Greg."

Before he kissed her, she put her hand up to his mouth. "You're my account, Dr. Dalton."

He raised his eyebrows.

She had to tiptoe around this. Many other things needed to happen before the

sharing of champagne and hotel rooms, such as finding Jason and Russell. She ground her teeth together. Why did it have to matter? Russell didn't want her and Jason was Jason.

A part of her begged to take Dr. Dalton's offer. Tell him she changed her mind. Who cared if he was her account? It didn't matter before. "We haven't even gone out as anything other than an account and rep. Remember this night started out as a gift from my company. I have the expense report to prove it."

"You are quite the challenge." He moved his hands down to her hips. "I'll tell you what, even with the little taste you gave me, I will be a perfect

gentleman. When we get back home we will go out. My treat, no expense reports or write offs."

She got a stay of execution. "That's better."

"I know the owner of Stephan's, we'll get the chef's table, then maybe go to the theatre, and have that champagne." He reached over to grab his chips. "I'll walk you back to your room."

Damn her. She looked up to the one of the huge, gaudy chandeliers wishing one would drop down on her head. Damn her for being offered champagne and wanting Russell's barbeque instead. Damn her for stepping into Jacques but wishing she was organizing Jason's

paints. Before she could be with Greg, she had to deal with them. They would reassure her they had no future. Damn her for not moving out and choosing to live her dream. "You're on a winning streak, you stay here and I will see you at the show tomorrow."

He paused, turned toward the table and back to her. "Get some sleep, we can't have you with puffy eyes. I'll rescue you for lunch after my first session."

"Okay." At least she didn't lose all her chips. She had lunch tomorrow after she killed her dream.

He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "I have to stay in check, we're still on company time."

"Goodnight." She sped out of the casino toward the hotel lobby. Her stilettos stung her feet, but once she was far enough away, she broke into the run she fought before.

The people she passed turned to mere smudges of color flying by her, but at last she found herself at the elevators to the hotel rooms.

"Room key, please." The security guard blocked her way.

She slipped as she stopped herself, and opened her handbag. Nothing was easy.

"Yes, room key please," a male voice said behind her.

Her body seized, unable to move.

"Unless you were going somewhere else," a second, deeper voice chimed in.

"Oh my God." With her body shaking, she turned.

Russell stood less than a foot away from her, one hand in his pocket, the other clenched. "If you weren't going back to your room let us know."

She put her hand over her mouth to stop herself from speaking too soon, and looked at Jason leaning back on his heels, arms crossed.

"I guess we'll leave Laurie with another choice."

"I was just thinking about you." She winced at her trite words.

"Was that when you didn't answer our

calls? Or was that when you were out half the night?" Russell's nostrils flared.

"I had an account meeting." She stepped toward them, either wanting to slap their faces or run into their arms.

"Lauren." Jason shook his head. "We've been here five hours."

She curled her lip over her teeth and bit down. They saw her, but they didn't understand. On automatic, she lunged toward them, toward safety, comfort and what she wanted.

Jason jumped back.

Russell caught her, but held her at arm's length. "Tell us what you want to do."

Her heart cried for what it wanted, beating fast enough and loud enough to

overpower her mind, her questions. They came here for her. With her hand shaking she located her room key in her purse and held it out to them.

Russell took the key, walked past her and flashed the key to the guard.

"Jason."

"Not now." He followed Russell.

She went after them, glancing at the guard. He shook his head. Somehow she gambled and even with a sure thing, she lost.

Chapter Seventeen

Lauren's hotel suite was designed for sex and lovers. If Russell had played his cards right they would have been indulging in Lauren, rather than staring out at a window overlooking the Las Vegas strip.

The lights put on their own show. Perfect entertainment to watch after one was spent and relaxed from multiple climaxes. From the thirtieth floor, the strip looked serene, even though utter chaos reigned down below.

He turned and took in the rest of the suite. The oversized bed, the couch,

multiple televisions.

He never even found out if he held a winning hand. Instead, he folded.

Except for Lauren's broken whisper telling them her room number, the three of them hadn't said a word. They entered the suite and she headed straight for the bathroom.

Jason paced the perimeter of the sitting room. He picked up a knick-knack then put it down, and moved over to the desk and lifted the pen. "Stop looking at me." He uncapped the pen, holding the point up to his face.

Russell chewed his lip and lost himself in a stare.

"What?" Jason threw the pen down.

"Don't you have a plan?" He

grimaced as the words left his mouth.

Jason opened the desk drawer and slammed it shut. "I'm not sure how mad I am, and I'm not sure who I'm mad at."

"She was with another man." He pushed his glasses up and squeezed the bridge of his nose, wishing he could squeeze the image out of his mind. Over a dozen times now he watched, even helped, dare he say participated in Jason making love to Lauren, but the sight of that other man made him want to punch his hand through a wall, or preferably Dr. Dalton's plastic face.

"I am trying not to break anything, can you not bring that up?" Jason pounded his fist into the desk.

"What do you think is going on?" Never once through this whole thing did he imagine losing her and he kicked at the floor. The repercussions of every one of his abrupt actions throbbed through his head. One second he agreed to try this, the next he threw it out.

"How can you ask that?" Jason hit the desk again. "She found someone to take her out!"

"Maybe she doesn't think this could work." Russell shook his head. "Look how fast she ran to someone else."

"Maybe that's what you think." Jason pointed at him.

"Maybe you never care for the consequences of your actions." He shot

back.

"Maybe you need to apologize for being embarrassed of her and of me."

"You want me to apologize for another man kissing her?" The time for apologies ended the second another man's lips touched her.

Before Jason answered or they went through another round of accusations, the bathroom door clicked open and Lauren tiptoed out.

The entire drive to Vegas all he thought about was how he would rush up to Lauren and grovel. When they caught her with Dr. Dalton, the man who appeared as if he could be a poster child good looking and stable, he wanted to walk away, tell Jason they were insane

for ever trying this in the first place.

She came forward, took them all in and lowered her gaze to the floor.

After what took place there would be no groveling, and he waited, assessing her.

At the beginning of this evening he knew she must have looked magnificent. Sophisticated black dress, her hair down long, high heels to make her legs appear long, even if she were short in stature. Only Lauren could pull off a business sexy look in her own way.

Over the years she came into her own. Gone was the girl who would put on anything purple or anything in sequins, and in her place was a woman

who made men fall to their knees.

Who was he kidding? Purple, sequins, or purple sequins, he always wanted her.

Now she appeared as if she were a melting statue of what walked out this evening for her account dinner. She still wore the dress, but the makeup had long been cried away leaving only red, swollen eyes. The heels were kicked away somewhere, and she pulled her hair back in defeat.

God, she was gorgeous.

"I need to say something." Her voice came out low and broken.

"No!" Instinct took over and he ran to her. "I'm going to speak first."

She looked up at him with wide, wet

eyes. "Russell."

"Russell." Jason joined.

He closed his eyes and held up his hand. "We are so sorry. We can't expect you to make love to us, and then hide what we are every time we step out the door. We can't blame you for wanting another man. We will figure this out. We are so sorry."

She didn't speak. He opened his eyes to find her biting her lip with her nose crinkled in the way that told him she was going to burst into tears. It was the same expression as when a movie had one of those unexpected tragic endings and she wanted him to somehow fix the director's error.

Still, she remained silent, and he tightened his jaw. What if she was turning the tables on them? Giving them an unexpected ending. Did she want that man?

"Hold up." Jason put one hand on his shoulder and one on Lauren's. "We need to make a few things very clear here."

Her focus darted between the two of them.

"Lauren, you have to believe us." Russell licked his lips, at the moment his whole body seemed dry, hot, parched. "Please say something."

"Before she says something, I must say something." Jason went between them.

“Why don’t we let her talk?” Russell managed to get the question out through clenched teeth.

“Because, though the three of us may be together, I can speak for myself.”

"Oh God." She finally let the tears go and lunged forward.

"Whoa!" Jason caught her before she fell flat on her face.

Russell pulled her in. She hid her face in his chest and said something, but between her crying and her voice being muffled by his shirt, he couldn't make it out. "What?"

She shook her head.

While he was usually the recipient of Lauren's tears, Jason was the ultimate

interpreter of the indecipherable cry.
"What?"

Jason held up a finger and tapped her. "Hey, what's with the water works?"

She answered with a sniff.

"Lauren." Russell tried this time.

She pulled back and faced Jason.

"Did you mean what you said?"

"Yes, we did." Jason nodded.

"Don't speak for me." Russell moved into her field of vision. "I'm the one who spoke."

"It is you who needs to stop speaking for me." Jason shoved him aside. "You said we didn't blame her for wanting another man, but I say speak for yourself. Also, for the record, I never

wanted or tried to hide the three of us, so I don't say I'm sorry. For someone who wouldn't do as much as go out to dinner with us, you are sure throwing the 'we' and 'us' word around a lot.”

“Isn't that what we all wanted?” He held his hand out between the two of them.

“For the record, I have to say I was impressed by the way you told the two girls at the bar that you were looking for the woman we are seeing.” Jason held his hand up for a high five.

Lauren blinked.

"Jason." He waved his hand, a mock flag to stop the race of Jason's mouth.

Jason sped by him. “They tried to

correct Russell twice before realizing we were both seeing the same woman.”

She pressed her hand to her chest.

“Lauren.” He would have to be the mop again and explain this. Women at bars, men at gambling tables, this was a game of craps, and they had no dice.

She held her palm up to him. “Did you really tell some women at a bar that you and Jason were seeing the same woman?”

He swallowed, giving himself time to choose the perfect words. While he observed the happenings with Lauren and the doctor, she didn’t witness the two of them at the bar. At this moment they didn’t need her to envision her own version of what happened. “Yes.”

She shifted her attention to Jason. "When you said the three of us were together, did you mean it?"

"Hold on, let me rewind." Jason glanced up at the ceiling. "If I said it, it must be true."

"Can you tell me what that means?" Her voice came out laced with both hope and terror.

Russell straightened up, he needed to know the answer as well and in this case, Jason set the rules.

Jason paced around in a circle, stopping back in front of Lauren. "I think we have enough players in our game. Until we figure this out you shouldn't see other guys."

Russell nodded. "No other men or doctors."

"Does that also mean that until we figure this out you don't see women in bars?" She curled her lower lip over her teeth and bit down.

Jason tapped his finger against his chin. "I would have to say that would be included. No bars, nowhere else either."

"I would definitely say that's included." Russell held up his finger. "But no men, you have enough." This point needed to be made clear. Watching her with someone else even if nothing happened was like watching Jason get kicked in the stomach and then

getting kicked in the stomach himself.
Double the damage.

"Are we only playing at home or are we allowed to go outside to play?" She turned her back to them.

Before Russell answered he paused. No matter what, he needed to make damn sure he could do what she asked.

Jason leaned back on his heels.

The little black cloud drifted over his head. People would talk, they would assume things, they wouldn't understand. The looks, the stares, the whispers would rain down on them.

He swallowed, willed the cloud away and tried to picture the light that always came after a storm. "It includes all playgrounds."

She spun back around. "I'm sorry."

As if they were drawn to each other, both he and Jason went to her, taking her into their arms.

Jason pressed his lips to the back of her head. "Don't do it again."

"No." Russell went with his instinct and lowered his mouth to hers. They stepped over the threshold and would reveal themselves to the world. He would have to deal with it or lose them both.

The lips, all four of them, were the right lips. These lips gave her the swirl in

her stomach, the heat in her body, and made her heart swell until she couldn't catch her breath.

They all ended up on the bed among the overabundance of pillows and blankets, and she tried to lose herself in the fantasy these two men turned into reality, but still the questions lingered in her mind, replaying over and over again on an endless loop. What were they really doing? What would have happened if they didn't show up? What did she want?

She sampled Russell's lips as if she never tasted him before. His kiss reminded her of one of the first they shared, tentative and testing at first, building into passionate and powerful.

He found his zone, pressed their bodies together and opened his mouth.

But she had two men, and now after being together almost every night, the insecure, uncertain movements of new lovers disappeared, and in their place were three people who learned how to coordinate themselves in a beautiful, fluid dance.

Russell took a breath, and she automatically turned to Jason. He took her into his arms, put one hand behind her head and crushed his lips to hers, moaning as he tangled their tongues.

Jason trailed his mouth down to her ear as Russell went to reclaim her mouth, but she pulled back.

"Lauren." Russell pulled her closer.

"You came for me." She looked between the two most amazing men, instead of replaying all the questions, trying to focus on how they rescued her. Their gesture nothing short of any romantic movie. They were always there, always. From the day Jason found her in English literature to this moment. No one who knew them could be forced to choose. At least not her, she wanted to be selfish and have them both.

"I hate when you disappear." Jason pulled her hair out of her ponytail. "Almost as much as I hate the artwork in this hotel."

She moved his bangs aside. At the

moment they didn't need adjusting, but she missed doing it today.

Jason caught her hand and kissed the back.

"We had to come." Russell ran his thumb across her jaw. "I had to come."

Shivers ran through her body and she removed his glasses. She wanted back what she missed last night. A night between the two men she loved. Never again would she dismiss these precious moments. If she had it her way she would fit them in a Valerie bag, hold it to her chest and never let the go.

Russell blinked a couple of times as if he were trying to keep his eyes open. Still when she twisted around to put the glasses on a table he leaned in and

pressed his lips to the juncture between her neck and her shoulder.

She bit her lip. Every one of her nerve endings reacted to each of their touches.

"It's feels great just to be in a bed." Jason unzipped her dress.

The cool air on her exposed skin warmed when he trailed his lips across her back.

"I'm just relieved we're all here." Russell found her lips once more.

Slow soft touches and caresses designed to reconnect rather than arouse made it easy to lose herself.

"Give me a few and I'll order some room service. I'm dying." Jason slipped

his hands inside her dress and hugged her close.

"I'll do it, I'm getting up." Russell leaned back on the pillows. "We need to take care of Lauren."

"Yes, we need to make sure she is fed, watered and doesn't feel the need to run to any more medical professionals." Jason's laugh vibrated through her, jolting out of her dream.

"Wait." Her chest tightened at her realization and she sat up.

"Laurie?" Jason didn't as much say her name as he yawned it.

She got on her knees and faced them. Until this second she never even considered what they went through today. Every question focused on her

needs. She only gobbled up what they gave her and in return fired a quick apology, not taking time to notice if it landed anywhere in their vicinity.

Now she actually took them in. There they lay on the bed both appearing as if they walked through the desert to get from Los Angeles to Vegas and all she did was let them tend her, dry her tears and carry her to the bed.

At some point today Jason must have been in the studio and no doubt was planning on staying there with his paint splattered t-shirt and ripped jeans. She knew that shirt well, and ran one fingernail across his chest playing connect the dots with the droplets a

moment before assessing her other man.

Russell also didn't bother changing out of his work attire. She reached forward and grabbed his tie, twisting it through her fingers.

"I was waiting for you." Russell pushed himself up on his elbows.

Of course, she knew that, he waited every night, but somewhere along the way she forget about Russell's ties and Jason's bangs and everything else, deciding instead to be a spoiled child who threw a temper tantrum the moment her favorite toys were taken away.

"What's wrong?" Now Jason sat up.

"Nothing." She gave Jason a soft kiss on the lips and pushed him back, climbing over him and getting out of the

bed. "Don't move. I have to do a couple of things. Just lay down."

Without protesting, they both slumped back among the pillows. She rushed into the bathroom and headed straight for the sink, turning on the water and staring at her own worst enemy in the mirror.

Tonight she almost lost everything, her best friends, her family, and her loves, just because she wanted it all.

She tossed a couple of washcloths under the hot water and then shimmied out of her mess of a dress before heading over to the closet.

Yes, she had plenty of clothes with her. The two men in the other room came to her without bothering to take a

toothbrush.

She slipped on the robe she brought with her, corralled the robes that came with the room and returned to the sink to retrieve the hot towels. Before she returned to them, she needed to answer the questions, or at least the one big question.

One last time she gazed into the mirror. "What are we doing?"

Eight years ago these men took her in, allowed her into their amazing friendship and became her family. Now they were willing to sacrifice everything to share her and she better make damn sure of what she wanted before she walked out there again.

With the robes and the washcloths,

she headed out.

One last time she would be selfish, but would make sure she did no damage.

They gave her a gift, one she wouldn't squander.

Yes, this time was a present from them to her. Something temporary, like a box of chocolate truffles or a beautiful bouquet of red roses. Like those decadent offerings she would accept this her whole heart, stop second-guessing and never look back. In return for this bit of magic she would make sure she gave them a something as well.

She returned to find them in the same position and went to Jason first, setting a robe by his feet, taking off his shoes and

wiping his face down with the washcloth. There were three in this relationship, or whatever this was, and she needed to do her part.

"Thank you." He pursed his lips for a kiss.

She gave him a quick peck and went to her other weary traveler, repeating her actions, but making sure to remove Russell's tie.

"I love when you take care of me." He squeezed her hand.

"Come here." Jason patted the middle of the bed. "We kept your spot for you."

"I'm on my way." She made one last pit stop and opened the mini bar, taking two bottles of water and some nuts and

cheese and crawled in between them with her stash.

"I love my spot." Never again would she take this for granted.

"This is where you belong." Russell pulled her down.

"Yes." She closed her eyes wishing it could be forever and reminding herself to enjoy the gift.

Chapter Eighteen

"Didn't Vegas use to be cheap?" Jason tossed his credit card across the counter.

"Yes, I think at one time it was home of the fifty cent breakfast and dollar shrimp cocktail." Lauren leaned back on the counter. She needed the support. Her legs didn't want to hold her up. They may as well be made out of elastic bands, they certainly managed to contort themselves enough last night, and today they were weak in protest.

After they ate mini bar treats and fell

asleep, they woke up two hours later recharged and ready to really use the hotel bed. True to her word, she would make the most of every second and appreciate this for as long as it lasted. "Now it's the capitol of the ten dollar water and the six dollar bagel." The three of them managed to drink at least thirty dollars in liquid before they fell asleep staring at the strip lights from the hotel window.

"So, what do you think?" Jason took his receipt and turned around to give her the view.

She raised her eyebrows. Those were about the only muscles on her that weren't spent. Jason was now donning a new pair of black jeans, a black t-shirt

and a black vest. "Perfect." Any other man could buy the same pieces and they would never look like him. No one had his edge. "You have a tag come here."

He approached. "Please detag me."

She reached around the back of his collar, pulled the tag off and was rewarded with a light kiss on the lips. Out of the corner of her eye she caught the sales lady watching them.

"Detag me too." Russell came out of the dressing room adjusting the sleeve of his new burgundy button down and dark blue jeans. Both men decided that if they were going to spend the day with her that they needed a change of clothes.

She held her hands out, and

Russell came right for her. Unlike Jason who was put together by his lack of being put together. Russell was always put together because he was together. While Jason whirled around the store picking out what he wanted and trying it on to stellar results, Russell thought and planned and took several things with him to try on.

"Am I now fit to go walking through Las Vegas with you?" He looked down at himself while she pulled the label off the back of his pants.

"Absolutely." She ran her hand along his waist as she turned him. Something was missing. "Russell."

"Lauren," he whispered.

Maybe he didn't want her touching

him like this, and she jerked her hands away.

He caught her hands and wrapped them around his waist. "I have something to tell you."

She licked her lips and tilted her face up to him, once more getting a glimpse of the lady at the counter. The sales person had her arms crossed and stared at them. "What is it?"

He bent down to her ear. "I'm going commando."

Well, now she knew what was missing. What was also missing was his apprehension about showing her any attention in public. "Thank you for explaining." Her gaze traveled down to

the front of his pants.

"Stop looking there." He took hold of her chin.

"Why?"

"Cause the three of us will never make it out of our hotel room, and then it would have been a waste to buy these clothes."

"Well, I know how you hate to waste."

"Yes, so I won't waste this opportunity." He guided her mouth to his and gave her quite more than a peck.

Heat generated right in her middle. Not from the kiss, per se, but from the fact that Russell kissed her in the middle of store right after Jason kissed her.

Now the saleslady was practically

lying on the counter.

"Here are the clothes you came in with." A salesman came from the back carrying a huge bag. He looked at Jason, Russell and then her and broke out into a wide smile.

"I'll take that." Jason slung the bag over her shoulder and grabbed her hand. "I think it's time we vamoose."

Russell straightened up and claimed her other hand. "Let's go and just have a day to ourselves."

In unison both men squeezed her hands, and she took a breath and turned back to the lady as they walked out.

The saleslady gave her a thumb up.

She smiled. This was the first time

they were out as a...well, as them. They walked through the casino and through the hotel. Some people gave them naughty glances, or pointed, but for the most part they walked together as a unit. As it should be. No matter what, she kept her head high, it was possible she could run into someone she knew, but this was what she wanted when she walked out of the bathroom last night and slid in bed between them.

"Are you sure you don't have to go the show?" Russell asked before they went outside. "Or have anymore account meetings?"

"I already did my job." She stumbled at the non-mention of Dr. Dalton. Upon her return to Beverly

Hills she would have to deal with this fiasco. What happened here wouldn't stay here.

"A Cadillac?" Lauren jumped up from the seat at the valet station and clapped at the bright red boat. "Is this new?"

"Well it's from 1959, but it's new to the dealership." Jason took Lauren's hand and led her to the car. "We can all fit in the front seat."

She kissed him and repeated her action with Russell.

Jason gave the valet some cash while Russell coordinated loading Lauren's

luggage and shopping bags. Since the blow up Friday night, Russell had been nothing but the attentive third of their trio. Never skipping a beat when it came to some PDA with Lauren. Yes, they got a few looks, but mostly from jealous women or admiring men. He could have lived without the men gawking at her.

Yesterday was the first day he would have called them actually together. Out in public for the first time, they spent their time shopping, gambling, going to restaurants and even though they both offered to take Lauren to a show or a club, they ended up back in bed. It was them but amplified, exactly what he thought would happen.

He slid into the driver's seat. Lauren took the middle and Russell slammed the trunk and got in beside her.

"I need to thank your parents for sending someone to get my car." She grinned at him, using her teeth and everything.

He shook his head. In their haste to get to Vegas, not only did they not pack, but they also didn't account for the fact that they would have two cars. Luck, or in this case, his parents, stepped in and arranged for a vintage car to be delivered to a customer. In exchange the driver would bring back Lauren's car.

"All right. In five hours we should be back in L.A." Russell pointed forward

and put his arm around Lauren. "We're ready."

He left the car in park and strummed his fingers on the steering wheel. After countless road trips with the two of them he knew they were still far away from actual take off, this was all part of the launch sequence.

Lauren opened her purse and stuck her head inside, no doubt checking for the hundredth time that she had everything. He watched her take out her phone and then put it back, find a lip gloss, and locate a pack of gum. Lauren never chewed gum, but she always had some. "Do you want any gum?"

"Do I need gum?" Russell held his hand out.

Okay this was a deviation from the normal gum question. The gum question had not come up yet since they became a trouple. Normally Russell smacked his lips together and held his hand out.

“Let me check.” Lauren leaned over and gave him a kiss, finishing with sucking on his lower lip. “You’re delicious.”

Well, normally after Russell took the gum then he would get a piece also. However, this wasn’t the piece he was after and he tapped her.

She turned around to him and held up the gum package.

He shook his head and raised his eyebrows.

“Oh.” She licked her lips and leaned in, giving him a matching kiss to Russell’s complete with a little tongue twirl and a lip suck. “Delicious as well.”

“You’re delectable.” He gave her an extra peck and stopped. They did need to drive home, and then they could continue their taste test. He glanced over at the Valet, the young dude gave him a wink. Yeah, he knew it was hot.

“Well, now I really want to get home.” Russell tapped the dashboard.

No, not quite yet. The gum exchange may have taken them for a bit of a turn, but there were still a few more parts to their ritual. He put his hands at ten and

two to pretend like he was going to drive forward and give it about another second before she realized she was thirsty. While he could have said something on the way out, he needed to get a second alone.

“Uh oh.” Lauren continued to dig through her purse.

“What’s wrong?” Russell put his head in her bag with her.

“I think we forgot drinks.” She lifted her head and pouted.

He kept his mouth shut. Now he only needed to have Russell offer to get them and mention what would inevitably happen with too much liquid to get them both out of the car.

“If we drink too much then we’ll have

to stop on the way.” Russell frowned.

For a man who hated to stop on a road trip, Russell was the first one to call a time out.

Lauren bit her lip. “Russell.” Her tone was that of a child who needed to admit they ate the entire jar of cookies.

“Oh man, we haven’t even moved an inch. We are totally off schedule.” He opened the car door. “I may as well get the drinks.”

“You’re chariot will wait here.” Jason turned off the car and both Russell and Lauren left. He wasn’t sure what schedule they were on except having to get home at some point today, but Russell loved to plan. Of course, now

he had what he wanted, at least five minutes of alone time, and he dug his phone out of his pocket and did something he was sure both his bedmates would be proud of, and checked his email.

He scrolled through the ads, the jokes his mother left him, and past the safety articles his father forwarded to find one from Steve and the one he waited for.

Not ready to face the real email, he opened the email from Steve.

This was a group email. Steve knew how to market himself. Gone were the days where an artist's work spoke for itself, now they had to become social media experts.

His jaw tightened as he scanned the

email describing his excellent showing and inviting him to his next event. Steve was moving up in the world, out of the galleries in the valley and right into Hollywood. After all the particulars, Steve included quotes from the reviews of his last show.

He pressed his lips together. If Lauren were here, she would read it with Russell and tell him not to worry about, but it was time he faced it.

It was time he faced a lot of things.

He skimmed the raving reviews and focused on the last one.

On short notice, Steve turned out a sophisticated and timely showing. His is a true talent built on what he loves –

Catherine Dumar.

He started the car and turned on the air conditioning. Unlike automobiles of today, the noise took over the car, and he only wished it would silence his thoughts. No, he wasn't vain enough to think Catherine the Terrible was thinking of him when she wrote that review, but she may as well aimed a dagger right at his chest.

With a quick glance around to make sure he was still alone, he took a breath clicked the email he both waited for and loathed.

Jason,

I'm glad you decided to take my suggestion and take some contract work. Here is your first assignment.

You will find all the particulars in the attached document. You will do wonderful. Call me if you have any questions, and please email me back confirmation that you got this.

Bette

He wanted to trash the email. Pretend he didn't receive it and never do any art for hire. He wondered what Catherine Dumar would say about the book cover, or what her review would be if he showed her what he was really sketching lately.

His thumb hovered over the delete button.

The car door opened.

"Did you miss us?" Lauren stuck her

head in the car and held out a bottle of water for him.

"Absolutely." He took the water and Lauren got inside.

"Here." Russell sat down with a bag from the hotel gift shop and tossed a candy bar at him.

"Gracias." He should have seen the candy bar coming.

"Don't say we don't take care of you." Russell slammed the door. "Let's get this show on the road. Time to make things happen."

Yes, time to make things happen.

He put his foot on the brake, but before putting the car in gear, he tapped a quick message on his phone.

Got the assignment, I will have it to

you by the deadline. Jason.

"Let's go." He hit send and put the car in gear.

Chapter Nineteen

"Sinclair party of three." With Lauren's hand in his, Russell made his way through the crowd and gave his name to the Maître d'.

She moved closer to him.

He interlaced their fingers as they followed the man in the suit to the booth he requested when he made the reservation. "I assume the restaurant is to your liking?"

"I love this place." Lauren kept hold of him and slid into the booth, giving him a kiss as they sat. "What's the occasion?"

Yes, he knew this was her favorite place one normally reserved for celebrating birthdays and other life events. Located west of Beverly Hills, this Italian Bistro wasn't the latest go-to place, it had been *the* place for years, and would probably remain that way for many years to come. Unlike the more trendy locales known more for their fancy drinks, designed interior atmospheres, and paparazzi, this restaurant was famous for its scaloppini, red leather booths, and true Hollywood royalty.

Before Jason took his spot on her other side, he leaned over to the man. "Please make sure they bring us the

bottle of champagne I ordered. It's under *Morgan*." He lifted his eyebrows at them.

In the decades of knowing this man, Russell never knew Jason to make reservations let alone call ahead for anything. Apparently they both wanted to make Lauren feel special tonight.

"Of course, sir." The man nodded. "I already have it chilling."

"Champagne?" Lauren reached for Jason. "What's the occasion?"

He scooted over and took her hand as well. "You love champagne."

Lauren's smile outshined the candle on the table and she gave Jason a matching kiss to his. Everything was falling into place. It was one thing to go

out in Vegas where anything went, but he needed to make sure they all did something here on their home turf. This week was much calmer than the weeks before. Everyone worked hard, and it was as if they all found their groove.

Russell wondered if the Maître d' would do or say anything, but he only handed out the menus and motioned for a waiter.

Another man rushed over with the champagne and glasses, uncorking the bottle and pouring the drinks.

"Well since this is the Sinclair party, why don't you do the honors?" Jason scooted closer to Lauren and lifted his glass.

A challenge hung in between Jason's words, floated among the bubbles in the champagne. Fine, Russell would play the game until Jason gave up whatever bothered him. Tonight was about Lauren and he lifted his glass, pausing to determine an appropriate toast in their situation. Did he clink her glass and tell her he could hardly wait to watch his best friend make love to her tonight, or he could hardly wait to see what new configuration they would try tonight? Maybe this was why Jason wanted him to propose the toast. "To us."

Jason shook his head, but his sentiment must have worked for Lauren because she straightened up in her seat

and tapped her glass against theirs.

"To us." She put the glass to her lips.

"To us." Jason chimed in and leaned over. "I can hardly wait to watch Russell make love to you tonight."

He put his arm around Lauren and prepared himself for Lauren to scowl at Jason.

Instead, she took a sip of her drink. "And I can hardly wait for Russell to watch us."

"I'll drink to that." Jason downed his champagne.

No wonder they both had to have her. "You can count me in." Russell drank as well.

"So, you never told me the occasion." Lauren faced him.

For the first time since this started, he had the answer. "Is there anything wrong a little romance?" Yes, it was smarmy, but she deserved a little smarm, and romance. He reached into his blazer pocket and held out the box he had been saving for her since before Vegas.

At the sight of the lime green box and purple ribbon she gasped and put her hand to her chest. "Russell." Her cheeks turned bright red.

"It's for you." He balanced the box in his hand.

"Can I open it?" As if she were handling a fragile, priceless piece of glass, she took the box and placed it in front of her.

"No, I only got you the box." He winked at her, getting in a little flirting.

With a laugh she touched his cheek, untied the ribbon and glanced at him.

He nodded.

She lifted lid and with only what he would call reverence, plucked the keychain out of the box, cradling it in her palm. "Russell."

In one million years he would never understand why a black leather letter J with orange stitching would cause Lauren to gaze at him as if he just handed her one of his vital organs, though the trinket probably cost as much. Obviously Jason didn't understand either because he kept tilting his head as if

seeing the small keepsake from a different angle would change things.

"I love it." She held it up first to him and then to Jason like a grand crystal ready to catch the light. "I just love it. Look at it."

Jason gave it another head tilt. "Awesome."

She turned back to him. "Am I allowed to kiss you in the middle of the restaurant?"

"You kissed me before." He played a little hard to get, but moved closer.

"I want to kiss you, Russell." She put the keychain back in the box.

No more inhibition, not if he wanted this. "I want to be kissed."

She wrapped her arm around his neck

and pressed her lips to his, taking the lead and opening her mouth. Their tongues tangled together and the sweet tang of the champagne combined with her lip gloss creating a delicacy better than any dish at this restaurant.

For a moment he lost himself. He curled his arm around her waist and went to deepen the kiss, when she pulled back, giving him a final lower lip suck before staring into his eyes.

No, he and Jason may never understand the keychain, but the glow radiating off Lauren made the bauble worth every dollar, and maybe an organ or two. If her kiss was any indication, they were both going to get it good

tonight. Bonus. "I'm glad you like it."

"There are a lot of things I like." She moved her gaze down to his lap.

"It's all yours." Two could play the sexual innuendo game.

"Don't think I forgot you." Jason moved her hair aside and leaned in.

She put her hand on his upper thigh but turned to Jason. "I don't know if I can handle all these presents."

Russell put his hand over hers. "Yes, you can." No matter the gift, Lauren always appreciated it and loved receiving it. On another note, once more his best friend seemed to enter into some sort of competition when it came to showing some attention to their girl.

Jason handed her a square envelope,

the type only artists or artistic types used.

She folded back the flap on the envelope and pulled out a sketch. "This is amazing."

Unlike a keychain only girls understood, anyone could appreciate his drawing of three intertwined hearts, two blue ones with a pink one in the middle against a geometric black and white background. "Beautiful." Russell nodded.

"I thought you could add it to the collection you keep in your wallet." Jason helped her put it back in the envelope.

She tilted her head at him. "I want to

kiss Jason now."

Her breathy tone caused Russell to arch his back. He needed to get used to this, and damn it he wanted her to kiss Jason, if nothing more than to give his buddy the same boner he was now sporting, but if this were a competition, he bet his was bigger. "Then I think you should."

"I think you should, too." Jason tapped her.

She licked her lips, and gave Jason a matching kiss to the one he received earlier.

Russell took a quick peek around the restaurant. Yes, a few people were glancing in their direction, but it wasn't as if they had a giant arrow pointing at

them. One man nodded and a woman smiled at him.

Rather than smiling back, or giving the man a thumb up, he put his hand in Lauren's hair.

When she finished her kiss and pulled back, Jason moaned, and tried to get more, but she smiled, and wiped the last remnants of her gloss off his lips.

Jason glanced at him, and he nodded as they both spoke the secret language of unfulfilled hard-ons, one thing they could agree on tonight.

"I don't have anything to give the two of you. I was waiting for the holidays." She pursed out her lower lip.

Jason poured them all some more

champagne. "Before we get to the good stuff we have to make it through Thanksgiving."

Now it was Russell's turn to groan, more like grunt, and down his drink. They had their tradition, Thanksgiving with his parents, and the day after Thanksgiving with Jason's. Only Lauren didn't bitch through the entire ordeal.

"Russell, how do you want to handle your parents?" Lauren's tone turned from fun and flirty to serious.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to know why she asked him this question and not Jason. If tonight turned into the competition Jason wanted to create, his best friend would win the parent department in a landslide. All his life he

wanted to be a Morgan. Jason's parents were...eccentric.

Again he scanned the restaurant and then at Lauren and Jason considering her question and envisioning walking in with the two of them in this situation. He refused to ever torture Lauren with a repeat performance of the party from hell. "This is our life." He took the initiative and pulled her in for a light kiss.

"I say we get back to the subject of what Lauren can give us right now." Jason slid her glass toward her.

"Well, I suppose I have to think of a way to thank the two of you for such an amazing and romantic date." In one

slow motion, she lifted her glass and ran her tongue around the rim. "Champagne makes me incredibly horny."

"This present is working for me."
Russell put his napkin over his lap.

"I'm liking it." Jason poured his champagne into her glass.

She gulped her drink down. "I don't know if I can outdo this."

"I think I can outdo it."
Jason focused on Russell and lifted his empty glass toward him.

Interesting. At last, Jason made the formal challenge. The man may as well have thrown down a white glove. Since returning from Vegas he noticed a change in his friend, but this dinner solidified his suspicion. He hit his glass

against Jason's. "Game on."

"Let's go to my room." Jason pushed her up against the hallway wall and with one last swipe of his lips across hers, got down on his knees.

Her head hit the drywall, and she opened her eyes. Rather than boxes, tonight their clothes paved a trail from the door to the hallway where they encountered their first roadblock.

"We will go to my room, I'm set up for it." Russell rushed to them, skidding in front of her and shoving Jason out of the way. He took her by the hips and

kissed her stomach. "I'm going to start my dessert here, and finish in my bed."

Jason caught himself on the wall, moving over and prodding Russell to one side of her. "My bed is where tonight's festivities are happening." He leaned over, kissing her waist and nibbling on her hip and working his way lower.

For the first time since they left the restaurant her men quieted down. The two of them seemed to be jockeying for position with her from the second she finished her tiramisu. As they drove home, both men took the time to kiss her and sneak a hand up her dress. However, their background of bickering about the most mundane things, from

who would drive to who would make breakfast, kept her from any enjoyment.

They returned home and the beautiful coordinated dance the three of them usually possessed disappeared in favor of both men rushing to rid themselves and her of their clothes, and make it to the bedroom. The only question was which room? Did it matter?

With the stalemate in the hallway, they seemed to calm down, almost recapturing their groove. Now she remembered her resolve to make the most of each moment with them no matter what happened, and she relaxed against the wall.

Russell sucked and kissed down her

leg.

She moaned as he licked the sensitive spot behind her knee and continued until he reached her ankle. "Russell."

Jason took the alternate direction, straightening up and focusing his hands and mouth on her wrist, her arm and her breasts. "Say my name." His voice vibrated through her.

"Jason." She tangled her hand in his hair.

"Again." He flicked his tongue across her tight nipple and caressed her inner thigh. "I want to hear it."

The tension drifted away leaving in its wake electrified nerve endings and the anticipation she craved. "Jason."

"Now say mine." Russell made his

way up to her other thigh.

Both men inched toward her center. She bit her lip. Normally one of them stayed by her breasts while the other tended to her needs below her waist and then they would switch, but the image of them both there caused her to flood. "Russell."

The vision in her mind became a reality as both of them touched her. Light tickles, but with two different hands and she held her breath wondering what they would do next. The thought of them accidentally making contact made her want even worse, and though it had never happened, a quick flash of them touching each other elsewhere made her

writhe against the wall. "Oh, yes."

"Move." Jason attempted to keep his voice low and sexy, but there was an undertone of annoyance.

"You move." Russell sounded as if he were in an electronics store and was about to start lecturing the clerk on what he got wrong.

She exhaled and glanced down at them.

Jason put one hand on each thigh and stared down her most intimate part as if it were his nemesis. "It's time for my dessert, you can return to the appetizers."

"For an artist you need a more creative metaphor." Russell took her by her waist, narrowing his eyes at his

goal. "I'm not going to mince words, I just want to taste our woman."

She opened her mouth wanting to tell them not to bother.

"You can have the leftovers." Jason jutted out his jaw.

Now she crossed her arms. Why didn't they just put her in the microwave?

"You're the one who eats cold spaghetti." Russell yanked her toward him.

At the unexpected movement, she tripped. Though she tried to catch herself, the floor disappeared beneath her.

"Lauren!" Somehow, Russell

managed to catch her, pinning her between himself and the wall.

"Watch it, we are trying get Lauren in the mood!" Jason reached for her. "This wouldn't have happened if we went to my room."

Again, they returned to this insane argument and she ground her teeth together.

"We're in front of my room." Russell aimed his chin in the direction of the door. "And that's exactly where we are making love to Lauren tonight."

"Stop!" Before Russell could pick her up, or Jason could chide him for not doing it correctly, she wiggled out of his arms and landed right on the carpet.

They both went to lunge for her but

she held up her hand, taking a minute to look between them. Whatever irked them, she knew her boys well enough to know they wouldn't tell her right now. Maybe if she took over they would get over it or reveal what caused the strange competition. "I think I know what's wrong." A plan came to her mind and she got up on her knees.

Once more they both reached for her.

This time she took one of each of their hands. "I think we are doing this all wrong."

Though two men gave her double the pleasure, they also required double the effort. Something she needed to remember. Since returning from Vegas

she worked on not being self-centered, now she needed to put her promise into action. "I need for you to stand up."

Neither of them moved.

"Russell, Jason, stand up right now."

She stared them down.

Without question they obeyed, putting her face-to-face with two needy cocks. She rubbed her chin and looked up at them with big eyes. "I think the two of you need a little lesson in sharing."

"What are you doing?" Russell bent down.

"No talking." She pointed at him and then Jason. "Stand next to each other."

They took the smallest possible sidestep toward each other.

"Let me see if I can help." She took

hold of Jason in her right hand, and Russell in her left. With all the drama, their erections had waned a bit, but within seconds of her starting to stroke them they sprung back to life.

"Lauren." At last the tension left Jason's voice.

"Shhh." She took a moment to study them, appreciate the differences between them. Jason presented her with a slightly curved, yet completely barren landscape, making him appear even longer. Russell's cock matched him, hard, thick, stable and perfectly straight. He didn't shave everything, instead leaving a bit of masculine hair. They literally gave her the best of both

worlds.

Russell moaned. "That's good."

"Don't speak." She continued to stroke them and somehow guided them until they were standing shoulder to shoulder.

A quick glance up told her they both intently watched her, as if making sure they each got equal attention, and that was the moment she decided to switch things up.

She slid her hand down Jason's shaft and cupped his balls in her palm.

He sucked in his breath, tilted his head toward Russell, and smiled as if he won the lottery.

Russell pressed his lips together.

Though she wanted to scold them for

whatever game they played, she took Russell into her mouth instead.

He held his breath, then made a noise and put one hand in her hair.

While she continued to fondle her bad blond boy, she relaxed her jaw and took Russell in deep.

He hit the wall and twisted her hair in his fingers.

"More, Laurie." Jason reached down and put his hand on the back of her head.

She looked up at him. The man may be an artist, but he was also a bit of a voyeur.

"Take him all the way, just a little more." His eyes remained affixed on her

and Russell.

They stared at each other as she did what he asked.

"Lauren." Russell braced himself on the wall.

Jason crouched down next to her. "You're beautiful like this." He rubbed her nipples and leaned in, kissing her neck as she sucked off his best friend, moving up and down Russell's length and relishing in his rugged taste. She snuck her hand between her legs and continued.

"Do Jason." Russell stopped her and pulled back. "He has to feel this."

Her heart sped up. Russell never directed them, and though their focus was still on each other, at least they

fought on the same side again.

"Then you do her." Jason stretched behind him, found his jeans and his wallet. "We've been so busy screwing around, our girl has resorted to playing with herself."

Damn she loved it when they called her 'their girl.' Her stomach tightened, all she ever wanted was to be theirs.

"Forget the bedrooms, I can't wait." Russell took the condom from Jason.

"I agree with you." Jason pushed her back on the carpet and scooted over into his position.

As if on automatic she took hold of him, but before she took him in her mouth, Russell bent down and kissed

her.

This was the closest she'd ever seen them get to one another, and she swore his hair grazed Jason cock. Apparently Jason noticed as well because he arched his back and ran his hand through his own hair.

"Russ." Jason cleared his throat.

"Make love to me." She caught Jason's gaze for a moment, and she throbbed with want. Again her mind wandered as to what would happen if they stayed together long enough to stretch their boundaries even further.

"Right now." Russell positioned himself between her legs and entered her.

She sucked in her breath as he filled

her, but now used to two men, her ache of arousal wouldn't be quenched until she had her second man. As Russell thrust into her, she turned and guided Jason to her mouth.

He combed his hand through her hair. "I wish you knew what you looked like with your boobs bouncing in time to Russell pounding into you and my cock in your mouth. You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"She's more than that." Russell slowed down her as he watched. "Take all of him, baby."

The slight curve of Jason's cock made it a bit more difficult, but with their words she had no choice. She ground

against Russell, closed her eyes and focused on nothing but these two men. Jason let her lead the way, but she managed to get down every last inch of him.

"Holy shit." Russell drove into her. She raised her legs up around his neck, forcing him as deep as possible.

"Lauren." Jason used her full name.

Something about having them both like this liberated her. She was exposed on the floor with two cocks as far inside her as they could get, and all she wanted was more. One man would never be enough ever again.

Together, they found their rhythm. Jason kept his movements slow and gentle. "Russ you can see how far she

took me." His fingers grazed her neck.

"That's amazing. I'm there." Russell propelled into her and his fingers found her clit. "Don't stop, Lauren."

She wanted to be a showcase for them. A living piece of art for them to contort and mold, look at and admire. The fact that they watched her with such awe, pushed her toward her own end and she bucked her hips toward Russell.

"Are you there?" Russell found her hand.

"I'm going to have to come." Jason took her other hand. "Lauren, are you okay?"

Without the ability to speak, she squeezed both their hands. Her entire

body tensed, and she let out a small squeak. The three of them needed to come together, it was almost like becoming one.

Jason's cock tightened and lengthened. "I need to. Now."

The second Jason let go she did as well. Her body pulsing in times with his.

"Lauren." Russell pushed himself into her. "Oh God."

Jason's warmth flowed through her, filling her with that one-of-a-kind taste only a man could produce. She dug her nails into both of their hands as her climax continued.

Russell withdrew and then embedded himself into her once more. "Damn."

Relief and satisfaction washed over her, but her orgasm continued, tiny delicious quivers and she reached for Russell and pulled him down, needing to feel his weight on her.

He obliged, lowering his body on hers, and kissing her neck right where Jason's fingers were only minutes before.

Jason pulled out and lay down next to them, taking her chin and kissing her lips. "Is she still coming?"

Russell nodded and found her lips with his, opening his mouth and kissing her. This kiss giving her more than a jolt as normally he would wait to kiss her after Jason was in her mouth.

"I think we need to let Lauren choose which bedroom tonight." Russell leaned up and pressed his palm to her cheek. "How about tomorrow morning, as the encore to our dinner, I'll make breakfast?"

"Tell our chef, I have to work early in the morning and am happy with some cereal." Jason gave her a light kiss on the ear. "But you are incredible and you can pick our bed tonight."

Shivers ran through her. The last thing she ever wanted was to choose or pick. "Maybe we should all just stay here." Maybe all of life needed to be as perfect as lying on the hallway carpet with the two men she loved.

Chapter Twenty

Jason never delved into photography. It was an art form he admired but never took further than one class. The medium required too much math and too many rules for him, but now he stepped through the gallery and allowed the artist's vision of a black and white Los Angeles resonate through him.

"What do you think?" Victor came up behind him. "Tell me what you know about the artist in looking at the work."

Jason rubbed his chin and assessed the picture. A California blonde complete with fake boobs, hair and a

smile was out in the sun with her arms wide out on one side of the photo. The other side had an overweight woman crouched by a wall. No smile, nothing artificial, a fast food wrapper by her foot, as she looked toward the blonde. "It's obvious."

"No." Victor moved in front of the photo. "Don't give me a critique, tell me what you know about the artist from the work."

Without moving, he glanced around the space. More photos, more dichotomies, a man on the big screen and a man in the audience, one woman carrying one of the handbags Lauren had to have, one woman carrying a dirty child.

"Whatever you think, remember it is this artist's passion, and it is the passion that sells."

Jason closed his eyes, remembering the pictures and trying to receive the less obvious message. "Woman in her thirties, outsider in school, excelled in college, but not in love. Now she is single and bitter. She is slightly overweight but now accepts what she feels she cannot change. Her work is a sign of empowerment to the everyday real woman though she wishes she could be the blonde in her photo."

"She's in her early forties and got married last year after her first big sale." Victor reached into his back

pocket and handed him a picture. "She was bullied, tries not to eat carbs, and felt dying her hair would be a sham. However, she was never bitter, she took what was given to her and made the best of it. Her art speaks to women."

Jason took the picture. The woman was almost exactly as he described.

Victor plucked the photo back. "What is important is that you knew her. Like her message or hate it, she confronted the uncomfortable, she came through her art." He took Jason's arm and guided him around the far side of the wall.

This time he was met with his art. The art he sold. One of the two book covers he needed to complete, the copy

of the mural he painted for an old lady a picture of an abstract that now hung in some office building.

"Tell me about the artist." Victor stepped closer to the wall.

"You tell me." He wiped his brow and turned wishing Lauren, Russell or preferably, both were here. They knew him, they would tell Victor.

"Based on this work, can you tell me about the artist?" Victor pointed to the book cover.

The cover only depicted a stack of books as well as the author's name and book title. "The publisher asked for that." He swallowed.

"I'm quite sure they did. What did

you do, follow the instructions like a paint by number kit?"

Yes, he followed the instructions. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Lauren even scowled at it. "I'm a working artist."

Victor shook his head. "This is a hand for hire, this is not art. My daughter could draw this with tracing paper and a number two pencil."

His whole body tensed and he clenched his fist. The art was shit.

"Now come here." Victor motioned for him to follow once more.

He paused, but joined the agent at a wall covered by a black velvet curtain.

Victor pulled only the right side of the curtain away, and revealed pictures

of Jason's last exhibit. Images of his failed exhibit. Where he stiffened before, now his legs turned spongy, didn't want to hold him.

"I know, I know, Catherine Dumar ripped you another one, the other critics were only a little less vile."

Sweat broke out over his body. Where was Russell when he needed him? Russell would quote the critics taking his own spin on what he saw and then site some statistic. He would then defend his art for money endeavor. Of course, Russell made money, enough to buy Lauren a trinket from that store, but the man was always on his side. One day he would remember that, instead of

fighting him like he did the night of the restaurant.

Lauren wouldn't defend his decision. No, she would look up at the pictures from his last showing and dissect exactly what made each piece special. He rubbed his eyes until stars sparkled under his lids, better to see the fake show his neurons put on for him than what he lost on that day.

"Did anyone ever tell you what was really wrong with the art?"

He lowered his hands and the stars faded. Every review was memorized, but none specifically said what was wrong with the art, not even Dog Dumar.

Victor paced back and forth before the wall.

Jason gritted his teeth, waiting for the verdict.

Victor took out the picture of the other artist again. "What came naturally for her, you tried to force. This art isn't you. This is." In one more dramatic move, he slid the left side of the curtain away.

He crossed his arms and moved back at what Victor presented him with. "Where did you get these?" Sketches he hadn't seen since college graced the space. In a flash he remembered drawing each one. An outline of Lauren at the library table where he had to capture how she scrunched her nose when she read something she detested.

A drawing of Russell behind beakers and flasks in biochem lab. He drew while Russell did the work, they never had a better picture of a molecular structure and Russell knew all the answers. Lastly, a picture of the three of them in their first apartment. He set a mirror up and sketched them on the couch while Lauren and Russell made a horrible attempt to stay still even though he begged them to be natural. To this day it was hard to get them to stop striking a pose if he lifted a pad and pencil.

"I have ways." Victor touched the one of the three of them.

He cleared his throat and glanced down at the floor. Those pictures were

his history, their history, their life. "Now what?" Somehow he felt like the man who saw the ghosts of the past and the present, but he had no future.

"You need to create to your strength, and your passion." He approached Jason.

Jason got himself together and faced him.

"If you need money go to your parents' dealership. Work with what you love, create without regard to what anyone will think or what they will pay. Do that, and then you can have me as an agent." Victor turned and headed right out of the gallery.

Jason watched him go and peeked

back at the sketches. He needed to do something or he needed to quit.

"Lauren!" Russell called to her. "Come on, it's time!"

"Okay!" She put her hand to her chest and stared into the mirror, fixing the small smear of gloss on her lower lip, smoothing down her sweater and skirt, and adjusting her belt.

"Lauren, are you coming from Siberia?" Russell yelled.

She straightened up, pulled her hair over her right shoulder, the way both men preferred, and went to the kitchen.

"Come on, we're waiting for you."

Russell kicked a chair out for her and rubbed his hands together.

Her heels clicked on the tile as she made her way to the dinette and sat down. Russell never looked up from his computer while Jason splayed himself over a chair with his arm slung over his eyes.

"All right. Let's begin." Russell put his hand out to Jason. "Give it."

Without moving from his position, he tossed his checkbook at Russell. A couple of pieces of paper fell out.

Russell adjusted his glasses and began his ritual.

He picked up one paper, tilted his head and entered something on the

computer.

Several times he repeated his action, nodding or shaking his head as he did his calculations. "How about you get us something to drink?"

"Something alcoholic," Jason mumbled.

"I'll have juice." Russell thumbed through some more bits of paper.

She pressed her lips together and got up.

Neither man gave her a second glance as she walked around the kitchen collecting glasses, vodka for Jason, some orange juice for Russell and a bottle of water for herself.

She returned, plopped all her items down in the center of the table, and sat

back down, this time crossing her legs.

"Will you pour me some?" Finally, Jason opened his eyes but only to spy the booze.

Before staring at him, she peeked down to ensure her cleavage remained in full view. Satisfied, she studied her blond again. Something was off. Boobs were his magnets, and normally he would be the first to notice her tight, low cut pink sweater.

She leaned over the table took his glass and placed it by her chest, taking her time pouring the liquid.

Jason may not be looking, but she got the desired result from Russell. He actually took the time to push his glasses

up to get a better look. She slid the glass over to Jason and focused on Russell. "Would you like some juice?" She gave him a quick wink. An amorous Russell distracted from his favorite task of bill paying would definitely get Jason out of his funk.

"Where's your stack?"

She arched her back. "Right where you want it." Only when Russell put his hand out did she realize he didn't say rack.

"Bills please, mademoiselle."

"Talking French will get you many favors." Out of the corner of her eye she noticed Jason finally moved. "Say something else." She put her elbow on the table and rested her head in her hand.

"Bills, s'il vous plait." He put his hand out once more, this time wiggling his fingers.

She narrowed her eyes and gave him her pouch holding her accounting. Long ago she learned that if she wanted Russell to help with bills and budgeting she needed to keep everything in one spot. In truth, Russell was the one who gave her the little zippered pouch and told her she should never have more monthly paperwork than what would fit inside. This month the pouch seemed a bit overstuffed.

Jason lifted his glass, held it up to the light and then downed it as if he were drinking water. In fact, his lack of facial

expression caused her to make sure she didn't give him her bottle of water.

He reached over, poured quite a bit more into the glass, and gulped it down.

She froze. Not only had Jason not gawked at her girls, or mentioned them but last night he came to bed late. When he made love to her it wasn't as playful as usual, it was serious. He kept kissing her and never tried to direct her or Russell. At the time she thought it was romantic. Now she wondered if he was bored and trying to figure out a way to tell the two of them, he seemed distracted and distant since the night of their little competition fit. Time and again she prepared herself for this moment, and now with her face heating,

she realized she wasn't prepared at all.

"Do we have anything we need to tell Russell before Russell begins?" Russell unzipped the pouch.

What would happen now? A tangy burn began to work its way up her throat, radiating throughout her body.

Again, Jason poured himself a drink.

She put her hand over her exposed chest trying to subdue her own heartbeat and heartburn. The man was going to drink himself into oblivion in order to tell them, his two best friends.

"Looks like someone went shopping." Russell made a tsking noise.

Jason took another drink.

"What do we have here?" Russell

continued, oblivious as to what was about to happen.

In an attempt to get into Jason's eye line, she forced herself to move. If they didn't make this easy for him nothing would be salvageable. She balled her hand in a fist, digging her nails into the heel of her palm.

She shut her eyes. They would never be the same. The day they kissed her she lost her only family.

"What is this for?"

The trembling took over her body. She needed to enjoy the fantasy. While all fantasies ended, she wasn't ready for this one to meet its curtain call. Only this morning she took a break from calls and went to buy some trashy lingerie.

She also bought some strawberry flavored massage oil and a naughty movie with two men and one woman.

"What is this?"

Jason reached for the bottle once more.

She planned on revealing the lingerie tonight and the oil and movie on the weekend.

No matter what happened, she couldn't let Jason drown himself in vodka, not when she needed some.

"Hello! I need to know what this is!"

Out of the corner of her eye she watched Russell wave a white slip of paper in the air.

Her receipt! The lingerie. The oil.

The movie. She winced. What was sexy this afternoon would be pathetic now. "Wait!" She jumped up out of the chair, knocking it over and lunged across the table for the receipt. In the process she slammed Russell's laptop shut and sent his prized papers flying across the breakfast nook.

"Lauren!" Russell shot up and caught her. "What's wrong?"

She tripped into Russell's arms and turned to Jason.

Jason stood as well, but stood there with one hand over his eyes and one hand out as if he were trying to keep his balance.

"Lauren." Russell took her chin and aimed her face at him.

She frowned. Russell glared down at her, but he was still handsome. Her executive who loved to be organized. Would Russell want her after Jason dumped them? Did she even want to do this without Jason? "No."

"No?" He put the back of his hand on her cheek. "Are you sick?"

She shook her head.

"Then what's the problem?"

She tried to look at Jason but Russell held her in place. "I didn't want you to see what I bought." No doubt he already processed the receipt.

"Did you blow your shopping budget on Rodeo again?" He narrowed his eyes. "Let's see the damage."

Wait. The receipt was clearly not from Beverly Hills but Hollywood. On top of that Mr. Assessment, aka Russell, would have read every line item in a nanosecond. "What didn't you know what to do with?"

"How much did you spend?" Russell stared her down.

She bit her lip.

"What's wrong?" He put his arm around her. "Do we have to do that thing where I have to return something for you again?"

She didn't answer but her mind quickly rewound all the times Russell had gone into various stores and boutiques to return items when she

regretted the purchase. She supposed it was because it was never what she truly wanted. The few weeks she had been more concerned with getting home then shopping. Again, she glanced over at Jason, now he was squeezing the bridge of his nose.

"Lauren, what is it! Tell me!"

"I bought something naughty and I have to return it because Jason hasn't even looked at my boobs once!" The words spewed out just like her cleavage.

"Liar!" Jason bolted his head up, causing him to grab the edge of the table for support. He cleared his throat and blinked several times. "I always look at her boobs. In fact, I have been enjoying the view since she sat down." He

directed his statement more to Russell than to her.

Relief made her weak, but now she wasn't sure if she was happy he was gawking at her or annoyed, or annoyed he was gawking and didn't say anything. She ground her teeth together.

"See, he was looking at your boobs, as was I." To prove his point, Russell hooked his finger in the neck of her sweater and peeked inside. "Everything looks amazing from my angle." He turned to Jason. "Do you want to get an up close look?"

All she knew was Jason better damn well want to take a look, but he better not gawk, or leer. Definitely no leering.

"Hell, yeah." Jason walked around the table, propping himself up on the chairs until he joined them. "Let me inspect the sites." With red-rimmed eyes, he stared right at her.

Fine, she felt better when Jason extracted her from Russell and didn't only look inside, but ran his hands up the bottom of her sweater, cupping both her breasts, and burying his face in her cleavage.

"Oh yeah." He kissed the top of each of her mounds and grazed his thumbs across her bra over her nipples. "I want to know what naughty thing you bought."

Jason's kisses caused shivers throughout her entire being and she put

one hand on the back of Jason's head, and grabbed Russell's arm.

"So, it's not good enough that I look?" Russell laughed and then dipped his head down giving her kiss. "You have to have an artist eye you?"

"Yes, I require many mediums to inspect me." Though the nagging nausea of worry over Jason wanting out waned, a new concern crept into her being. Something was still not right with her creative cohort.

"I'm hardly an artist." Jason trailed his lips up her chest, neck and then kissed her lips.

"I beg to differ." Russell stepped back and returned to his papers, shuffling through them. "What I was

asking before is what do I do with this check stub? Do you have an invoice or anything to go with it?" He returned and showed Jason.

She straightened up and read the document. "Twelve hundred dollars."

Russell nodded. "Twelve hundred dollars."

"Jason!" She started jumping and flung her arms around his neck. "What piece did you sell?" This was a monumental moment. He sold a piece of art and broke his streak.

"I say this calls for a celebration." Russell clapped.

"Why didn't you say anything?" She took Jason's face between her palms and

kissed him.

He didn't kiss her back.

No, he didn't kiss her back, but not because he didn't want to kiss her. Only minutes before he had his face in her chest. "Jason?"

He took the check stub and tossed it on the table. "What naughty stuff did you buy?" He grabbed her hips. "I think the vodka is making me especially horny. Russell needs to catch up so we can see what you bought."

"Jason." She put her hands over his. "What did you sell?"

Russell crossed his arms.

He looked beyond her. "Nothing worth anything."

"It was worth twelve hundred

dollars." Russell picked the check stub off the floor.

"Bette got me some work with a publisher. Two book covers. I did the first. I still have to do the second. Some beach cabana or something." He scratched his hand through his hair.

Art for hire. The precise work Jason didn't want. Without any fanfare she backed away and returned to the table. Now she understood the competition, the distance, the alcohol, right now she could use some as well.

"Let me clean up this mess." Russell picked up the chair she knocked over, bent down and began gathering the papers off the floor.

"Hey." Jason put his hand on her back. "It's no big deal. We all sell things. You sell your stuff, Russ sells his brain."

Russell made a noise and came up with a ton of papers every which way.

"Let's do the bills." She sat down. Russell may sell his brain, but he loved it. She may sell her stuff, but it was a means to an end. Jason selling his art this way was a step back. He was giving up. She chewed the inside of her mouth. Over the last week and a half her job didn't even have a goal. She gave it up when she crawled through the boxes for an unsure end. Her stuff only paid the bills, just like Jason's art.

"This all got mixed up. I say we go find out what Lauren bought." Russell pulled the plug on the laptop.

This went beyond their bizarre relationship, breakups and other nonsense she came to this table worried about. She couldn't try to cookie cutter their situation into anything traditional. Their friendship and future was interwoven with every decision they made and the thought of being without them made her physically ill.

Yes. Everything was all mixed up.

Chapter Twenty-One

Jason leaned back in his chair, stared at the paper on his table and shifted his glance to the email from his agent describing what the author wanted for their book.

He rubbed his chin and lifted the paper, turning it ninety degrees and another ninety degrees and even assessed it upside down. Somehow the cabana on the beach this man described in great detail in his memoir was only a square with rudimentary hooked waves behind it. All he needed to do was add in a circle for a sun, a smiley face and

some birds shaped like flattened 'm's and he would have a masterpiece fit for a preschooler.

"Focus." He had to learn how to do this. The look on Lauren and Russell's face at his check told him everything. Hey, he did fine with the mural and the first book cover. He put the paper back down. The page didn't look any better, and trying to redirect his energy he swiped up his pencil, turning the square into a bed, but not any bed. This bed was decadent, full of pillows and blankets, and a canopy with flowing fabric panes. His hand took over as if it were directly connected to the creative lobe of his brain.

In less than fifteen minutes he had

transformed the picture to a seaside scene. The waves now had depth, flotsam and jetsam and no sun. Instead, moonlight directing a soft beam right to the canopy spotlighting the bed.

Once again he sat back. This time he swallowed to catch his breath. A good art run was not unlike an orgasm. There was the anticipation, the build up and the release. When the art took over, nothing else mattered, and the picture or the sculpture did what it wanted not what it was hired to do.

This was the image he envisioned, the three of them on a secluded beach, the breeze blowing and tons of blankets because Lauren would be freezing even

between them. He twisted his chair back and forth. Yes, it was perfect.

Perfect for him.

The printed email from his agent loomed in the corner of eye. The one with the specs for the picture.

Nowhere in the instructions did it say bed on the beach, or three people.

Apparently this author never experienced three people in bed because if he did then that would be precisely what the man would want. He squeezed his eyes shut, not needing to read the email to know what was expected of him. "Green striped cabana on a white sand beach, shells, water, sun." Maybe he should get his crayons out.

Still heady and high from creating

something with more depth than the shallow ocean they wanted, he turned the paper over, crumpled up the email, grabbed his tools and left the studio.

He needed a change in venue, a perfect cure for art gone wrong. Some distraction, and a little conversation and by the time the buzzer rang on Lauren's luscious lasagna he would have worked through his green stripes and blue water. The picture would be so much better with no stripes and purple water.

He stood in the hallway.

Sunday afternoon at the house had its own vibe. No matter what happened during the week, or on Friday or Saturday night, Sunday afternoon was

different. After breakfast the chores of the week began. Even now the hum of the clothes dryer was only overshadowed by the rhythmic beat of the washing machine. In the background the television whispered with one Lauren's reality shows, and the whole house was permeated with the scent of garlic, onions and tomato from the homemade sauce Lauren started earlier.

On Sunday afternoon the whole house was like one gigantic pillow, soft, welcoming and warm.

He went to the family room and peeked inside.

Where the house might be a pillow, inside this room was like being under a blanket, and he wanted to crawl inside.

Russell looked up from the corner table where he had an assortment of parts and pieces out with one of his vintage toys. He opened his mouth.

No. He didn't want anything to break the spell. Jason shook his head and put his finger over his mouth as he tiptoed to the corner chair and sat down.

Russell shrugged his shoulders and returned his attention to tinkering.

Jason put his feet up, put two pencils in his mouth and turned to Lauren.

She lay on the couch, splayed out on her stomach sound asleep. One of her cheeks disappeared in the pillow she grabbed from the bed, and her mouth was a little open. Her hand hung down

after falling off the edge, and her ass was nice and rounded, a tight mound in black leggings he wanted to grab on to.

The shapes were amazing, all curves, no straight lines, everything flowing.

Screw green stripes.

He glanced over at Russell. The man personified concentration, hunched over his contraption with a metal piece between two of his fingers and a thin screwdriver in his hand. He had the same expression on his face as when he would study Lauren, wide eyes hardly blinking, maybe a slight smile.

Jason started his sketch and like earlier the world did him the favor of disappearing. No television, no meat sauce, no emails dictating his art. Time

vanished as well, and he didn't know how long he sketched getting all the details the way his mind wanted them. At last he erased one errant pencil mark and that indefinable yet definable moment let him know his drawing was finished.

Now he had his second sketch today, this one was Lauren on that canopy bed on the beach with Russell looking over her. He even added himself in the background.

He let his head hit the back of the chair and high fived the air.

"Was it good for you?" Russell chuckled.

If Russell only knew. He nodded.

"Yeah." The only problem he was having now was every piece of art centered on the three of them. Yes, their troupe did the job of letting his artwork out, but not in the way he imagined. He only thought he was blocked, he never anticipated getting a muse as part of the deal.

"Good." Russell returned to his own art. "She's cute when she sleeps."

"Yeah." He repeated, stopping himself from talking about the color of her cheeks or how he wanted to lay down next to her. "Look at her ass."

Russell put down his screwdriver and tilted his head. "From this angle it looks good." He lifted his hand as if he wanted to pick a fruit.

"It's hot that she doesn't know how hot she is."

"Yeah, it's also hot that she's just laying there sleeping." Russell pointed at her.

Leave it to Russell to voice what he couldn't. "That's cool. Sunday afternoon is cool." Things needed to always be like this.

"Better now." Russell mumbled and bent down to examine his toy.

"What's better now?" Lauren's voice strained as she stretched.

They both stared at her ass. It was all up.

He wanted to say Sunday afternoon with the two of them, or maybe his

artwork, but once again redirected himself. "Your ass."

She reached back and touched her backside. "Better than what?"

"Better in those leggings you have on." Russell laughed.

"Oh." She turned over and arched her back. "Did you finish your drawing?"

Her shirt rode up on her stomach and her braless boobs gave both of them something new to gawk at. "I finished some art." He closed the sketchbook, but wished she would stay in that position.

"Can I see?"

He wasn't prepared to show them, didn't know if he wanted to. They may take it wrong especially since he was

starting to have a stack of the pictures and his stomach tightened. "Not yet."

"I was going to help you with your work."

"You've already done a lot."

"I haven't done anything." She wrinkled her nose. "Come on, don't we have cabanas we need to be creating? What can I do?"

Yes, he had cabanas, he had a job, but was handed his inspiration. "Bend your right leg and don't move." He assessed the points on his pencils, chose one and flipped his sketchbook to a blank page.

This was art. Art wasn't a job, it was a moment, and in this moment with

Lauren and Russell and himself was what needed to be shown and what needed to be sold. Not cabanas, and not agents who did corporate work. The pressure on his chest lifted. This is what Victor spoke of.

Without a word she bent her knee and kept her eyes on him.

"Perfect. Don't move." Shit, she was flipping gorgeous and didn't know it, but he had a best friend who did and that made it? Arousing. He had to capture those curves.

With his oversized portfolio clutched in his hands, Jason scanned the artwork

around Victor's office. He recognized a picture from the woman at the gallery, and a painting from the same artist he and Lauren found at the pop-up store, but among the familiar works were creations he couldn't place.

He walked over to one of the pieces made from found objects. Sculptures artists put together from everyday items or junkyards, or wherever their creative muse led them. The one in the office was made out of medical supplies. Syringes, those red containers to throw needles into, gloves and even surgical masks. He bent down and spied an empty box for the filler Lauren sold.

He wished Lauren would have had to

make calls in Hollywood today, but he needed to do this alone, man up and get his career back on track.

"You should see the one he did with musical instruments. It was inspiring."

Jason straightened up and approached Victor with his hand out.

Victor shook his hand. "Enough about other artists, what brings you here?"

He swallowed and let it out. "When I force the art I end up with stock book covers, when I do what speaks to me I end up with what's in the portfolio."

"Do I get to see it, or is it secret art?" Victor motioned toward his portfolio.

"I think it's meant to be seen." He

tightened his hold on his work.

"Do you think or do you know?" Victor crossed his arms. "An artist isn't timid of his vision."

"I'm confident in my vision, I never felt more sure of my art, it's a personal subject."

"Art is personal, never forget that." Victor took the portfolio from him.

Jason watched him take his baby to a desk at the back of the office and unzip the leather holder.

He turned away. Last time he showed his true art to anyone other than Lauren, Russell or his parents he was roasted. Left to turn to char, turn to ash and blow away.

Victor's laugh echoed through the space.

At this agent's total disregard for his work, he clenched his teeth and spun on his heel. Adrenaline pumped, telling him to gather his art, get out and ask Bette for more covers and murals.

Instead he found Victor holding one of the sketches up to the light, smiling and nodding.

"What is it?" He forced himself to stay put.

"I met your girl that day, and I must say you captured her essence." He nodded again. "I wouldn't want to get in her way."

He knew the piece Victor spoke

about. His depiction of Lauren on calls, doctors were merely forms in the background and she stood strong and proud with a syringe in one hand and her cell phone in the other. "She will run over you." She was his strength, but he knew she struggled everyday since this relationship started. Girls, especially Lauren, needed things concrete and solid, and he knew at the moment her world consisted full of shaky fault lines. Something he needed to address with the other male in their trio.

"I have no doubt." Victor put the sketch aside and chose the next one. "She loves you both?"

He inched closer. This drawing was of the three of them in the front seat of a

red 1959 Cadillac. "I was going to give that to her."

"Your other..."

"Russell."

"Russell. He's the serious one. How is he doing?" Victor put the sketch down and picked up the painting of Lauren asleep on the couch with Russell in the background. He wanted Russell to have this piece.

For the man who wouldn't hold Lauren's hand in public only a couple of weeks ago he was making big strides. "He's doing great."

"The three of you love each other?" Victor tilted his head to take in the painting from another angle.

He froze, a question and an answer hitting him hard at the same time. Lauren loved them, she wanted more, but what would Russell want? What did he want?

"I don't need an answer." Victor replaced the sketch and flipped through a few until he came to a few of the more racy works. He stopped, put one aside, put another aside, and put a third aside creating an NC-17 patchwork on top of the table.

Jason held his breath his heartbeat loud enough to throb in his ears.

Victor rubbed his chin and paced back and forth in front of the pieces.

"What is it?" Jason shifted his weight

from one foot to the other.

Victor held up his hand. "Never force a reaction from someone looking at your work. If we are silent, we are thinking, and if you have us thinking you have done your job."

He bit the inside of his mouth to remain silent, his mind returning to Lauren and Russell.

"The sweet paintings and sketches will have to come later." Victor started making piles. "We need to capture our public first. A little shock, a little romance, a lot of sex."

Jason bit down harder, it sounded as if the man was going to take him on.

"It's an interesting life you have. An artistic one."

"Yes." Jason cleared his throat. It was what he wanted, an artistic life with the two of them. They built it and it was tailor-made for his muse.

Victor faced him. "I need more. You have to push it so we make a huge wave."

"More?" He shifted his focus from Victor to his art.

"I need everything pure and raw." Victor leaned over the table. "Are you ready for this?"

Was he ready for this? Ready to be recognized? Ready to have his art seen? Ready to be a success? It was only a five word question, but five words he had been waiting to hear. His

blood raced, and he inhaled trying to keep his cool. "What do you mean?"

"Are you ready to expose your life like this?" He picked up one of the paintings. The three of them in bed, covered but definitely sizzling with sex.

Once more he scanned the art in the room. "Do you think that will do it?"

"I'm not in the business of collecting art, I'm in the business of selling it." Victor went to him, stared right at him. "I am asking you if you are ready for putting this on display? Are you ready to sell your life? Your real life with no barriers."

Art was life. His life was art in more ways than one. He created what he felt and an agent, one who made stars,

wanted him if he only pushed his muse a little further. He nodded.

Victor didn't move, but his jaw jutted out. "Are they ready for this?"

Jason attempted not to blink, not even when his eyes seemed to dry out. Both Russell's and Lauren's insecurities swirled around him, for the first time he was the solid one. He didn't answer.

Victor raised his eyebrows and walked over to the desk. He pulled out a file folder and held it out to him. "I want you ready for a show in two weeks."

"I had an idea this morning." Jason took the file and peeked inside at the contract.

"Good. Give me a few more options." Victor picked up a pen. "Fire your book publisher and give me twelve months."

Jason glanced at the pages. Though a standard contract he knew he should take it home and have Russell read it anyway. Instead, he signed his name.

"Leave these pieces with me." Victor shook his hand.

He put the contract on the desk and went to the table. "I need these two pieces back." He returned the sketch for Lauren and the painting for Russell to his portfolio and zipped it up.

"Make sure your models stay in love and are ready." Victor patted his back.

He nodded. "They'll be ready."

Chapter Twenty-Two

"At least on a holiday there's no traffic." Jason nodded as they pulled up into the circular driveway to Russell's parent's home.

"Yeah, I was really hoping for some closed roadways." Russell put the car in park and squeezed the steering wheel.

"Maybe there could have been some freak snow storm, that would have definitely shut So. Cal down." Lauren leaned forward and put her head between the two front seats. Today they each had their job to do. Russell got to brood, she was perky and positive, and

Jason played the comedy relief.

"That would have been perfect."
Russell blew through his lips making them puff out.

"No. Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair wouldn't allow it. Not when we've been summoned there for turkey and all the fixings." Jason turned back to her. "Did we remember everything?"

She grabbed her list. "I have the bottle of wine in the trunk."

"My father won't like the year."
Russell mumbled.

"Then we'll drink it. I'll swig it out of the bottle." She put her hand on Russell's shoulder. "I have the candle Jason made."

"It was very 1970's of me." Jason

grinned.

"They'll only pretend to like it."
Russell pushed his glasses up.

"Your parents adore me." Jason pointed to himself.

"My parents adore money, they love my brother and they tolerate you."
Russell tilted his neck from side to side.

"I have my gourmet salt." She reached out and rubbed his neck. Her poor man was tight and tense.

"Salt?" Russell turned back to her.

"It is this awesome pink salt that cost like forty bucks. Salt is the new vinegar." Jason gave her a thumb up.

"You bought my parents forty dollar salt?"

"It is a salt collection. The salt is from the Himalayan Mountains." She stifled a groan. Unlike Jason's tolerability, it didn't need to be said she wasn't his family's favorite, not since the first year Russell took her home and they saw her with her purple hair and the three piercings in each of her ears. After she toned herself down, she went from being disdained to being invisible. "I thought it would give them a little spice."

Jason chuckled. "I brought the vodka."

"They don't drink vodka." Russell growled.

"That's for you." Jason opened the

door and got out.

"Come on." She coaxed Russell out of the car. They gathered up their gifts, or offerings, but stopped when Russell held his hand out to her.

She gave him the salt.

"Lauren." He put the salt under his arm and put his hand back out.

Since Vegas they overcame a lot, but this was a battle that didn't need to be won, not yet. Maybe next year if they were in this position next year. A sour taste rose in the back of her throat, but this wasn't about her and her needs, this was about Russell. "See that path there." She motioned toward the flagstone trail that led to the front door of the house. "It's called the path of least

resistance."

"I'm sick of worrying about this." This time he took her hand and leaned over to Jason.

Jason grabbed her other hand. "Why don't we just let things happen?"

As they walked up to the door she held her breath. By the time Russell rang the bell, the cold evening air coupled with the heat generating over her face made her lightheaded.

"I forgot something." Jason let go of her and sprinted back to the car. "I'll be right back."

"What?" Russell called after him.

"Happy Thanksgiving!" Mathew Sinclair opened the door.

"Happy Thanksgiving!" Lauren straightened up and shot Russell's brother a smile fit to grace any cosmetic dentistry advertisement.

"Come in, mother's waiting." Mathew backed up and held his arms out to her. "Where's Jason?"

"He forgot something in the car." She now had the perfect excuse to extract her hand from Russell's and gave his brother a hug, sinking in, like when she stepped in mud with her good boots. While Russell bore his resemblance to his father, Mathew looked like his mother and was more rounded and bloated versus Russell's angles and edges.

"Well, thank you for that welcome."

He held her tighter.

She was going under, being sucked into the mire, but Russell caught her hand again and pulled her out.

"Come on." Russell yanked her away.

"I haven't said hi to Mary and the kids." She tried to go the opposite direction toward the billiard room where Mathew's equally puffy wife and two matching children sat like polite little statues. They all gave her some finger wiggles.

"We are making the rounds." He gave her another tug.

"Maybe we're running in circles." She glanced back, searching for Jason as she wondered how she could get her

hand back before they encountered the parents, but Mathew continued to stand there with his eyebrows raised.

"He shows with his entourage in tow." Mr. Sinclair cut them off at the pass. "Or at least part of his entourage."

She flashed another smile, this one a little less dental ad and a little more dental patient. Mr. Sinclair wasn't the hugging type and she couldn't liberate herself from Russell before the man saw.

"This is for you." Russell squeezed her hand and thrust the bottle of wine at his father.

She wanted to open her mouth to tell him to stop breaking her hand, he may

want to use it later. Instead, she bit her lip as his father only glanced at the label on the bottle and focused on their hands.

"Not the worst year, not the best." His father shrugged his shoulders. "I see you have many things to catch us up with. Good to see you, Lauren."

She got a good to see her and widened her smile, but it came out more as a grimace. "You too."

"Your mother is waiting for you." Mr. Sinclair pointed, dismissing them.

Russell kept on his trek, now moving toward the kitchen.

The first time she was here, she remembered swooning at the kitchen. Made of marble, steel and stone it wasn't the best of the best, it was better. The

kitchen was big enough for it to have two of every major appliance and still have room for an island and a specialty pizza oven.

The first time she was here, she had dreams of helping Mrs. Sinclair in that kitchen, but when she asked she was abruptly turned down and told they had a maid.

The first time she was here, she also had visions of playing pool with Mr. Sinclair in their billiard room.

Now after more than eight years and twice as many visits to this grand house, she settled for flanking Russell's side, a human buffer between him and his kryptonite. Every year she asked if she

could help, and every year she was turned away. She still held out for the game of pool. Well, not really.

"Russell." Mrs. Sinclair turned, smoothed down her skirt and went toward them.

"Hello, Mother." He let go of Lauren to give his mother a hug.

She was free! They wouldn't make a scene. She moved her fingers to get the blood circulating again. In the background there was a ruckus that could only be Jason returning.

"Lauren brought you this." He handed his mother the salt and reclaimed her hand.

"Thank you." His mother looked between the gift, the two of them and

their hands.

Right now Lauren was positive the smile she possessed made it appear as if she got some sort of shot in her mouth. Her dreams of being a dental model dissolved. "They say salt is the new vinegar."

His mother didn't say a word.

Even if his mother wouldn't speak, she still had to ask the question. "Can I help you do anything?"

His mother reached forward and touched their hands. "You know, Lauren, I could use some help with the salad. Rosie is very busy."

"I can help?" Every part of her wanted to check and see if maybe it did

start to snow in Southern California.

"Lauren has always wanted to cook in this kitchen. She's a wonderful cook." Russell moved closer to her.

"Well, come along and we'll let the men do what they do." Mrs. Sinclair took her arm. "Do you cook for Russell often?"

"I love cooking."

Mrs. Sinclair leaned over and gave Russell a kiss on the cheek. "Go find Jason, I'm sure he's drawing with the children."

Jason. He didn't forget anything in the car. A master of observation, he knew what would happen the moment Russell walked in holding her hand making them look like a couple when

they were a trouple, or whatever word he invented.

Russell may need to prove something, but she couldn't let him do this. In all the years this was the first time she ever witnessed his mother kiss him.

"Go find Jason." She spun around, stood on her tiptoes and gave him a peck on the lips.

"Come along." His mother led her away. "How are the two of you with Jason in the house?"

She swallowed. This woman did not need any details on what she did for Russell, or Jason. "It all works out." For the first time in eight years she walked into the kitchen. A couple was

something to be happy about, a trouple would be a freak show, especially here. She understood why Russell hid before. Tonight they would be a couple, and she was certain she wouldn't have to worry about this next year.

"How did you like the salad?" Russell's mother put her hand on Lauren's shoulder and leaned toward him.

Russell pierced the last lettuce leaf, radish piece and cucumber wedge and shoved it into his mouth hoping he didn't have to answer his mother. He'd been taught never to speak with his mouth full.

"Russell."

His mother said his name and his trained DNA forced him to turn to her. To prove his point he continued chewing, of course with his mouth closed. The woman draped herself over Lauren since they sat down. Jason was relegated to the seat furthest away from them, and his brother and sister-in-law were practically seated in another state.

"Are you enjoying your salad?" She smiled, but her smile was never a real one, it was more like a slash of lips that had been forced to turn up in the corners under protest.

This was a seemingly benign question, there had to be a trick.

"I like how Lauren cut the vegetables. She's very precise, probably because she works with so many doctors." His mother nodded and patted Lauren's shoulder.

He continued to chew. The second they got home he was dipping Lauren into a hot bath. Both of them would have to scrub her down thoroughly to ensure she was cleansed of this experience.

"Yep, Laurie is a cut above the rest." Jason gave his mother a thumb up from across the table.

"Russell." Somehow the octave her voice hit was exactly the same as nails sliding down a chalkboard.

If he masticated this vegetable mess

anymore he wouldn't have to swallow, the liquid would slide down his throat. He bypassed his wine glass and took more than a gulp of the vodka Jason poured earlier. "Yes, Mother."

"You haven't said much tonight."

He blinked and considered the possibilities of speaking. Judgment, opinions and ultimatums were his reward for opening his mouth. "What would you like to know?"

"How's your job?" The smile flat lined.

"Russell got a promotion." Lauren bounced in her seat and turned to face the enemy head on. "He's a Solution Architect now."

"What does that mean?" His father

lifted his hand.

One of the servers rushed over with two bottles of wine, the one he brought and another one. His father motioned to the one from his personal stash.

"He's the boss man now." Jason piped in and took it upon himself to refill Russell's glass.

"He could be more than a boss." At last his father faced him.

He could ...

Those two words hung over his head every day of his life in this house and every time he returned.

He could have been on the football team if he tried harder.

He could be in his father's business if

he stopped tinkering around with computers.

He could become a success with a family like his brother.

Always it came down to that he could be more. He took another sip, well gulp, of his drink.

Lauren reached under the table and put her hand on his leg.

"Well, maybe now that Russell is getting his life together and he has more to think about than himself, he'll come to the firm." His mother's smile grew, threatening to break her face.

"I don't have a law degree." Though this fact was etched in their brains, he reminded them. When he asked to run the IT department for his father, he was

told he came from a line of lawyers and he could go make his own career. The day of their graduation Jason's parents did the congratulations and kissing for both him and Lauren, his parents left right after the ceremony to go mourn their losses.

His father put his fork down and rubbed his chin. "If there is one thing I learned about having a wife is they like a certain lifestyle."

"That's the truth." Mathew raised his wine glass.

"With Lauren working with doctors you have a lot to compete with." His father nodded. "There's only one profession that competes with doctors

and that's lawyers."

Everyone but him, Lauren and Jason laughed and Lauren moved her hand away.

First she didn't want to walk in together, now she removed her hand. Damn it, he knew her better than anyone and knew since they showed up in Vegas she was a mess and he hadn't done a thing.

No, she wasn't a mess she was scared. Terrified. Terrified of being with them, and terrified of not being with them, and now here they were all screwed up again because of him.

He reached over and found her hand, though he tried to lace their fingers together, she didn't move.

"Come run the IT department over at the firm." His father put down his fork as if he were slamming down a gavel.

He could make his father proud.

Every muscle in his body tightened. How many times had he asked for this only to be told he was a waste? Out of the corner of his eye he glanced at Jason. His best friend gave him a slight nod, but his eyes remained dull. Jason would categorize working at Sinclair Law in the same thread as art for hire, maybe worse.

Lauren's trembling vibrated through him. If everything else didn't turn her into an anxiety ridden disaster zone, him working all hours with his family would

have her drooling in the corner. Still, she tightened her grip, giving him her support.

For the first time that night, he wanted to smile. Not the fake expression his mother was so fond of giving out, but a real smile. With his mother and father, everything focused on what he could do, but with his family he was the man who did.

He fixed both finances and technology.

He provided a voice of reason against Lauren's dreams and Jason's insanity.

He was an integral part of the other two. No proving necessary. "Why now?"

Lauren let out a little gasp.

"As your mother said, you are getting it together." He set his eyes on Lauren. "Isn't this what you always wanted?"

Every time his father spoke to him, it was like being cross-examined. At one point in his life he would have practically dropped down to his knees and thanked his father. Tonight he presented his parents with what they always wanted. If they only knew what went on in his bedroom every night. "I need to think about it."

Jason sat back.

Lauren remained motionless.

"Robert, you always wanted Russell to think before he spoke." His mother

raised her hand and both Rosie and the server made a run for her. "Why don't you and Lauren go enjoy the garden while we get dessert set up. I would ask for Lauren's help, but it's already done."

"I'm going to go see if I can get the kids to show me how to play Pride of War Seven. Did I tell you I want one of those handheld games for Christmas?" Jason stood up.

"No!" Russell got up, taking Lauren with him. "I need to discuss something with Jason."

"You live with Jason. Go enjoy the garden." His mother narrowed her eye in disappointment.

"The three of us need some air." He gulped down another drink.

"Fine, then send him back, the children love him." Along with the eye, he also got her to jut her chin of warning out.

"Come on." He pulled Lauren to him and waited for Jason to walk ahead of him.

Maybe instead of a warning he should take it as a victory.

Once dismissed, Russell kept a firm grip on her, grabbed Jason's arm, and basically dragged the two of them around the back of the pool behind the rock waterfall.

The Sinclair's backyard was as magnificent as the rest of their home. Lauren wondered if anyone ever used this area for anything other than showing off.

Russell stopped, let go of them and put his hand to his forehead.

She shut her eyes, allowing herself to envision the future the Sinclair's saw for their son. No, she wasn't dumb enough to think she was their dream girl. The Sinclair's battled with their son's lifestyle, his devotion to his best friend, his platonic relationship with her, his career. When they came in as a couple, they had hope.

They weren't a couple.

She turned to Jason.

They weren't a couple either.

Her own hope took her a whole different direction. Every day some new obstacle told her this was hopeless, but like a drug addict needing to go to rehab she continued to tell herself one more day. "Russell."

"What are you doing?" He paced around in a circle.

He knew damn well what they were doing. They were trying to save him from destroying anything he had with his parents. Rather than arguing, she wrapped her arms around his waist, breathing in the scent of clean laundry and cologne.

"I don't know what the two of you are doing, but I'm late for my game." Jason tapped his foot.

"When did the normal become abnormal?"

She looked up at him, staring at his well-defined chin. No one would ever exemplify strength and smarts like Russell Allen Sinclair.

"What are you talking about?" Jason shrugged his shoulders.

"They think we're a couple." He shook his head. "That's what they've been waiting for."

"So let them think it." Jason hit him in the arm. "Look how easy tonight has been. Let it be."

"This isn't easy, and it shouldn't be."

She let go and moved in front of him. Only two weeks ago he wouldn't kiss her in public with Jason. Yes, in Vegas they decided they weren't seeing anyone else but long after this was over, they would have to piece their lives together.

"Does it feel right, just you and me?" Russell motioned between them. "Does it?"

She opened her mouth, but had no answer. After having both of them nothing else would ever feel right. All day she pretended, but it felt off, as if she were walking with only one heel on and everything was staggered.

"Does it feel right? Let me know?"
He offered her his hand.

Here it was, the fix, the high and almost beyond her control she answered by taking his hand, intertwined their fingers and then reaching back and taking Jason's hand.

"See. That feels right. It's not normal, but it is." He leaned down and kissed her.

"Now you." He tilted his head toward Jason.

Jason took her chin and gave her a similar kiss, only taking it a bit further and sucking on her lower lip. She tightened her grip on both of them.

"Damn."

She broke the kiss. "What's wrong?"

"I get so hard watching you." Russell pulled her closer. "But if it was anyone but Jason I'd kill them." He dipped his head down and gave her another kiss, opening his mouth and letting go of her hand to rub her ass.

"I think the alcohol is making you horny." Jason moved in and began working her neck.

She shut her eyes and let them tend to her. All night she was tight, ready to be found out as a fraud, and now with both of their hands and mouths on her, the tension melted, her insides heated and she moaned as the high took over.

"I am hard." He ran his tongue along

her ear.

"Russell." She arched her back.

"I get hard in less than a second thinking about the two of you." Jason pushed himself up against her.

"What about you?" Russell cupped her breast in his palm. "Does the thought of just one cock do it for you anymore?"

How did she answer? Jason may get hard in less than a second, but she swore it took her less than that to have her panties soaking wet at the thought of having one of them inside her and one in her mouth. "Stop." She stepped back.

"Lauren?" Russell reached for her.

She put her hand to her chest and turned away. "It's more than just two cocks."

"Laurie." Jason came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders.

"Look at me." Russell's voice took on the quality she loved, solid, strong, and definitive.

She shook her head and turned back. These men were who she gave up her dream for and the closest she got to telling them what she wanted was that it was more than two cocks. It had to be both of them or no one. Damn it, she wasn't ready to let go.

She reached up and fisted Russell's collar. "I think you wanted to piss your parents off." With that, she thrust him away, and flung her arms around Jason's neck. "Are you still hard?"

"I can be." He took her by the hips.

She faced Russell. "It's not two cocks, it the two cocks."

"I think I can be hard too." He went behind her. "Actually, I am hard."

Jason pushed her sweater down and nibbled her collarbone.

With two men there was never any room for want, they took care of her in conjunction, caressing all the right spots in unison and opposition and she moaned as she first reached down to the front of Russell's pants. "Yes, you are." His erection already made its way down his pant leg.

"I don't need dessert, let's get out of here." Russell pressed her hand to him.

"Yes, I think it's time the three of you leave."

Russell's father's voice intruded into their interlude. His strained tone was that of someone who just found out his son cheated in the big game and the team would have to give the trophy back. She stood motionless, frozen, not even bothering to move her hand from the conspicuous place it was on this man's flesh and blood.

Jason straightened up and pushed her behind him, and Russell put his arm around her. She peeked around them to find not only his father, but his mother standing there with her hand over her mouth as if her Thanksgiving dinner was

about to make a reappearance.

"Don't tell me this is not what it looks like." His father pointed at him.

Russell tensed against her and she bit her lip, welcoming the metallic taste of blood in her mouth.

"It is exactly what it looks like." Russell cleared his throat.

Mr. Sinclair shook his head. "This is how you live your life, you've actually gotten worse."

If Mrs. Sinclair didn't vomit, Lauren could take her place. The turkey, trimmings and salad did a spin cycle in her stomach and she broke out into a sweat.

"Apparently so." Russell gave her a light push forward. "But you are right

about one thing, it's time for us to leave."

Jason took her hand and she held on, letting both men guide her forward.

Russell let go of her as they passed his father. "What exactly is so wrong, anyway?"

"Come on." Jason continued to move them forward.

"I don't think you need an answer to that question. I don't even know why I'm surprised."

"Me neither. I'm glad I lived up to your expectations." Russell laughed.

They made it to the gate when Russell caught up with them. "Let's go home." He put his hand on the small of her back.

"Russell." She swallowed trying to stop her voice from breaking.

"Did you leave anything in the house?"

She glanced into the window, right into the kitchen. The maid was cleaning up. Her salt was still on the counter, Jason's candle next to it. "No."

He unlatched the gate himself. "Well, I did piss them off."

"Yes, we did." They walked through the gate together.

Now the addiction would ruin a family.

One more day.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"Oh my God, you all look wonderful!"

Russell shut his eyes before the big fuchsia lips abraded his cornea. Instead, the massive, moist mouth only assaulted his eyelid, but he was pretty certain he sacrificed a few lashes in the process.

"Look at them!" Cecelia Morgan pinched both his cheeks, hard. "You make my teeth hurt." She mashed her lips against his chin and pushed him away.

Russell wiped his eye and watched Jason's mother move on to her next victim. She was always a sight to

behold with her skin-tight pants and equally tight shirts. Though she was no taller than Lauren, her blue-black hair done up in a beehive and patented stiletto heels made her appear much larger.

"The fruit of my labor! It took me thirty-six hours to give birth to you and every hour was well spent." She lunged at her son, flung her arms around him and gave him a similar round of kisses before shoving him aside.

"Hi, Mom." Jason backed up and elbowed him.

His mother turned to the one she really wanted. "You look positively radiant!" She clapped, rubbed her hands together and took Lauren's face between

both of her hands.

Russell bit the inside of his mouth to stop the laughter when Cecelia's onslaught caused Lauren's lips to purse out like a goldfish.

"You are absolutely gorgeous. Gorgeous, I tell you. I wish I had such a complexion, it's better than peaches and cream, better." She pummeled Lauren's face with a series of pecks followed by a hug. "Oh, I missed you."

Every time Cecelia embraced Lauren she closed her eyes and leaned into her, and every time Russell felt his own need to take her into his arms. Lauren wanted, no needed a family more than any of them and what he and Jason found

annoying or funny, she basked in, soaking it up like a sunbather dripping in baby oil.

Lauren kissed Cecelia's cheek. "I brought you salt."

"Salt?" Cecelia kept hold of Lauren's shoulders and held her at arm's length.

Russell put his hand in his pocket. Lauren always made sure to treat each set of parents the same, but they weren't, not by long shot.

"It's pink." Cecelia scooped the salt set up into her palm. "It's magical."

"It's from the Himalayan Mountains." Lauren grinned, one of those grins she couldn't stop because it was authentic.

Cecelia wrapped her arm around Lauren and spun around to face the men.

"Bruce, look at the magic salt from the mystical land of the Himalaya."

The way Jason's mother described the salt, he believed the salt could perform miracles.

Jason's father stepped forward, patted both him and Jason on the shoulders and bent down to study the salt. He tilted his head from side to side. "I think we should put it in the center of our Thanksgiving feat. It is marvelous." He stood up straight, kissed both of Lauren's cheeks and leaned back. "She looks different."

"I think she looks beautiful." Cecelia gave the salt to her husband and pulled Lauren in for another hug, smothering her

in her bosom.

Russell nodded as Cecelia doled out the attention and the compliments that should have been Lauren's yesterday.

"She looks great." Jason bent down and hit the glass on the aquarium.

"Ahhh!" Cecelia screamed and let Lauren loose to shoo him away from the fish.

Lauren stumbled, and instinct caused him to rush toward her, only to be tripped up by Jason.

They found their footing and both reached her at the same time. "Lauren."

"I'm okay." Lauren held her hands out and widened her eyes at them.

He punched her in the shoulder and swallowed. The last thing they needed

was a repeat performance of Thanksgiving with the Sinclair's. Lauren cried the night before. She didn't want him to know, never said a word, but he knew. Knew from the way she tiptoed to the bathroom. Knew from the way she sniffed as she slid into bed. Knew from the way she held his hand yesterday. "It looked like you were going to fall."

"You cool?" Jason reached forward and then gave her a high five.

"Groovy." The grin she produced this time wasn't a real one, more full of gums without any tooth sparkle, and her face remained dull. In truth, she appeared a little pale.

"I told you." Cecelia pointed at them.

Not much of what Cecelia did or said made sense, but for the first time in the twenty-two years that he had his second mother, he didn't want to look at her. He glanced at Jason wondering whom Cecelia told what to.

"Mom." Jason turned first. "Did Lauren tell you that salt is the new vinegar?"

"You were right." Bruce held his thumb up and swiped it across the three of them.

"Good, now I can finally give Lauren my present." She offered Lauren her hand. "Come see what I have for you."

No, in twenty-two years, he never fully understood Cecelia Morgan. All

the Morgan's lived in their own dimension and followed their own laws of physics.

"Mom wants you." Jason elbowed her.

Lauren stared straight ahead and walked toward Cecelia as if she were trying to balance a book on her head.

"All of you come to the living room." She grabbed Lauren's hand, held it up to her chest and walked into the living room.

"All of us need to come." Jason stomped after his parents.

He inhaled and followed. While his own mother redecorated once every five years no matter if they needed it or not, the Morgan's did not subscribe to the

theory that they had to stay up on the latest styles. Discard what was old and worn and replace with the latest and most expensive. The Morgan's believed everything had an energy and a purpose, and nowhere was this more evident than in the Morgan's living room.

Crushed green velvet couches lined the walls accented by a dark wood coffee table and two end tables. Knickknacks took up every available surface, and celebrated every decade from the fifties to present day. The only items more abundant in the room were Jason's artwork. Everything from his paintings to his sculptures was everywhere, even if they didn't fit in

their designated space. They fit by not fitting.

Only one item in the room was as coveted as their son's artwork, and that was Cecelia Morgan's rain lamp. This rain lamp hung in the middle of the room, encaged in the wires that dripped the perfectly timed droplets of oil was a plastic sculpture of a naked woman surrounded by plastic plants. When he and Jason were teenagers they called it the make out lamp and Jason used to try to convince girls that the woman in the lamp was a goddess who imparted natural birth control.

No, this wasn't his parent's living room only deemed worthy of people who made more money than his parents.

This wasn't the living room back at their place, a room they passed through and around in the quest in and out of the house. This was a room for living, and living it experienced.

He spent years in this room, watching cartoons and sleeping in sleeping bags. In his teens he laid on that green velvet couch with a hundred and three fever while his parents were out of town. If someone was going to get sick, the place to do it was at the Morgan's. To this day any time he felt the least bit ill he craved the no-bake cheesecake and club soda his mother made him while she taught him to play gin rummy. All he wanted during his week with the flu was to be a

real Morgan.

The room possessed history, something both he and Lauren craved. This was the room the three of them studied for finals every year while Jason's mother made her final feast before freedom. If this room had the same effect on his best friend, this was the room where they both realized they wanted Lauren. He reached out to rub her back and stopped himself.

"This is for Lauren and Russell."
Cecelia motioned up toward the light.

Lauren gasped.

"Mom?" Jason stepped forward.

Russell shook his head.

"Yes, you must have this lamp."
Cecelia hugged Lauren and held out her

hand to him. "I knew it would turn out this way. I had a feeling and you always have to go with your feelings. Don't I always say that?"

"Yes." He, Jason and Bruce all said in unison.

"Lauren has always loved this lamp, Russell has always loved this lamp, and I saved it and now it is yours, yours to share with my son." She spoke as if she were reading the United States constitution. "I always said this was for Jason's partner or partners and I couldn't be happier." She ended her decree by kissing them both on the cheek.

"Mother!" Jason moved in front of the light. "What are you doing?"

Russell wanted to ask the same thing but somewhere in between her giving him this light and calling him Jason's partner his voice got lost and he could only stand there staring at Lauren.

"Are the three of you together or not?" Cecelia asked as if she were asking Jason if he finished his homework.

Lauren put her free hand to her chest.

Jason glanced between the two of them and shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, we are."

"Cecelia." He needed to say something, explain.

She let go of his hand and put her finger to his lips as she shook her head

"I've always known and I always wondered how you would resolve this. I couldn't be happier."

"Do you mean that?" Lauren whispered.

"Of course, I never say anything I don't mean." She leaned her head on Lauren, crushing her beehive just a little.

Tonight Lauren cried again, two lone tears slid down her cheeks like the oil down the wires of the lamp. "Excuse me." She backed up and walked away.

He and Jason both went to go after her.

"Wait." Cecelia motioned for the two of them to come closer. "She needs a second."

"How did you know?" Jason asked.

She put one palm to each of their cheeks. "You told me by your actions." Then she focused her attention on him. "Don't let your parents or your friends or anyone hurt something that is so unique and special. Make sure you do this right, she's scared. Shame on anyone who doesn't understand what is different."

He surrendered and gave the woman a hug.

"Family is what you make it," she whispered in his ear. "You have always been part of my family ever since my other son had the foresight to bring you home."

He leaned back and took her in. Damn he loved that lipstick, the black eyeliner and the blush.

"Now go get my daughter so my Thanksgiving lasagna doesn't get overcooked." She let go of them. "Go get her, both of you."

Jason pushed him forward.
"Come on, brother."

Make sure you do what's right.
Cecelia's words echoed in his mind. No wonder Lauren cried. They needed to do something more definitive.

Maybe he was a Morgan at last.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Saturday activities were always determined by the type of vehicle Jason borrowed from his parent's dealership. Visions of a beach ride in a convertible even though it was fifty-eight degrees out, or driving to a fancy lunch in a German sedan vanished when he pulled up in a huge crew cab truck.

This wasn't the monster cartoon truck the boys took on their infamous first night together. Instead a utility truck filled their driveway. A mode of transportation that combined all the

conveniences of a minivan coupled with an eight-foot long bed designed for the home improvement store.

Now as they drove up in front of the oversized lumberyard, she put her head in hand. She wanted to love this store, the name alone denoted building a home, but somehow they only ended up here when Russell needed to build shelves or get something for his hobbies, or Jason needed paint. No actual home improvement took place. The only two words that came to mind in front of this mecca of parts and pieces were boring and depressing.

"Ready for hardware?" Jason jumped out of the truck and opened up the little back seat door for her.

Maybe if she told Jason she was ready for something hard if they could get back in the truck and get a different car for a different task. Maybe Jason would go for it, but she had a bigger enemy to fight on her quest not to shop for wood and screws, and it came around the truck in the form of Russell Sinclair reading a list.

She pointed at him. "He has a list, that's not fair." This wasn't a little list written on a piece of scrap paper, it was a full sheet from a yellow pad. It may have even been legal size.

"Come on, this may take a while." Without glancing up from the list of horrors, Russell offered her his hand.

She hugged herself and scooted back. If Russell said it would take a while, this meant they would be here until closing time, and that didn't include the three trips back when he realized he forgot some vital nut, bolt or widget. "What are we getting?"

"Get her." He elbowed Jason and pulled a screw out of his pocket.

Jason reached inside the truck.

She tried to fight, slide away, move out of reach, but Jason caught her shin and dragged her until she was at the edge where he grabbed her waist. "He has a comparison screw, that's not fair either." That meant twenty minutes while he held up the screw to every bag

of screws, and even if it were the same screw he would deem it unworthy.

"I'll give you a comparison screw." Jason raised his eyebrows and got her out.

"My life is a comparison screw. Don't forget that." She narrowed her eyes at Russell who was now in full home improvement mode. Since Thanksgiving the men were different. They kept staring at her and she caught them talking in hushed whispers more than once. Either she was getting a wonderful case of paranoia or the end was near. "What are we getting?"

"At least everything on the list." Russell took her hand.

"I have a list as well." Jason pointed

to his head, grabbed her other hand, and they led her directly into hell.

Russell attacked the home improvement store much like other people attacked the grocery store, traveling up and down every aisle as if not to miss anything. As she pushed the cart and nursed the bottle of water Russell handed her, she didn't even have Jason's prodding and complaining to support her as he had gotten into the act by buying three different colored paints, a bunch of brushes and a drop cloth. Actually, over a year ago they stopped taking her here. For a second her heart raced, maybe something was on the horizon and she scanned the contents of

the cart. Nothing inside smacked of anything homelike, no bathroom items or something for the kitchen, just a mish-mash of the normal bizarre things Russell purchased.

Multiple times she tried asking why they were there, but the men never answered. That didn't stop her from trying again. "What are we here for?" She figured maybe varying her word choice would work. Her only wish was to know what was going to happen. She needed to ditch the never-ending sinking sensation in her stomach.

Russell held up his finger and chose a 2X4 piece of wood. She only knew it was a 2X4 because the sign above the mountain of wood said so, and before

Jason dashed off because he forgot something Russell told him he would be by the 2X4's. Russell put the wood on its end, shook his head, put it back and chose another one.

"What was wrong with that piece of wood?" Every piece seemed exactly the same.

"Hold on." Russell repeated his action three more times and finally chose the two pieces he deemed worthy of the cart. "I need a couple more."

Maybe she didn't like the home improvement store because no one answered her. In any attempt to keep her mind from dwelling on horrible things, she wandered down the aisle, stopping

at some different wood. These pieces were rough and dark, and much more interesting than the wood Russell was assessing. She poked at a piece.

"Careful."

With a frown she glanced over her shoulder, Russell wasn't even looking her way. Maybe she didn't like the home improvement store because they treated her like a baby. "I like this one better." She picked up one of the planks and was greeted with a sharp searing pain in the center of her palm. "Ow." She released the weapon, the splat of her enemy falling flat on the concrete floor echoing through the aisle.

"Lauren!" Russell tossed his 2X4 aside and ran to her.

She opened her mouth, was about to tell him she was fine, but she wasn't, it hurt and then one blood droplet dripped to the floor. "Russell."

He grabbed her wrist. "Let me see."

"No." She resisted and another droplet fell.

"Lauren you're bleeding. Let me see!"

"It hurts." She winced as he turned her hand over, whimpering at the huge, jagged splinter that stuck up out of her skin. More than a splinter this was it was practically an entire log imbedded in her hand.

"Let me get it out." He positioned his fingers like a tweezers and went in for

the kill.

"Russell! Russell!" She tried to pull away.

"Lauren you can't live with a splinter in your hand." He attempted to hold her steady.

"Yes, I can. It's okay." She bit her lip. "I want it there."

"No." Russell laid down the law.

"Yes." The blood now trickled down the side of her hand and she swallowed, trying to wash away the bile in her throat. Suddenly, the whole home improvement store became a fiery inferno and she broke out into a sweat.

"Lauren!" Russell raised his chin and looked right in her eye. "I am going to remove it."

Her body trembled as Russell made the pincher fingers again and Jason came down the aisle.

He held a ton of rolls of something as well as a bucket, but the moment he spied them he sprinted toward them, throwing his items in the basket and rushing over. "Whoa!" Without any fanfare or pretending he was some sort of shellfish he reached over and plucked the piece out.

"Ahhh." She screamed and both her and Russell stared into her wood free but bloody hand.

"I was going to do that." Russell cradled her hand in his.

"You can have it." Jason presented

him with the shard of wood. "You can't warn her before you do it."

She shook her head. Apparently she was a baby. Maybe she needed to sit in the front of the cart and be wheeled around so she didn't touch anything else.

"We need to wipe this up. Go get a paper towel." Russell took control, or gave it his best shot.

"No need." Jason took her bottle of water, poured some of the liquid on her palm and retrieved some sort of rag out of his pocket, pressed it on the wound. "You okay even though you had to see blood?"

No, she wanted a lollypop too and she always wanted both of them there to take care of all her boo boos. Maybe

rather than moping and being sick she should talk to them. "Yes."

"What are you a one man first aid kit?" Russell lifted the cloth and inspected Jason's handwork.

"I try." He pinched her cheek.

"Well, I guess she's no worse for the wear." Russell put his arm around her. "I got everything, we can leave now. Why don't we reward Lauren with a trip to the warehouse store for not burning the place down."

She hung her head down. Her behavior didn't warrant a reward, a bottle of apple juice and a pacifier maybe, but not a reward. Why they lasted even this long she would never

know, and the warehouse store held that same bittersweet place in her heart as this store. While she loved all the humongous items, they were made for families.

"Do you want to know what we got?" Jason took control of the basket.

She didn't deserve to know what they got. "Yes."

"Well, we're not ready to tell you yet." Jason led the way to the registers. "After the land of gluttony, we will all sit down talk."

"Yes, talking is definitely in order." Russell patted her shoulder. "It's time."

At last they were going to let her in on the secrets. "What do you need to talk to me about?"

"If you were paying attention you would already know." Jason took a sip of her water. "But first we will go to your favorite place."

"Yes, we're already here so let's get it all done." Russell scooted ahead of them to pay.

Yes, get it done. She only hoped when it was time to really get it done someone was around to kiss the boo boo.

"I have to go get something." Russell tiptoed to Lauren and bent down to her ear to basically ask for permission.

"What do you need?" She held up a huge bag of apples and didn't look at him or Jason.

"It's a guy thing." He kissed the top of her head and swore she frowned.

"I need a guy thing, too." Jason kicked the basket and held his hand up. "Can I go with Russell, can I?"

"What do you need?" She narrowed her eyes at nothing.

"I said, guy stuff." Jason crossed his arms.

At last she faced them, her gaze darting between them. "What kind of guy stuff?"

"I'll be right back. Just keep going up and down the aisles and we'll find you."

He spun on his heel and made sure to walk, not run toward the section he needed.

"Hold up." Jason followed.

"No tools and no toys!" She yelled after them.

Fine, turnabout was fair play. He stopped short, causing Jason to trip. "No one will eat that many apples, and no, you won't make apple pie with them." He peeked behind him expecting to see a smile.

Instead, she walked away shaking her head, disappearing behind a mountain of crackers.

"This is perfect!" Jason hit him in the arm. "Let's get tools and toys." He picked up a tub of cookies. "This should

throw Laurie for a tizzie."

"I think we've already done that." He shooed Jason away and sped toward the front of the store.

"What I need is this direction." Jason ran ahead of him, picking up one thing or another and putting them down.

While his best friend became distracted with a display of framed art, Russell darted down another aisle and took the long way around to the pharmacy department.

Women with children strolled the aisles of cold remedies and vitamins and he backed up toward the guy section. He nodded at another male, and they spoke the silent language of not speaking while

he perused his choices.

"Let's get these." Jason appeared behind him and pointed to one of the boxes of condoms. "That's the brand you use."

A shudder ran down his spine, and the man next to him made his selection and left. "Jason."

"Look at this." Jason moved him down and lifted a canister. "Now this is a variety pack." He held it up. "Eighty condoms, different colors and textures. Sweet. We can surprise Laurie with different sensations." He chuckled.

"Why do you know what brand condom I use?"

"Dude. I've watched you bang our girlfriend a bunch of times now. You

are very consistent." He put the canister of condoms under his arm.

"She's not our girlfriend yet." Russell shook his head. "We need to officially ask her."

"Yes, yes. I know you like everything done up all nice and tidy." Jason patted him. "Tonight she will be. Everything is in place."

"She was nervous enough. I think dragging her to the store she hates and telling her we had to talk to her may make her rethink her decision." Somehow he always ended up in this mess. After he and Jason talked, he wanted to make it official that night, but he listened to Jason and decided to turn

this into a multi-day, multi-faceted ceremony.

"Oh the little black rain cloud appears." Jason thrust the canister at him. "She likes the ribbed ones, I'll have you know."

"She does?" He did notice Jason always had different condoms. He wished he didn't notice, but he did.

"If she puts it on me she always smiles, like it's our secret." Jason elbowed him. "But since you are my best friend and soon to be more, I'll reveal all."

More? They still had no real words for their relationship but it was a relationship, one that needed to be recognized. He really had no words for

this conversation. He pushed his glasses up and tried to study his options.

"You are a creature of habit. You use the same brand and style as the ones we bought in junior high." Jason picked up a box of his brand. "I say we get these for your comfort zone and the canister of fun for her comfort. We'll mix it up."

"We are not sharing condoms." He had his nightstand where he kept his stash, and Jason kept his in the other one. Lauren kept her items in the bathroom, except for her lotion, which she alternated between the two nightstands.

"Why not, we share a girl." Jason reached behind him and handed him a

bag of disposable razors. "Get this too."

"I have a razor." He reached up to his forehead and tried to push the vein that was sure to be bulging back in.

"You could use a little touch up downstairs." Jason pushed the bag into his chest.

"Not everyone needs to be hairless like you." He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "My situation is fine."

"No, I think it's good to offer Lauren variety since we can provide her some." Jason nodded. "You know when you shave it, it looks bigger."

"We can measure anytime." He turned and found a mammoth bottle of peroxide. "Here."

"What's this for?" Jason took it.

"Maybe you're the one who needs a touch up."

"You know I'm a natural towhead."

He put the bottle down and chose one more canister of condoms. "This should last us for a while, its two hundred and forty condoms. If we split them even we can each do her one hundred and twenty times."

For a man who was lousy at math, Jason managed to calculate that figure pretty fast. "Fine."

"Look this one has a special glow in the dark one." Jason pointed. "I get dibs on that one. Let's go before Lauren buys like five hundred pounds of cherries and

we have to eat something jubilee'd for as long as we have these condoms."

Again, the abnormal was normal. They were co-buying condoms, why shouldn't they? "How about we ask her already so we can use the condoms."

"Maybe once we're official we won't have to use condoms. We're all tested." Jason licked his lips. "Have you ever?"

The image alone got a rise out of him and he shook his head. "You?"

"Nope." His eyes widened.

They stared at each other.

"Let's go home." Jason turned on his heel and rushed away.

He took a step to follow, stopping and darting down an aisle as his survival instinct took over.

Anne stood only a few yards away from him flipping through some books.

When his first thought was how to get out of there without her seeing them, he wanted to bang his head against some oversized brick.

Now what did he do?

Roast beef. Lauren nodded to herself and grunted as she lifted the seven-pound hunk of meat. The roast, along with the baked potatoes, salad and a chocolate cake would be the perfect dinner. If they made it through tonight they could all share it, if they didn't, the four pound chocolate cake may make her

ill enough to pass out.

She patted the side of beef, hid it under her eighteen rolls of paper towels so neither man would chastise her for buying too much, and took hold of the cart. Maybe Russell and Jason were too busy with their tools and toys to realize some of the items she put in the cart including a rather large size bag of pears that Jason loved poached in wine and an oversized bottle of the kind of April fresh fabric softener Russell preferred. She couldn't stop herself.

"Lauren!"

At the sound of her name being yelled, she looked up to find Anne waving at her.

There were many times at work

where she forced a smile on her face in a half-hearted effort to not show her feelings. Her curled lips were her mask and right now she may as well have put on an entire Halloween costume for as much as she wanted to address her friend. The last time they crossed paths was at the charity event, and today felt no better.

At this moment she was thrilled she didn't prepare or eat any roast beef yet, she wanted to throw up at the memory of that night. With no point pretending she didn't hear or see her friend she lifted her hand, a limp, uninviting gesture.

Anne trotted over. "It's been so long." She flung her arms around Lauren

and kissed her cheek.

"How are you?" She gave Anne the obligatory hug and wondered how what was once a wave and handshake turned into hugs and kisses. Those gestures should be saved for those most special, yet everyone now kissed and hugged without even thinking. She pulled back without returning the kiss.

"Good. It's been forever. I feel like you're avoiding me." Anne held her at arm's length. "How are pharmaceutical sales for the one person that doesn't sell pharmaceuticals?"

Anne took a breath and Lauren opened her mouth hoping to cut her off before she asked about the men. All she could hope for was to get rid of her

before they returned. She prayed they were collecting a palate-full of toys and tools.

"You look different." Anne tilted her head.

Different wasn't good or bad, but it was definitely bitchy, and Lauren's mind didn't spark a retort, instead it exploded with an epiphany.

This woman didn't like her.

No, Anne didn't like her. Someone who liked her either wouldn't mention her looks or say she looked nice. The different comment stood enough on the acceptable side of the fence to pass, but had at least one foot in the rude.

"How are things with Jason?" Anne

moved around rude and slid closer into what she really wanted to know, and it wasn't about Jason.

Her only wish was for Jason to appear with one of his lines. Somehow she could never come up with the comeback quip like he could, it must be a different art form. She glanced around the warehouse.

"What, not talking?" Anne hit her in the shoulder.

All she needed to do was look where every other female stared. It was rule number one when locating one of her men, and sure enough right as a group of teenagers pointed and giggled near a stack of cold cuts. This time she waved her hand in a genuine gesture, this one a

call for help. To hell with this, until she was told differently they were still doing whatever they were doing. "Why don't you ask him yourself?"

Jason lifted his chin and charged toward her with his arms behind his back. "I was a good boy." He smiled and she half expected a tiny cartoon starburst to appear on his pearly white. "Ask me why." Even after multiple warnings throughout the years to be nice to Anne, he didn't as much as acknowledge her.

"Why?" Anne leaned over to try to get in his eye line.

Jason didn't turn his head, didn't glance over, he kept his focus

completely on her.

Lauren wasn't going to chastise him. She wanted to know why he was a good boy. "Why?"

"Because I only bought two things." He revealed a bag of disposable razors in one hand. "Does this have the Lauren seal of approval?"

Jason used an expensive razor that took equally as expensive blades on his face, so did Russell, and she had a special razor for her legs and such. Her entire face heated when she realized what those would be used for. Jason took a lot of time to clean up his area and her mouth watered. This was not the conversation two people had if they weren't going to have sex later.

"Absolutely."

With his eyes on her he dropped the bag into the cart. "I also got this." He held out a box of candy with milk chocolate, white chocolate and dark chocolate, but it wasn't the confections, it was the name on the box. "It's called Trifecta."

A sweet taste, sweeter than the candy could ever be caused her to rub her lips together.

Jason raised his eyebrows and winked.

Caught in gazing at him, she didn't move. The horrendous feeling that weighed her down lightened a little.

"Is that chocolate on sale?" Anne

broke the spell. “What does trifecta mean?”

Jason put the box in the cart and put his arm around her waist and sort of spoke to Anne though he kept his eyes affixed on hers. “It means three winners, first, second and third place, but in our case I think it’s all home base.”

“I don’t understand.” Anne went toward them.

She didn’t care if Anne didn’t understand. Her eyes filled up. All that mattered was she did and if Russell were here he would as well. Where was Russell anyway? She wondered if he saw Anne and wandered off. She also wondered why Jason was being nastier to Anne than normal.

As Anne approached Jason moved them away. “It’s a mystery.”

“Maybe it’s one Russell can solve.” Anne began flailing her arms.

Lauren stiffened and took hold of Jason’s arm as she located Russell. He pushed his own cart and slowed down the faster Anne waved.

The ball of anxiety reformed, taking on a density that threatened to buckle her knees. This surreal experience was a total rewind of that terrible night, but now there would be no gallant jaunts to Vegas. Today it would just be the end.

At last, he joined them, staying behind his cart as makeshift shield. Unlike Jason with his complete attention

on her from the first second, he glanced between the three of them. "What's going on?"

Her stomach bottomed out and the anxiety morphed into nausea. Somehow she wanted Russell to rush to her other side, show Anne they were together. But she supposed she should be happy for anything that didn't end in disaster, and Russell had come out a lot, but he wasn't ready in front of people they knew. She couldn't force him, didn't want to. They never officially declared themselves together, they only agreed that they wouldn't see other people until they figured this out. He owed her nothing.

"I called you and called you but you never called me back." Anne frowned.

Lauren squeezed Jason's arm.
Russell never told her Anne called him.

"Okay." Russell shrugged his shoulders.

She bit the inside of her mouth.

"I saw the latest couple and hoped you may have tagged along." Anne shimmied around both baskets and went to Russell's side.

She couldn't watch, wouldn't watch. Last time this happened Russell ended up with Anne's shoe and walking away with her. Her heart seemed to stop. All Russell needed was to feel like the outsider.

"What are you talking about?" Russell's tone was that of an annoyed

teacher who just explained a simple problem to a student for the millionth time.

She opened her eyes only a crack, keeping her eyelashes as a veil in case she didn't hear right.

With his arms crossed, Russell backed up toward them.

"They are so lovey dovey with their chocolate and such, maybe you might want to get out of here and let them be." Anne gave him a crooked smile. "I can pick up something for dinner. I hate it when I'm a third wheel."

Lauren peeked at Jason. He stood with a grin across his face. Maybe he knew something she didn't because she knew this was going to ruin all the

progress they made since Vegas. Ruin them. How many times did they have to be hit in the head with this until they were knocked out?

"You know, tricycles are pretty stable." Russell leaned over his basket, dug under some huge package of shop rags, and pulled out a box. "Was this the candy?"

Lauren opened her eyes all the way, this time to take in the glorious sight of Russell holding the Trifecta candy. She sucked in her breath and waited.

"What is with that?" Anne reached for it.

Russell reacted fast and held the candy up. "I got this for Lauren." He

walked around Jason and went to her other side. "Look."

He placed the cellophane wrapped box in her hand. "For you."

She opened her mouth, but once again didn't have the chance to speak because this time Russell bent down and gave her a kiss. A light kiss right on her parted lips, but he may as well have bent her back and planted one on her, her body warmed up the same.

"Let's get out of here." Russell gave her one more peck. "I'll transfer this stuff into our basket."

She turned to Jason. With the same grin he gave her a kiss as well, only his was punctuated with a laugh.

"Is this a joke?" Anne's eyes were

wide, wide enough that Lauren thought they may pop out of her head. "What are you doing?"

"Trifecta." Jason nodded.

"Lauren." Red splotches took over Anne's cheeks as if someone had slapped her twice, but in Anne's case Lauren supposed it was three times. "I should have guessed."

"Anne." She almost felt bad for her. Maybe she should have told her. Maybe she was guilty of the same thing she almost accused Russell of, or maybe it was Anne.

Anne huffed and adjusted her purse, a half-hearted attempt to appear as if she were doing something, anything. "It's

always you."

As if she'd been punched, she recoiled at Anne's words "What do you mean?"

"You get everything you want. You don't even have to choose." She shook her head. "Now I know why things aren't working out with Dr. Dalton."

Russell grunted at the name and Jason pulled her closer, but she couldn't deny that the reason things didn't work with Dr. Dalton was the men on either side of her. "Anne, you don't understand."

"What do you expect to happen now?" Anne went to her cart and put both hands on the bar. "Maybe for once you won't come out on top. In fact it looks like you're stuck in the middle."

She shuddered at the venom behind Anne's voice, poisoned words that weren't a product of embarrassment but something much deeper and more evil. "Anne." Leave it to her so-called friend to voice her exact fear in the most cutting way. The only thing she was certain of was, Anne was not her friend.

"At least now I know why you didn't return my calls." Anne turned to Russell.

"I didn't return your call because I didn't want to." Russell put his arm round her. "But most importantly I have a girlfriend."

Somewhere in the background Lauren heard Anne say goodbye, saw her stomp

away, but she froze at Russell's word choice. It was quite possible he didn't think that meant what she thought it did, and if she were Russell's girlfriend what did that make Jason? In Vegas they only agreed to give this a try, they never agreed to make a commitment.

"I think you sort of blew the whole thing we had planned for later." Jason put his arm around her.

"I think your planning sucks ass, look at her, she looks like she's going to pass out." Russell took her shoulders and turned her to face him. "Are you all right?"

She tried to nod but only succeeded in staring at him. With tears forming in her eyes, his image became all blurry

like when she would mess around and put his glasses on.

Jason stood by Russell and waved his hand in front of her face. "Our girlfriend looks spooked."

When Jason used the G word her heartbeat sped up and she was sure the poor organ was attempting to escape her chest. However, at the end of the day she needed to remember these were her best friends. The two people she could tell anything to and they wouldn't judge her, but could she ask them this?

"Say something." He leaned in, bangs falling down into his eyes.

"Girlfriend?" Now she used the word, one of the most deadly and

misunderstood in the human language.

"Girls always need things to be so official. We had something all planned, but with Anne and all." Jason exhaled. "I don't have to be nice to her anymore, do I?"

Not sure what was up with Jason, she turned her attention to Russell.

Russell picked her hand up and brought it to his lips. "Will you be our girlfriend?"

"What do you mean?" The world seemed to swirl and she grabbed his forearm for stability.

"You know, like we don't see anyone else, we're committed, we're more than a sum of our parts." Jason put his hand over his chest as he if he were about to

make a pledge. "We are officially a trouple."

"Trouple?" Her entire speech had been distilled down to one word questions.

"You know a couple, but three." Jason motioned between them.

"Do you want to know what we bought at the home improvement store?" Russell kept hold of her hand.

"Okay?" Trouple, home improvement, commitment?

"We are going to redo the closet so that all of our stuff fits in our room." He smiled.

"I really thought unveiling the closet would have been better than doing this in

the warehouse store." Jason shook his head. "Maybe this was perfect."

"We want you, Lauren." Russell pulled her in close. "Let's do this, okay?"

"Yes." Again only one word came to mind. This is what she wanted from the beginning and she could finally take a breath. Actually, another word came to mind, but she pushed it away. How?

Chapter Twenty-Five

"Oh my god, that is so freaking ugly." Jason stared up at the rain lamp that haunted his childhood. He thought he was free of it except for visits to his parents, yet here it was in his old bedroom, hanging in the corner. "Seriously. Who has this?" He made his fingers into a gun and pretended to shoot at it. The lamp was a parody of a lamp. "It doesn't even give off any light."

"I love it." Lauren's head bounced on his stomach as he laughed. "Where do you think it all goes?"

He glanced down at her profile. She gazed up at her gift with a slight smile. Yes, he missed that smile, the one that told him she was happy, calm and safe.

"Where what goes?" Russell lifted his head from her chest and took her hand.

"The rain in the lamp. All the golden droplets." Her voice sounded light and airy like a dream.

Russell pointed up to the monstrosity. "There is a pump at the bottom of the lamp that recycles the oil back up that pipe in the center so the liquid can travel down the wire again."

Jason shook his head. Leave it to his best friend to give the real answer.

She wrinkled her nose. "That was incredibly romantic."

"Well, it's a fact." Russell shrugged his shoulders.

She turned up backwards at him. "Say something different."

"It goes back to the 1970's where it belongs." He grinned at her.

She groaned and settled back down. "Can we keep the lamp here? I think it will make a perfect addition to our new office."

Jason raised his thumb and assessed the lamp. They came home from their shopping, and while he and Russell worked on the closet, Lauren made some dinosaur for dinner. All she wanted was

for them to hang the lamp now that they were official. They decided to turn his bedroom into an office, but they had to spend the night in here while the paint in the new master bedroom dried. Now they lay all tangled on the bed, he and Russell in boxer briefs and Lauren in some little see-through nightgown watching the show. This would make an amazing painting. "I think it's a great burglar deterrent."

"You don't think anyone will steal it, do you?" She raised herself up on her elbows.

He pushed her back down. "No, I think a burglar would see it in the window and run the other way. He wouldn't want to steal from the house

with the orange Formica countertops and olive shag carpeting."

"I think that any burglar who would want to steal it would be too old to break into the house, so we're safe." Russell patted her hand.

"I don't care, I love it."

"It sort of reminds me of Grecian pornography." Jason inhaled making her head travel up and down with his diaphragm. The woman in the center of the lamp was draped in some cloth and always looked as if she were about ready to strip. He supposed it was all right with the eclectic style in here. Unlike Lauren's old room that was all frilly and flowered, and Russell's neat

space, his domain was a mish-mosh of whatever he liked at the time, much like his parent's home.

"Your parents had it since before you were born." She grabbed his hand and put it to her chest.

Imbedded forever in his memory were that lamp and his parent's waterbed. "Yes."

"It belonged to your aunt and uncle and they gave it your parents when they got married." Russell got up and fixed the cord woven through the antiqued brass chain. "They said it would bring them good energy."

He narrowed his eyes trying to remember the story.

"Yes." Lauren played with his

fingers. "Good energy."

"What?" Now he sat up. That may be the story that was told, but it didn't make it true.

Russell gave the cord one more adjustment and returned to them, giving him a quick glare before resuming his spot. "Yes, that is what your mother says."

"Okay." It seemed as if Russell knew the real tale as well, but for some reason they were keeping it from Lauren.

"What does that mean?" She pushed Russell up and turned over on her stomach. "Your mom loves the lamp, it gives off good energy."

"It must give off good energy." He

reached forward and touched her protruding lower lip deciding not to tell her the lamp was regifted to his parents after his father lost a bet with his uncle. He didn't think his mother remembered that part of the story either. "As long as you love the lamp, I'm down with it."

"It belonged to your parents." She flipped back over. "It's good to have family."

Maybe he needed to remember how much Lauren needed family. He hated the way she looked so hopeful at Russell's parents when they warmed up to her before all hell broke loose. She was a sponge who needed them. Her mom died before she knew them, and her father years before that. When they first

met her she used to always say she was an orphan. Only after they all moved in together did she stop branding herself with that title. "Do you think your mom would've approved of the light?" He knew all about her mom telling her to marry a doctor, it was why she went into pharmaceutical sales in the first place. If her mom were alive what would she think of the two of them? Since they made the decision to be together, this answer suddenly seemed important.

Russell kicked him in the ankle.

Lauren took a breath. "I think what she wanted was for me to be happy and stable."

Once more he leaned up and studied

the scene before him. The way her hair fanned out over his chest, how she held his hand but had her other hand in Russell's hair, how they all were laying on the bed with the light giving off a glorious glow. Everything was right here. The security, the people, even the lamp. Everything. "We are the next link in the chain. That's why my mom gave us the lamp."

"Do you think we are?" She stared straight at the light.

This would normally be a Russell question, and as if on queue, he answered. "Yes, we are." He sat up and pulled her up. "Look at what we're building."

She grabbed Jason and took him with

her as she scooted into Russell's arms.
"Russell."

Jason joined them and he put his face in her neck. "Are you happy?" He swore he never asked anyone that question in his life, but he also never really had any sort of relationship.

She kissed Russell, turned and gave Jason a light kiss, one where their lips melded together. "I'm very happy. The two of you are my family." She smiled and pulled them in. "Always have been."

The three of them sat with their foreheads together.

"You never answered my question." He whispered since they were all right

there, as it should be.

She tilted her head toward him.

"Would your mom have liked the lamp?"

"My mother would have loved the lamp." A small laugh escaped her throat.

"Not like I love you." His mother always said when it was right the words would be there. Though he didn't plan on saying it, never thought about it, it was right. Somehow with the three of them like this, he was free, free to have a relationship, free to be himself, free to create.

"Jason." She squeezed his hand.

"I always thought I would be the one to say it first." Russell took her chin and turned her toward him. "I've loved you

for a long time."

He inhaled and nodded. Russell loved her from the second he saw her, but it did him good to hear him say it anyway. Again, this was right.

With one tear streaming down each of her cheeks she looked down at their hands together. "I've never not loved the two of you."

"I feel like you were made for me and Russell." He leaned in and nuzzled her neck. Strange, the only relationship in his life he was ever certain about was Russell. Somehow they were given the love of their life, someone who needed them, and the perfect way for them to all be together.

"I was." She put one hand on each of their chins, her fingers tracing both, taking her time and taking them both in before giving him another kiss. For this one she opened her mouth, took time tasting each one of his lips, and teased him with only a flick of her tongue.

In an instant, his body responded. Her taste, a sizzling sweetness radiating through his body, but he resisted deepening the kiss, wanting to let her guide them.

She finished her kiss, stared into his eyes and turned her attention to Russell.

Russell must have received the same memo because he simply sat still, closing his eyes as Lauren traced his lips

with the tip of her finger and moved in to kiss him.

With her mouth still on Russell's she reached back, finding Jason's hand and guiding it around her waist.

He accepted her invitation, catching the bottom of her tiny excuse for pajamas, moving it out of the way in favor of caressing her bare skin.

Lauren pushed Russell down, but rather than landing on top of him, moved to the center of the bed on her back.

Russell moaned, their hands colliding when he took hold of her. Over the last couple of weeks Russell had become more comfortable around him. Not flinching and tensing if they happened to touch or get close to each other.

As a test, Jason didn't move, and he swore Russell paused, keeping his hand there a bit longer than needed before sliding it over his and down to Lauren's hip. Jason arched his back, prolonging an unexpected heat to radiate through his body. No, he never even dabbled in anything with another man, didn't feel the urge, but Russell was Russell, part of them.

"I want you to make love to me." Once more she kissed Russell then turned back and kissed him.

While he knew that right now Russell only considered them both with Lauren, the fact was they were all together. He reached over to Russell's hand and

moved it up to her breast. "Let's make love to our girlfriend."

With the golden raindrops falling from the lamp, the ethereal glow in the room and two of the most amazing men on either side of her, Lauren didn't know if life would ever be more perfect than this minute. For the first time in her life reality completely outweighed any fantasy. As the day calmed down and she watched her men work on redesigning their bedroom while she cooked, the doubts began to fade.

When they said they loved her it was more than she could ask for, but when

Jason said she was made for them, she found her place in the world. Her search led her to what she had wanted all along.

She closed her eyes and let the sensations flow. Jason's lips on hers, Russell caressing her breasts, her hands occupied with taking each one of her loves in, wanting to remember this night, each emotion, each touch, each word.

Caught up in pure appreciation of this time, she barely realized they completely undressed her and themselves until Jason turned her to her side facing him, and she had two more than ready men pressed up against her.

Now skilled in what they needed, she

took Jason in one hand and reached behind her to Russell, giving them both some attentive but soft strokes. As if they rehearsed their next move, Jason's fingers parted her folds, while Russell focused on her most sensitive spot with a light massage. Her desire grew, turning into an ache she now wanted satisfied. "Now."

At the same time, Jason went to pull her on top of him as Russell tried to push her back.

"This way." She resisted and stayed on her side wanting to feel surrounded by them. "I want you both right here."

Jason positioned her leg over his hip.

"We're both here." Russell kissed

her neck and took her chin turning her toward him. "Look at me as Jason enters you."

She stared into his eyes, waiting for the ultimate fulfillment, but neither man moved. "Do you need a condom?" They had a huge tub from the warehouse store, but with her head foggy with need she couldn't remember where they put them.

"Do we need one?" Jason punctuated his question with a kiss on her chest.

She broke eye contact with Russell, focusing on the lamp and the amazing moving shadow it made on the wall. "I've never done that." Though the image of them not fumbling with cellophane and latex was alluring, enough to make

her move her hips toward Jason.

"Neither have we." Russell's lips brushed her ear. "But if you don't feel right..."

"No." She bit her lip. A first for all three of them. Something intimate and special to only be shared by those in a commitment. "You're right. No condom."

"Then look at me as Jason enters you." Russell's tone one of control and confidence.

Again she gazed into his eyes, greenish blue, arching her back as Jason ran the head of his cock over her and slipped inside her without anything in the way, maybe a metaphor for her life. "Oh." While she knew men craved this,

she didn't think she would notice a difference, but before he even moved, there was no doubt this wasn't the same at all. She held her breath waiting for Jason to thrust into her.

"Yes." Jason pressed his face to her shoulder and stopped.

"Jason?" She gasped.

He took hold of her face, crushed his lips to hers and began moving inside her.

Yes, there was a difference, a major one, not only with no condom, but with the way Jason made love to her. He wrapped his arms around her, and seemed to take his time, Russell directed her and she rocked her hips back and forth. He stomach coiled, the beginning

of the euphoric build up.

Jason broke the kiss. "You need to feel her." He gave her two more strokes and pulled out. "It's incredible."

"Jason." She grabbed his hand and squeezed at the loss of the source of pleasure.

He kissed her. "We're all together."

Russell took Jason's place.

Unlike Jason who took a moment, Russell never paused. "I love you, Lauren."

The romantic love scene she craved played out before her with her in the middle.

The men took turns being inside her, kissing her and fondling her, each one edging her closer toward her climax.

Rather than three people having sex together, they moved as one unit. The mood turned urgent, the slow strokes now strong thrusts. She wouldn't hold out much longer. "Please."

Jason took over once more and Russell ground against her back, keeping the momentum.

"I need to come." Jason drove into her.

"Jason." She writhed against Russell trying to get in the perfect position to keep up with him.

"I can't hold it." Jason reached over her, grabbing Russell's shoulder.

Even more incredible was Russell returned the favor, and took hold of

Jason.

Never did the men make it a point to touch each other. Never. But the way they held onto each other, their arms over her gave her that last little bit she needed.

Her orgasm grew, the pressure increasing, becoming more intense. A bubble expanding and wanting to burst.

"I'm there!" Jason pulled Russell toward him and propelled his hips into hers.

The most incredible heat filled her, radiating through her body, causing the bubble not to pop but explode into rapture. Even though her body continued to pulse against Jason, her arousal remained piqued. "Now I want

Russell." At last, she had everything, and they in return could have all of her.

The first time him and Jason made love to Lauren, Russell prayed this whole situation wasn't a fluke, a once in a lifetime experience that would go down in his history. Every night since then he received confirmation this was right for him. Yes, he had his doubts, but in the end deciding to be with the woman he loved and his lifelong friend was what he wanted.

Tonight only solidified his choice.

Sex was one thing, but they were

together, and he let go of everything and went with what he wanted.

The sensation of making love to Lauren without a condom, actually being able to take in everything she offered seemed to drug him. All he wanted was for the three of them to share this, and damn him but watching Jason come only inflamed him more. Now he would make Lauren his.

In one motion he entered Lauren again, and his balls tightened. "Oh shit." He held his breath to stop himself from moving forward.

"Russell?" Lauren turned back to him.

If he saw her or Jason he would come for sure, so he closed his eyes.

"Does it feel that good?" Jason gave him a squeeze on the shoulder.

Good wasn't quite the word he would have chosen. Magnificent, off the charts, insane were better choices. Without a condom he could make out exactly how wet and open she was, and Jason came inside her only moments before. "Better." He forced the word out and burrowed himself until every inch was immersed in her.

Jason's hand traveled down his shoulder to his back. "Lauren wants you to make her come again."

"I love it when you're inside me." She squirmed against him.

Every miniscule movement made him

ache, and he didn't want it to end like this. He needed to feel Lauren's orgasm as well as his own.

"Take a breath and go slow." Jason slid his hand down to his ass and prodded him forward.

He kept hold of his best friend and followed Jason's lead. Shallow thrusts to calm down, then deeper, and at last he let loose and plunged into her.

"Russ." Lauren reached behind her, her hand joining Jason's. "Harder."

Using Jason for leverage, he continued increasing his pace causing the bed to thump against the wall creating a bizarre metronome to his need. Everything in the world disappeared but the three of them.

"Come on." Jason pushed him into Lauren. "She's going to come, wait until you feel it."

His heart didn't race, it zoomed and he shook in an effort to hold off his own climax.

"I'm there," Lauren cried out. "Come, Russell!"

All of a sudden his cock was surrounded by the most glorious, pulsing massage as her orgasm reverberated through him.

His cock thickened and body seized, and he wrapped his arm around Jason, pulling both him and Lauren toward him as he allowed himself the decadence of letting go without any barriers, emptying

himself into his girlfriend. "Yes!" A second surge, then a third hit him, leaving him weak, spent, and fulfilled.

Lauren's body went loose with the last remnants of her release quivering down him and he panted to catch his breath.

"Are you okay?" Jason kissed her.

"I love you both." Her voice trailed off as exhaustion took over.

"We love you, just relax. We're all here." Jason glanced over at him.

The cloud of his need cleared and the glow of the rain lamp gave him a perfect view to how the three of them managed to contort themselves together. Not only were they tangled with Lauren but they were intertwined with each other and he

wasn't making a move to unravel them.

"You okay?" Jason raised his chin in his direction but didn't move his hand.

"You?" He glanced down at Lauren. If she weren't here, they would be holding each other. Still he didn't move.

"Yeah, I am." Jason smiled. "That was fucking hot."

Nothing in his life had ever been like this, all consuming, arousing, and intense. He wondered what other boundaries they would break. "I'm okay." He nodded. "We're all together." Now he wasn't sure what those words meant.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Russell gripped the sides of his keyboard until the plastic crackled in complaint. He forced himself to release the innocent typing instrument. If he broke his keyboard he would have to find one, or take this horrible nightmare home. If his concentration were shot in the privacy of his office, going home would certainly euthanize it.

Instead of taking down his keyboard that had done nothing but try to help him, he tried to focus on his true enemy. The little envelope at the bottom of his computer screen that would indicate if

he had the email containing last quotation he needed to finish the proposal from hell.

He leaned his chair back and pushed his glasses up. What did it take to give him a price? A simple price? A number to fit in the box on his spreadsheet that would make all the formulas do their magic. With that one number he would see the profit, the loss, and be done. Every aspect of this deal opened up not only cans of worms but entire vats. All he needed was the one final piece and he couldn't get it.

Without turning away from his monitor he reached over to his desk and found the marker Lauren enjoyed writing with but would never take for fear it

would leak in her purse. He put the pen between his teeth and pulled the cap off, aiming the felt tip at the envelope. Before he wiped out the icon forever he would give it a fighting chance and he hit the send/receive button. Still, he found himself staring up at the ceiling.

Lauren may love the pen, but if Jason happened to be stuck at his office he would make it a point of doodling with it, silly cartoons or a geometric shape. Jason always gravitated to it, would search it out in his top desk drawer, but he would never take the pen either. He only said it would be there the next time, like Old Faithful.

Of course he earned the name. He

always kept the pen in its spot. Right where Lauren could write down her notes or Jason could create a random piece of art.

Maybe some hidden part of him wanted Jason to come here and use the pen. Or maybe in his quest to have Lauren he only agreed to this arrangement because he truly wanted Jason. This weekend's festivities, touching and orgasms certainly pointed in that direction.

If he could get the waves of bile to stop sloshing in his stomach long enough to relive the experience, he may be aroused.

“Dude!” Tom ran into his office holding a motherboard.

He blinked, put the pen down and spit the cap out of his mouth. “What’s going on?”

“Let’s go put together some machines.” Thomas held the revered piece of chips and wires out to him.

“I’m waiting for a price.” He glanced over at the computer. Nothing.

“We’ll wait with you and grab some lunch.” Ken knocked on the doorjamb and came into the office as well. “I have the games set up in the lab. Let’s call in some pizza and we’ll hang.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Tom clapped and rubbed his hands together.

He inhaled, his lungs expanding to the point where they reached maximum

capacity. Already he knew Tom and Ken would stay until he finished his proposal. They were great that way. Pizza, games and a stack of finished work usually made for a great lunch, especially if he could lure Jason there. Jason and Lauren.

“I think instead of pizza we should get Chinese.” Tom lifted his motherboard and turned it over.

“No, pizza.” Ken swiped the motherboard from him.

“Chinese.” Tom reached for the component.

“Pizza.” Ken pointed to something and Tom moved over while they both assessed the electronic.

“Chinese.” Tom elbowed him.

"Let Russ be the tie breaker." Ken pointed at him.

Russell watched this interplay as if he were watching a bad movie of his own life and stood up. "Get out of here I'm working!"

Both Ken and Tom stared at him.

He clenched his fist and swallowed in an attempt to catch his breath.

"Didn't you get any last night?" Ken elbowed Tom. "Is Lauren mad at you?"

"Maybe Jason came home too early, and Russell had to stifle himself." Tom held the motherboard up as a trophy.

"Maybe Jason's the one who came and that's why our buddy is all full of pent up emotion." Ken made a motion

like he was wiping the tears out of his eyes.

"Or..." Tom laughed. "Maybe Lauren is only a cover, and Russell and Jason had a lover's spat."

Fire seared through him, not enough to melt him, just enough to burn. He relaxed his jaw enough to ask the next question. "Is that what you think?"

Both of them started laughing, more like giggling. Ken bent over and grabbed his sides, and Tom hugged his motherboard.

"I always pictured him with something with more chips and wires." Tom squeaked out, "Maybe a plug."

Once more he pushed up his glasses, this time hard enough to cause a blunt

pain to go through his skull. He made his way around his desk to shovel his so-called friends out of his office.

"Here you go!"

A singsong voice broke through the vibrations in his head, and he turned to find their company's receptionist standing in the doorway fanning some red, green and blue papers.

"Do you have my pricing?" Russell held his hand out.

The woman wrinkled her nose. "No, I just have the flyers for the annual holiday party." She handed one to each of them.

He shook his head. This woman wouldn't have his pricing. She didn't

even know what he was working on. He hit the paper and read the invitation. Unless he was dating someone he always brought Lauren to this event, which meant he brought Lauren every year but one. The one year he didn't bring her, he wished he did.

"Make sure you RSVP." She waved and walked away.

"Well, I guess the big question of the day is if Russell is going to bring Lauren, a computer, or Jason as his date this year."

Ken's comment caused him and Tom to go into another round of laughter.

Russell watched them. Now a different movie of his life played in his mind. The two of them together with

Lauren was one thing, but the three of them together was a plot twist he wouldn't accept. He couldn't enjoy this, want this, his whole life was a disaster of epic proportions. "I'm going to be out of town that weekend."

"Come on." Tom stood up. "We were just joking around. Let's go get that food. You can pick."

Russell went back around his desk, crumpled up the invitation and threw it in the trash. He looked around and picked up the pen and cap, tossing it away as well. One quick glance of the screen told him the email he waited for was most likely there, but the damn spreadsheet could wait. He flicked off

the computer without properly shutting it down and picked up his bag. "I'm out of here."

"Russell." Ken rose. "Dude."

He pushed passed them, glancing back when he reached the doorway. No matter which way the movie went, he didn't like the story. He needed to go rewrite the ending. "Later."

I need you to come by the office.

Lauren bit her lip and read the text Dr. Dalton sent her for the thirtieth time, maybe fortieth. Since Vegas, since Thanksgiving, since she was in a committed relationship with two men,

she couldn't go there.

She stepped into the hallway of the medical building she was making calls in and pressed her back to the wall. For the last three weeks he sent text messages that she let go unanswered. The front girls placed any orders and she somehow managed to avoid him. To date the messages were simple ones. Asking where she went in Vegas, how she was, if everything was all right. The last time he requested her presence at the office he placed a big order. She stomped her foot. Normally this type of demand would have her running there.

She had several options. Once more she could ignore the text. This may

work for a while longer, but it wouldn't be indefinite. Of course, she could always call the office and hope he couldn't come to the phone, or she could go there where she would be stuck waiting.

She took a breath, taking her time breathing out. Maybe she could return the text and handle it this way.

"Okay." She lifted the phone and typed back. *Is everything okay? Do you need to place an order?* She forced herself to hit send and hoisted her product bag higher on her shoulder, and went to continue her calls.

She didn't get two paces down the hallway when her phone vibrated. Her stomach twisted.

I said I need you to come by the office.

For three years she managed her territory, and he didn't need to say the words to know the tone of voice he was using in that text. He was the doctor and she needed to make sure never to forget that. She squeezed her eyes shut.

The twist in her stomach turned into a full-fledged knot. The kind of good Boy Scout knot Russell used when they played with his neckties. Her mind raced, what did she answer now? She tried to think of anything, tell him she was out of town, busy. Anything but face it.

She moved further down the corridor

away from any offices and lifted her phone. Wait, she had boyfriends now, boyfriends who loved her and they would know how to deal with this, or at least back her up. The fact that she had boyfriends and not *a* boyfriend turned the corners of her mouth up only a bit.

In the past, pre-boyfriend days she would have called Jason first. Jason knew how to handle such situations, but Jason surprised her yet again and ended up to be the more jealous of her men, and she did not want him storming over here. Instead, she chose to go with the man who had a bit more business acumen. She wanted to check on Russell anyway, she knew they pushed his limits. Maybe she could tell him how

much it turned her on to see them touch. It was totally natural.

His cell phone went straight to voicemail, and she frowned. She tried to ignore the tightening knot in her stomach and did what she would normally do in this situation, and called Russell's office.

"California Computer Solutions, this is Tom how can I help you?"

Now she smiled. The few times she called the office the lady answering the phone seemed too busy to deal with her, but Russell's buddy, the very person she had to her house more than once would find her man right now. "Hey, it's Lauren, what are you doing answering

the phone?"

"Receptionist took a break." He laughed. "How are you?"

"I'm okay." She shrugged her shoulders. "Is Russ there?"

"He left the office."

Tom's statement made it seem as if the knot in her stomach was tied around some sort of large boulder.

"Oh. Do you know when he'll be back?"

"No, he just said he had to bolt and left. I wasn't sure if he was sick or not."

"Okay." Maybe she needed to go home, that could be her excuse to Dr. Dalton.

"Hey, we're going to miss you at our holiday bash."

"What?" She glanced up and down the Spartan hallway. The space was completely empty, as if no one were in the building, and everything was silent making it seem as if she were screaming this whispered conversation. This would be the perfect scene for some horrible monster to start chasing her.

"Yeah, you know the party we have every year." He laughed again. "Russ said you had to go out of town, we were actually thinking of changing the weekend."

She wished a something would start chasing her. It would give Russell an even better excuse not to go to the party. They went every year, but apparently he

would rather take his friend, not his girlfriend. She blinked, refusing to cry in the middle of the workday. "Well, I think I'll try him on his cell again." Somehow she managed not to tell Tom not to bother asking if they could change the date of the party, no matter which one they chose she was certain Russell would be busy. "I have to go."

"Bye."

No sooner had she hit the end button on her phone when it vibrated again.

If you would rather not come to the office, I'll call corporate. Let me know.

Well, at least she didn't need Russell's advice anymore on what to do with Dr. Dalton. The good doctor called her out by threatening her job. Even though

Bradley never got mad about those types of things, this was her biggest account, and it would definitely raise eyebrows there and get her a call asking her what was going on. Make her stand out and not in a good way. In sales you were either at the top or you were quiet.

She had to refocus and get her work done. No way would she run after Russell or call Jason. This was all her fault, from messing around with her top account to thinking she could have two boyfriends.

I'm on Bedford I'll be there in ten.

When people were sick they waited to see the doctor. The wait could be unending, people being called ahead and everything running behind schedule. It could take the better part of the day to have your temperature taken and walk away with a prescription.

In Lauren's world if she were sick she never had to wait. A quick phone call to a favorite office would net her a scrip called to the pharmacy in under five minutes. If she walked into an office coughing, sneezing or wheezing she would be rushed to the nurse's station where medicine and care were given without even flashing her insurance card.

However, even with her fast track to the medical field, she spent more time waiting in doctors' offices than anyone. When here for work, she couldn't cut in front of patients, but had to wait at her place last in line while the doctors did their work.

On most days she found this bit of quiet time welcome. Time to catch up on emails, text Russell and Jason, or plan her sales, but right now sitting in Dr. Dalton's office, she couldn't focus enough to play a game of solitaire. In the course of thirty minutes her entire world changed.

All the closeness, the confessions of love, the promises they would be

together would go down as only memories. Russell still couldn't accept them. She knew his schedule, they didn't have any trips planned, he just didn't want to reveal them to his world, and he never would. His parents only happened by accident. Now she could only sit in the leather chair facing Dr. Dalton's mahogany desk and wait for the diagnosis. No wonder patients complained.

"Well, my favorite rep finally shows herself."

She swallowed and sat up straighter in the chair. "I want to apologize for what happened in Vegas." This man was still her account, he had done nothing wrong and maybe if she quenched this

early they could put it behind them.

"I accept your apology." Dr. Dalton came around the desk, taking off his white coat before sitting down. "Funny, I thought the next time I saw you in my office I would be sneaking you in the back for a kiss, not begging you to come here."

She stared straight ahead, trying not to look directly at him. "I think threatening me was more accurate." This was no time to get combative, and she pressed her lips together. Her goal was to somehow get a cordial relationship with the man again. No more inner dinner circle, just rep and doctor.

"I didn't mean to do that. I didn't know what else to do to get you here. I would never call corporate. I don't even have their number." He leaned back in his chair. "Can you tell me what's really going on?"

She garnered enough courage to look at him. "I'm involved." The first time she said it to someone she didn't think it would be Dr. Dalton and she didn't think she would be questioning it. Maybe she wanted to say it one time to make it official before it all vanished.

"Were you involved in Vegas?" He picked up a pen and began turning it over and over in his hand.

Russell always talked about

ramifications. It was one of his favorite words, and today she realized the ramifications of that night were far reaching. The mistakes she made were like a spotlight blaring down on her, causing her to have to shift in her chair and cross her legs. "Things are complicated."

"I have no doubt." He nodded and concentrated on the pen.

"You know everyone says their life is complicated, but it's probably no more or less complicated than anyone else." She fought the need to fling herself out of the chair and run out. "As I said I truly apologize for what happened." Once more she could hear Russell talking about ramifications. She should have

remembered that around the time she decided to play dumb games with her top account and a man who had been nothing but nice to her. She should have remembered that when she made love to her two best friends. She should have remembered a lot of things.

"What if I told you that I understand and I'm willing to wait for your life to get less complicated?" He put the pen down.

She opened her mouth, but didn't know what answer to give.

"Don't look so surprised." He moved his chair in and strummed his fingers on his desk. "It is not unusual to wait for what you want. I think you've been

doing it for quite some time."

"What?" She almost felt like looking behind her to make sure he wasn't speaking to someone else.

"When you're a doctor it takes a lot to make us lie awake at night. We've seen everything, we've had to tell people they are dying and then we have to go home and be able to sleep so we can get up the next day and do it again."

She found herself holding her breath.

"I lie awake at night thinking about you." He motioned toward her.

If this man were saying this to her three months ago, her heart would have swelled enough to float her across the room. She put her hand to her chest.

"Why?"

"When you are in my position you know what you have to do. Know you need to settle down, but you worry if you will be satisfied." He exhaled. "I have no question you are that woman."

"I don't know what to say. I told you I'm involved." The words left her mouth again, as if she were trying to convince herself. After this she was going to go down the street to one of her normal accounts to get something to stop the throbbing in her head. At least she would have to wait to be seen by a doctor.

"This is what I want you to do. I want you to place a big order to get your commission, and then I want you to go

home." He pulled up his sleeve and glanced at his watch. "Right about now the holiday gift I got you should be delivered to your home. Just think about it." He stood up. "I'm sorry I have to rush this, but you can't miss the courier and I have a VIP patient coming."

She got up, or she thought she did, she didn't realize she was moving until Dr. Dalton guided her to the door and put her bag over her shoulder.

"May I apologize once more for how I got you here?" He took her hand. "Please consider what I said." He bent down and gave her a kiss on her cheek. "Go rid your life of complications."

She stepped into the hall and turned back to him. Complications ruled her

life. Why would Dr. Dalton step into the middle of this when he could have anyone?

"I hope you enjoy your present." He walked back into his office and took his coat.

"Goodbye." She spun around and rushed toward the back exit. Something told her she had to get home before her boyfriends intercepted her gift.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Jason?" Russell put his bag down and for the first time in weeks, loosened his own tie.

He stepped into the living room and turned around. The vibe in the room was strange. Jason would say the energy was off, Lauren would say it was creepy. He swallowed and decided it had to be because he couldn't remember the last time he came home to an empty house. Probably around the same time he undid his own tie.

The day had been a waste and he knew he had to leave.

There were times when a man needed his best friend.

With Lauren on calls, he would have the perfect opportunity to talk to Jason, man to man. They were men. Men who loved one woman - not each other.

He walked to the kitchen to get a bottle of water and then opted for a beer. After opening the bottle and taking a long gulp, letting the icy liquid cool him down, he glanced in the laundry room. Gone were the days of three hampers with three people doing their own clothes, now everything was intermingled. Lauren joked she was going to have to label his and Jason's underwear.

He finished off the beer and put the bottle on the kitchen counter as he walked toward the bedrooms. His old bedroom was now their bedroom, Jason's old room was now an office as they reorganized their lives, Lauren's old room turned into her own personal closet and shopping receptacle. At the end of the hall was the garage turned Jason's studio and storage. The door was half open, as if Jason rushed out.

"Strange." His best friend never left the door to his studio opened. He never wanted anyone to snoop at his creations, and normally Russell wouldn't breach that trust, but he spied something strange in the studio.

After a peek he turned away. No way he was seeing right.

"No." He couldn't snoop around like this. Go looking at someone's possessions and someone's artistic work.

His feet refused to walk away. The brief glimpse he got of the painting left a hole in his chest that wouldn't be filled until he checked to see if he was right. His body tightened and he clenched his fist. If they were together the way they claimed, if Jason could touch him the way he did two nights ago, if they could live like this, it was his right to look.

He forced himself to turn, and stomped into the studio, hitting the

door hard enough for it to slap the wall.

There on the easel in the middle of the studio was apparently Jason's painting. His style, his colors, his use of light and shadow. If someone were studying the works of Jason Morgan there would be no doubt this would fall into the category of a traditional piece for him.

All except for the subject matter.

It was all three of them. All of the three of them. Every last inch of the three of them in a graphic, intimate moment.

The chemical tang of oil on canvas still hung in the air and as he stepped closer, the telltale glossy paint strokes told him that his best friend had put the

finishing touches on his masterpiece quite recently.

Jason had to have created this as a present to the two of them, but still Russell backed away. It was one thing to do these things behind closed doors, another to have a picture of it.

His back hit Jason's desk, and he stumbled knocking some papers to the floor.

More than ever he needed to talk to Jason. He bent down, but before he could clean up his mess, he caught sight of two sketches and an email.

He supposed his best friend was done drawing book covers. The sketches were more of the three of them in

compromising positions, but the shock wasn't from the pictures, it was from the email.

The paper vibrated from his shaking as he read the words and then reread them. He had to make sure he had this correct.

"What are you doing in here?" Jason came bounding into the studio.

He inhaled, taking a moment to collect himself and straightened up still holding the email.

"I guess you saw my latest creation. I sort of wanted to show you with Lauren." Jason walked over to the painting and reached for a cover. "I meant to hide this, but the paint was still wet and I wasn't expecting anyone to

come home."

Without a word, he rubbed his chin, thankful for only one thing, he was numb, utterly numb. Right now Jason could touch him anywhere and he wouldn't even feel it. Too bad this didn't happen two nights ago.

"I find quite the inspiration in the three of us." Jason put the drape over the painting.

"You also find quite the profit in the three of us." His words came out flat and he dropped the email to the floor, watching it flutter as it landed.

"What?" Jason faced him and crossed his arms.

"I should have known." He shook his

head.

"What are you talking about?" Jason came toward him.

He held his hand up and swallowed, shutting his eyes and remembering the words he just saw on the page. His chest seized or was it heartache? It didn't matter, all that mattered right now was he spoke. "This whole thing, the three of us, it was for your art." If he had any moisture in his mouth he would have spit the word at Jason.

"Russ." Jason swatted his hand down.

"Stay away from me." He pointed at Jason but wouldn't retreat. "Now I know how you got your show. You sold us." He took off his glasses and wiped the

sweat off his face. "You planned this all along."

"What I planned was the three of us being together." Jason lowered his voice. "What you are seeing is some inspiration I decided to put on canvas."

His teeth ground together, scraping inside his skull and he picked up the email from the agent Jason mentioned describing in detail the show the man secured to feature his threesome, or *trifecta* artwork. "What you planned was a sick way out of your block and into a gallery."

Jason's eyes flicked to the page and back up to him. "I don't think you understand."

"I know better than you do." He held the page out to his best friend. Were those even the right words to describe him? "I know you have no bounds, I know you'll do what it takes, I know you thought this was some grand experiment."

Jason stayed silent.

"Your so-called agent even had the gall to congratulate you for seizing your passion." He balled the paper in his fist.

"Let me explain." Jason cleared his throat.

"I think I'll wait to read the review. Your agent didn't neglect to mention that Catherine Dumar will be at your show."

He took the paper, tossed it at Jason and turned to leave.

"Damn it, Russell!" Jason caught his shoulder. "Let me say one thing."

"Don't touch me." He tensed at this man's hand on him, spun around and pushed him away.

"Can I say one thing?" Jason held his hands back as if in retreat.

"Can you tell me you didn't do this for your art?" He forced himself to inhale and raised his chin.

Jason opened his mouth but said nothing.

"I don't know who I feel more sorry for right now, you or Lauren." He stepped forward. "This is going to kill her." His only hope was he could

intercept her before she walked in on the madness. They started out knowing they both had to have her or it would ruin their friendship. Now neither would have her, and their friendship was through.

"So that's it?" Jason stood up to him nose to nose.

"It wasn't me who decided to take twenty years and toss it." He stared at Jason. He knew every inch of that face maybe even better than his own, but he may as well be staring at anyone, a stranger. "This is over."

"What's over?"

Russell shut his eyes at Lauren's voice.

"What's over?" Lauren asked the question though at the moment she could identify many things that were over, including the beat her heart was trying to make, and any hope she managed to scrounge up on the way home.

Truth be told the second she stopped in the driveway in her spot next to Russell's car, her hope took a detour. The man was never home in the middle of a workday unless he was injured or sick. She couldn't remember the last time he was ill, and as far as she knew, he wasn't injured, at least physically.

Upon walking into the house and finding her two boyfriends in Jason's studio, her hope tried to flee, but she dug her nails in her palm and refused to let it leave. Russell seldom went into the studio for any length of time. He only entered to get one of them or deliver some life altering news. Russell saying something was over seemed about as life altering as things could get. She tried to ignore the fact she was only home to intercept some mystery gift from another man. Something she wasn't sure she could handle if the situation were reversed.

Now neither man would glance in her direction. "What's over?"

If she were truly honest with herself, in the flash before Russell turned she would admit she knew what was over. She knew once she called Russell's work. Maybe she knew before. She wrapped her arms around herself.

Russell faced her.

Jason shook his head.

She was glad she never opted for lunch, because right now she would be throwing it up all over papers scattered across Jason's studio floor.

Without a word Russell held a paper out to her.

She pried her hand away from herself and took the page. It rattled as she shook, but a quick scan told her Jason

got a new agent, a new show and a new chance with Catherine Dumar. Why weren't they celebrating? "I..." Her dry throat made her cough. "I don't understand."

"Lauren." Jason said her full name, and any drop of hope that remained evaporated.

"You can't explain this away." Russell took the paper from her and crumpled it in a ball. "Why don't you show her how you got your newest show?"

She bit her lip and waited. The scene in front of her reminding her of walking in on the middle of a horror movie where the villain came out and slashed someone with a knife for no reason

except shock value. Her trembling wouldn't stop, rattling her teeth and making it hard to focus.

"I'm not ashamed of any of my work." Jason walked across the studio to the easel, and pulled the drape off his painting.

She blinked, once, twice, a third time. The painting was most definitely them in the most private of moments. If Jason would have presented her with this painting over a candlelight dinner and a bottle of wine she knew her insides would have warmed and swirled rather than seizing. They were Jason's muse, but weren't they always? She still didn't understand and shifted her

attention to Russell, the man who knew every answer.

"He sold us out. This whole thing was for his art." He shook his head and filled in the blanks.

She shut her eyes and took a breath, her mind fighting to process what Russell just laid on her. New art, new show, new agent, new chance with Catherine Dumar and a painting of the three of them having sex. No, this wasn't true. Jason said he loved her. He didn't sell them.

She opened her eyes, willing the scene before her to change, waiting for Jason to say something, to deny Russell's accusations, anything.

Jason looked between her, Russell

and the painting.

She pressed her lips together.

"Lauren." Russell took two steps toward her. "He was blocked, he got bad reviews, he concocted this."

The backs of her eyes heated with tears she didn't want to fall.

"He pushed us and now look." Russell motioned behind him. "He's selling us."

"You don't know anything." Jason rushed forward and pointed at Russell. "You are thrilled this is happening like this, you never wanted this work, you were always trying to hide us and now you have the perfect opportunity to walk away the victim."

"Don't blame your deception on me." Russell turned to him and pointed right back. "You lied to us so you can profit."

"Then explain why you're home right now?" Jason got in his face. "Did you come home for an afternoon quickie, or could you not handle that I touched you this weekend and it turned you on?"

Lauren's vision blurred through the unshed tears, and she was partially grateful she didn't have a crystal clear view of the two men she loved going at it.

"I was totally fine with this weekend. I'm allowed to come home whenever I want, this is my house. Something you would have if you could create art off

something other than a literal interpretation of your life." He inched closer to Jason and clenched his fist.

"Maybe you don't like that your life is mimicking my art." Jason raised his chin.

Lauren held her hand out. She had to stop this before they resorted to blows. They were best friends. Best friends since elementary school. "Please."

Russell pulled back his fist. "I may have had issues in the beginning, but I worked through them."

"That's not true!" Lauren lunged between them. "That's not true and you know it."

"Lauren." Russell caught her hand. "You have proof of what happened right

here."

"She's not ashamed." Jason put his hand on her shoulders and pulled her back.

"Neither am I." Russell tugged her toward him.

She wasn't a wishbone, and she shook them off her and stepped back, holding her hands out. "You told your work you wouldn't be attending the holiday party this year."

"You don't understand." Russell shoved his hands in his pockets.

"You lying bastard." Jason reached for her. "We understand everything."

She shrugged him away. "You did sell us."

Jason put his arms down.

They all stood there, three points in a triangle. She glanced between them. Jason, her dreaming artist, his quest for success outweighed everything, even his friends, and in a way she couldn't blame him. She shifted her focus to Russell, her rock, and her conscience. His heart and his body may want certain things, but his mind would never let go. It wasn't his fault it was in his DNA. "I was so selfish." The tears wouldn't be denied and she didn't even try to stop them now. She wanted what she couldn't have, what no one could really have. In the process she not only destroyed herself, she destroyed a lifelong

friendship. "I should have left that night."

Only the ringing of the doorbell rescued her from hearing anything else, and she spun around and went running.

Somehow without the two of them behind her, and with her mind shattered in a million different directions she managed to reach the front door. Without even asking who was there, she swung the door open and stopped.

Somehow she also forgot she was home at this hour to receive a package.

Where once upon a time a giant lime green box and purple ribbon held the key to everything she wanted, now faced with what was no doubt hers, and no doubt from one Dr. Dalton, her knees

buckled, and not from joy. She held onto the door to keep from falling to the floor.

"Are you Lauren Redmond?" The delivery boy asked.

She nodded and bit her lip at the sounds of footsteps behind her.

"This is for you." He set the box on the inside of the door. "I need you to sign here." He held out a clipboard.

She stared straight ahead and made a mark on the paper sort of resembling her name.

"Thank you." He took the clipboard back. "Dr. Gregory Dalton already took care of my tip. He said to enjoy."

The only thing this man needed was some flair gun to announce who sent

over the present. She watched him leave, wanted to run away with him. Instead, she moved the box further inside and closed the door, turning to face the men who only hours ago she called her boyfriends.

"Is there a reason one of your accounts is sending you a gift from Jacques?" Jason crossed his arms.

For once he got the name of the store right. She didn't move.

"At least we know why you are home now. Did you hope to hide that?" Russell stared at the delivery. "I suppose it's better than a keychain. The box is much larger."

She held up her hand. This had to stop because it was already over.

It was already over.

She couldn't even blink the tears away. They dried up. "You are right about everything."

Neither man answered her, and that was fine. She needed to say what she needed to say. "Jason may have sold out, but so did I." She swallowed. "Russell may have denied us, but in a way I did too." She moved the box over with her foot to make her point. "This is over."

With the words out, the sick nausea that followed her everywhere that day left, only another sign of her fantasy's demise.

She left the box and walked past the

two of them and stopped. "Please figure out a way to put this behind the two of you." Never again would she look back, nor would she live in her dreams. It was time to be real and face her life. Her life was not with the two of them. Maybe she wanted that Jacques box all along. "Please do that."

She went straight into what was once her room, was now her closet, and would soon be vacant. In keeping with her momentum she found her suitcase and stuffed whatever items touched her hands into it. This time there would be no one knocking down doors to get her, no one making love to her.

At last the tears resurfaced and she turned on some heavy metal ballads to

drown out her crying.

There was a reason you couldn't find
trouble in the dictionary.

The word didn't exist.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Jason lifted his paintbrush and tossed it aside. The painting was finished and he was done. He ran his hand through his hair and shook his head pretty sure he just gave himself an unintentional blue stripe.

"It's beautiful." His mother entered the kitchen and put her hand to her chest.

He wiped his hand down the front of his shirt, staining it like he stained everything else.

"Maybe you should call them and show them." She came around the back of him and gave him a hug.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"If you need to cry it's all right." She grabbed a paper towel and waved it in front of her.

"I don't need to cry." Maybe he did. He didn't deserve to cry. Lauren cried that afternoon. She sobbed and thought by turning the music up they wouldn't hear, but he did, he was sure Russell did, and neither of them went to her. They told her they loved her and then dropped her. "I don't even know where Lauren is." He shut his eyes. For the first time since he found her he could honestly say he misplaced her.

After the fight and the box delivery, she ran away. He could have predicted

that move. What he didn't see coming was her not returning that night, or the next. For some reason he also thought she would have left the Jacques box.

The first night he stayed in the house. Russell stayed in his room and Jason returned to his. They didn't speak and Lauren didn't come back. When Russell went for work the next day, he packed his art and his clothes and left as well.

He drove around for hours, winding up in Beverly Hills. Part of him wanted to go by Russell's office, part of him wanted to try to track down Lauren, part of him wanted to go find Victor. He did none of those things.

He went home.

Of course his parents took him right

in. They didn't ask questions. His mother guided him to his old bedroom, turned their breakfast nook into a place to paint, and when at last he confided what happened they stared at him as if he were either a victim or a villain.

The next day his father took him to the dealership, his mother made dinner and straightened out his art supplies. He lay in his twin bed that night and stared up at the glow in the dark stars and planets he painted on the ceiling when he was a teenager.

After reaching for Lauren more times than he cared to count, he got up, stumbled into the kitchen and began to paint.

They may not be together, but they remained his muses.

"Call her cell phone." His mother interrupted his thoughts.

"I can't." Once more he picked up the paintbrush.

"Don't over paint." She took the brush from him. "Why can't you?"

He spun toward her. "Because I'm a child. I came home to my mommy and daddy. I let her leave. I let Russell escape. I did this." He braced himself on the counter at finally voicing it. If anyone deserved his parents it was Russell who wanted to be adopted by them or Lauren who wanted a family. He had everything, and now he had to

own his actions. He couldn't buy Lauren what was in that lime green box. He couldn't help Russell face his demons. All he could do was come up with schemes to get what he wanted.

His mother put the brush down and patted his back. "Are you sure about the art?"

He shut his eyes. Of course he wasn't sure about the art. "This is the art that has to be shown."

"Because your agent thinks so?"

He hit his fist into the counter. Victor created stars. This was his chance. He would make some money. "They can't take care of the wounded artist anymore, I have to be a success."

"Is that the art you wanted to show?"

She wrapped her arm around him.

"I created it." He straightened up.

"For you and Russell and Lauren, or for the world?" She took hold of his chin and made him face her. "You wouldn't even let me see it."

He stared into that face. His mother's face. She would accept anything he doled out including supporting erotic art if that was what he wanted. The only caveat was it had to be what he wanted. "I want to be an artist."

"You are." She kept hold of him.

"I want to be something."

"You are." She put her other hand on his cheek.

He put his hand over hers. "I need to

show this art. I need this. They need me to do it."

"Then get them to the gallery and show them what you see." His mother let go of him.

He retrieved his paintbrush. "They need me to do this."

Sunday night blues. The sick, sad sensation one got when they realized there was nothing on television and they had to go to work the next day. Since the day she crawled through the boxes to Jason and Russell, Sunday night blues were in the past, something experienced by single girls, not by a woman who had

two men.

Now single again, the Sunday night blues came back in full-force, seeping through her like bad medicine, making her dizzy, antsy and nauseated all at the same time. The only problem was this was now Monday morning and today would make it one week since she walked away from her fantasy and in to horror movie.

Every morning she woke up in the hotel alone with only herself, the bottomless pit in her stomach, and a black Valerie bag with silver fittings. She finally got the monster to chase her only in this case it was the bag. It wanted to suffocate her and take

everything she ever wanted.

"Oh my God." She scratched her nails through her hair. The bag wasn't what she wanted, the green box, the purple ribbon, the oversized Jacques bag that in itself was a collectable. "I don't want it."

Not unlike the horror movie of her life, the walls of the small hotel room she checked into last week seemed to close in on her, forcing her to face the bag. All she could do was back up, move as far away from possible and shut her eyes. "I don't want it."

Her eyes ached from the nights she spent crying. Right when she thought she was done, the tears would start fresh. Sometimes it was wracking sobs,

complete with sniffing and snorting and other times her eyes simply leaked, but either way, the better part of her week was seen through the blur of salt water that wouldn't stop, as if her tears were trying to block out the horrible images of the three of them the day before, each with their own demon, embracing the monster rather than addressing it and banding together.

This morning, without any tears to blur her vision, she saw she was stuck in this hotel room with her monster, but the monster was only disguised as the Valerie bag.

She took a breath and gathered the strength to face the monster head on,

walked across the room, and picked up the purse.

Two months ago all she wanted, dreamed about and schemed for was this moment. Dr. Dalton gave her the bag and a note. He wanted her.

Two months ago, if she would have received this gift she would have called her boss and told him she got another gig. The next rep would be coming to her to buy the plumping agents, and she would be the wife who guarded her husband more closely than this unattainable bag.

Two months ago she would have told Anne she got it all, and tried not to gloat that her so-called friend was still selling antibiotics.

That was two months ago.

Today, two months later her fantasy moment wasn't when she held the purse, it came true the night Jason slipped and said he loved her. The dream was made complete when Russell whispered the same. Two men loved her. The two men she loved.

Two men, but as she said to Russell Thanksgiving night, it was *the* two men, not any two men.

Of course now she didn't have *the* two men. One thought they should be on display, the other wanted to hide them.

She studied herself in the mirror. Bag on her shoulder, bracelet on her wrist, if she played her cards right she

could have the baby and the Botox. The picture would be perfect, everything would be planned and she would be set. "I don't want it."

She walked over to the green box, moved aside the purple tissue paper and laid the Valerie bag back inside. With a nod she ran her fingers across the leather once more, put the lid on and slid everything back into the collector bag along with the note from Dr. Dalton. Even now she couldn't get herself to think of him as Greg.

She took a breath when she picked up her own bag. No, not a Valerie bag, it wasn't born on Rodeo Drive, it didn't have a waiting list. This bag came from an artisan in Hollywood and housed her

wallet, her makeup bag and had a special slot for her tablet computer and her cell phone. The compartments pleased Russell who tilted his head at it twice as he helped her change purses. The fact that the bag was one of a kind pleased Jason who told her this purse was true art. Though she had her designer bags, this was the one she always wore. It was unconventional and different, no other strap sat on her shoulder without slipping, nothing fit her better.

Nothing fit her better.

Before she took the coward's way out. Traveled down the freeway of bags, babies and Botox, she swooped

the Jacques bag into her arms and dashed out of the hotel room.

The moment she entered the elevator her cell phone vibrated and she balled her hand into a fist. No matter what happened, what kind of shambles her life was in today was still a workday. She reached into the slot on her purse and froze. Maybe, just maybe, it was one of them. The vibrating stopped and her heart seized.

If one of them called would she run? If it were Russell could they work through his issues? If it were Jason could she believe they really had love and the art only got in the way? If it were her could she tell them she didn't want the purse and all that went with it?

Could she?

The elevator doors opened and she walked straight out onto Wilshire Boulevard. Dr. Dalton's office was only two blocks down. She couldn't just tell them she didn't want the bag she needed to prove it.

Her body shook. Once she made the decision there would be no backtracking. If Jason and Russell didn't want her back did she still not want what she was offered?

She made it to the corner and glanced up at the red light. Dr. Dalton's office was only two blocks down. She needed to check her phone, but if it were someone wanting to order a dozen

syringes she may lose her mind.

A scant few people joined her on the corner. This was one of the only places people did walk in LA.

The light turned green and everyone but her stepped off the curb. She had only two choices. Go to Dr. Dalton and return the purse. Go to the Dalton and accept the purse.

Her phone vibrated again. This would give her the answer. She retrieved her phone and letting fate take her, she answered the phone without glancing at the caller id. "Hello?"

"If I say I'm sorry really fast do you think we can meet for lunch?"

She clutched the bag tighter. "What do you need, Anne?" Was this the sign?

Anne called before Jason or Russell?

"I miss you and I feel bad for what I said."

The light turned red. "I really have a lot going on right now."

"Did something happen? You sound upset."

"I'm fine." The light turned green again, and some people pushed passed her. "I just have to get somewhere."

"I know you have to be near Rodeo. Let's meet and talk."

She narrowed her eyes. "How do you know that?"

"Come on, don't tell me you don't like the favor I did for you. You didn't expect to keep two men all to yourself. I

spoke to Dr. Dalton and he told me expected to see you any second."

"You spoke to Dr. Dalton?" She shook her head.

"Last week. He was so infatuated by what you were doing I think it made him want you more. Us girls have to stick together, you needed a back up plan." Anne laughed. "You are quite the catch, maybe you can teach me your tricks."

She squeezed her phone and gritted her teeth. The cryptic, strange conversation with Dr. Dalton, the purse, everything fell into place.

Her phone vibrated again. "I can't see you, I have something to do." She hung up.

The light began to flash, a sign in Los

Angeles not to stop or slow down, but to hurry up. She lifted her phone to her face. "Please let it be them and I promise I'll never ask for anything again." She stepped off the curb.

Her hand trembled and with the glare of the sun she couldn't make out anything on the screen of her phone. No matter what, she had to talk to them.

Still walking across the street, she shielded her eyes and blinked, but before she could focus, the honk of more than one car jolted her away from her phone, and she looked up with only enough time to drop her phone as a red sports car headed toward her.

Her world went black.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"So what's up with this impromptu invitation?" Ken leaned over the table and handed Russell a screwdriver.

"Yeah since when did we score dinner on Russell?" Tom straightened out the rest of the tools.

"What do you mean?" Russell sat back and assessed his latest challenge, an early 1990's Mac computer. He remembered when those came out. His parents bought him one, it had an 80-megabyte hard drive and he was the envy of everyone in the computer club. Even Jason was

impressed. Now the flash drive Lauren kept misplacing was sixteen gigabytes. Times were different.

He put his hand on his pocket. She left the flash drive in the kitchen. He found it on night two of his solitude when he rearranged the kitchen. Today every drawer, cupboard and crevice had been cleaned and organized. Everything except the bedrooms and the once studio.

Now he slept on the couch watching the oil lamp he rehung so he didn't have to step into Jason's old room. As he headed into night three, he was sure he going to end up running through here pulling his hair out and screaming or spending another night cleaning and looking out the front window waiting for

car lights. After a week, he decided he needed a straight jacket, hence the invitation. "It was about time we had a guys night." Yes, times were different. He tightened his grip on the screwdriver and went in for the kill. "After we eat I got a movie, and I set up the video games."

"Gee, I wish I would have brought my sleeping bag, and the three of us could camp out in the living room and make a tent with your extra sheets." Ken laughed and took a swig of his beer.

Russell swallowed. He guessed the guys didn't want to spend the night.

Tom reached over and grabbed the screwdriver.

"Hey." He kept his grip on the tool.

"Where are the other people who live with you?"

"Yeah, I was hoping to see Lauren."

Ken looked over his shoulder.

The doorbell rang.

"They forgot their keys!" Russell dropped the screwdriver, pushed himself away from the table and dashed toward the door.

Before he rounded the corner to the living room, he skidded to a stop, grabbing the doorjamb before he tripped. The last time the doorbell rang Lauren received a present that would take him months to save up for.

She walked away too fast.

Disappeared without a note or a call. For all he knew she was with that doctor right now showing off whatever was in that box. No wonder she left half her stuff here. She didn't need it anymore.

The doorbell rang again.

"Dude, are you going to get the pizza or what?" Tom came over and hit him on the shoulder.

Where he was starving when he got home, now the vision of melted cheese, sauce and chunky toppings caused a sour sensation to rise in the back of his throat and work its way through his body. "Can you get it?" He reached in his pocket, trying to ignore Lauren's flash drive, and fished out some money.

"Sure." Tom gave him a pat,

snatched the money and trotted away.

Russell returned to the table. He sat and reached for his beer. Once again he stopped himself. This was the brand Jason got him. The bribe brand.

No doubt Jason went to his parents. Right now his mother was probably helping him get ready for the show. She probably even gave him every reason why he should show his grand art.

He narrowed his eyes and tried to think what Cecelia would say. "You love them and it came out in the art. The world should see it."

"What?" Tom hit the table.

He blinked and shook his head, not meaning to say the words aloud.

"Nothing." He took his time exhaling. Was it possible this was a labor of love and not profit? Jason hadn't strayed once since he concocted his plan. In fact, he was the one who turned out to be jealous and possessive. He wanted to wear the three of them on his shirtsleeve, show the world, and it came out in his art.

He stared at the beer bottle wanting the answers. Unlike Jason, he went to any length to hide them, even after he said he wouldn't. He even lied.

Ken returned with the three pizza boxes and placed them on the kitchen counter. "Looks like we are ready for our night. You ordered a ton. Are we expecting the rest of your crew?"

"Something's wrong with him." Tom pointed to Russell. "He's talking about the world seeing his art."

"What's up, Russ?" Ken put the boxes in a row and opened them. "Where is everyone?"

Russell turned and assessed what he ordered. The vegetarian for Lauren because she felt the vegetables diluted the cheese. The pineapple and ham for Jason, who was convinced he invented the concept of fruit on pizza, and the cheese for him, though Lauren and Jason would both sneak a piece of that pie. "What if I told you I was with Lauren?"

"I would ask you why she wasn't here serving us this pizza." Ken grimaced at

the pineapples.

He was about to tell his friend to try it, he may like it. Lauren and Jason may steal the cheese slices, but he would swipe theirs as well. Pineapple was his favorite.

"I would say tell me something I don't know." Tom got up and examined the food.

"Okay." Russell got up and put a slice of Jason's pizza on Ken's plate. "I have another question."

"Shoot." Tom took a bite and tilted his head.

"What if I told you that Lauren..." He cut himself off and cleared his throat. If he couldn't own it now, he never could, and he would have to leave things as

they were. He would have to spend the rest of his life sleeping on the couch, watching the oil lamp and waiting for them to come home.

"Dude, spit it out." Tom took a slice of all three pizzas.

The couch was killing his back.

"What if I told you that me, Lauren and Jason are together?" He stared straight ahead, but he said the words.

The room became silent.

He clenched his fist.

"I would say that is awesome." Ken shoved the rest of the slice in his mouth and socked Russell in the arm. "Dude."

"I would say tell me something I don't know." Tom took hold of him and turned

him. "How does that work?"

Russell was still back at the awesome remark. "What?"

"Don't you watch porn?" Ken's voice was stifled from trying to chew. "Lauren has enough room for at least two more men, maybe three."

"Hey." Russell shook his head. They really didn't need anyone else in the mix. He turned between his friends. "Seriously."

Ken went in for another slice of pizza. "It's a little out there, but sort of cool. I don't really care. I think it would be weird at first but it's still you."

"What about work?" Russell pressed two fingers into his temple.

"We work in computers, you would be a God."

That answer was about as honest as he could hope for, and if he were alone he may punch his fist through a wall or burst into tears. He destroyed them. Wrecked the two people he loved.

Tom went to the refrigerator and got another beer. "Lauren was a given, but I have to admit, if I had Jason living with me, he would be hard to resist." He raised his bottle.

Ken and Tom both burst out laughing.

He let Lauren and Jason leave, practically pushed them out the door. His heart raced in that horrible way that told him he needed to get out of here, run

and find them, or maybe go throw up. He moved down his glasses and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes trying to think. Jason sold them, or did he? Lauren left with a doctor. No she didn't, she only left with a box.

"Dude, where are your better thirds?"

He wasn't even sure who asked that question. He needed one of Jason's plans right now, needed to think, needed to ask Lauren what to do.

Without his partners, he would have to use what he had at hand. He looked up, adjusted his glasses, and opened his mouth to ask them when his phone vibrated on the table.

Maybe it was one of them, and

instinct caused him to jump toward the table, almost knocking the computer over. He managed to grab his phone, and a quick glance at the number told him it wasn't either of his bedmates. "Hello?"

"Mr. Sinclair?" A female voice asked.

"Yes." The voice was too official and he turned to his friends, but they weren't the right ones.

"This is Cedar Sinai Hospital, Lauren Redmond has you listed as her emergency contact."

He froze and tried to listen, but the woman's words were drowned out by his own prayers. Right now, above

everything else, he needed his best friend.

Chapter Thirty

Somehow Jason managed to get himself to the hospital, though the ogre managing the visitor's desk, and now down the hallway toward the surgery waiting room.

Before he entered, he stopped, leaning over and bracing himself on his knees, inhaling in an unsuccessful attempt to catch his breath. His throat ached for moisture, and his heart thumped a warning for him to take it down a notch.

With some sort of semblance of control coming over him, he straightened

up and fought the need to burst through the door and demand to know what was going on with Lauren. Instead he opted to turn the knob and walk in like a man who didn't feel like he had a huge metal-toed boot kicking him right the groin.

He may as well have had the groin kicker.

Russell already arrived. Of course he got there first. He sat hunched over, his head in his hands, but looked up at the slam of the door.

They glanced at each other. Jason shoved his hand in his pocket and stepped further into the room, and at last Russell tilted his head. Jason answered with a nod and sat down next to him.

Jason rocked back and forth in his

chair and scanned the room. At one point the walls were white, but they yellowed with age. The sparse furniture was a horrible rose color that in some decade when shoulder pads were fashionable may have been acceptable. The only items adorning the walls were a small television he was sure was devoid of cable and a poster about flu symptoms. If someone's illness didn't kill them, the décor would most definitely do the job.

He switched from rocking to foot tapping, and peeked at Russell. With twenty years of words between them, now when they needed to speak the most, they had nothing to say.

Leave it to Russell to do the right thing. "She's in surgery."

"Hence the surgical waiting room." Jason squeezed the bridge of his nose. "Do you know anything?" Russell always knew everything. The location of any bathroom, the nearest water fountain, answers about someone's life.

"I got a call she was in an accident. When I got here they told me to wait in this room. No one has come in yet." Russell strummed his fingers on his knee. "Do you know anything?"

Jason turned. Russell was asking him? "Same thing, call, hospital, room, nothing. Did you try to get anyone?"

Russell shook his head. "I was

waiting for..." He cut himself off.

"For what?"

"Nothing." Russell shut his eyes.

"Right now all that matters is Laurie is okay." Jason would raise the white flag for now, for her.

"Yeah." He stood up and paced among the row of chairs. "She was alone."

Jason stared up at the ceiling. Nondescript white tiles and unflattering fluorescent lights. "I have already thought of that."

"She hates being alone." Russell paced the other way.

"She gets in trouble when she's alone. Remember last time?"

Russell stopped at the mention of

their Vegas trip.

"God, that was great." Jason didn't realize he said the words aloud until he was met with Russell's glare at the mention of the unmentionable.

"The night or the creation?" Russell crossed his arms.

Jason stood, but before he had a chance to say anything, the door opened.

"Who's here for Lauren Redmond?" A man in blue surgical scrubs entered carrying a folder.

They both rushed to the man.

"I'm Doctor Roberts." The doctor lifted his chart. "Is one of you her husband? Next of kin?"

"I am." Russell raised his hand.

"We are." Jason stood next to him.
"We both are."

Now the man looked between them.

"Please tell us what's happening with my..." Russell paused. "With our Lauren."

The doctor turned a few pages of the chart and right as Jason went to step closer to Russell, Russell moved over and they collided with each other.

Jason ground his teeth together when Russell jumped away, putting ample space between them.

"Miss Redmond was in a serious car accident. She was struck by a car when she was running across the street." The doctor told them.

Russell covered his eyes.

Jason shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Why wasn't Russell taking over, asking if she were alive, would she be okay? He waited, wanting his best friend to do what he did best, but Russell remained transfixed, his eyes hidden and his hand shaking. "Is she alive?" Jason asked.

"She has a broken leg, a concussion and suffered some internal bleeding, but she is alive."

Russell still didn't move.

"Is she going to be okay?" Jason continued to ask the necessary questions. He needed to keep his focus, listen to everything. Be the eyes and

ears, but right now being kicked in the groin seemed definitely preferable than having to hear this.

"She is still unconscious. We're monitoring her."

Jason heard what the doctor wasn't saying. The man purposely didn't answer his question. His stomach bottomed out and he turned to Russell.

Russell lowered his hand and stared off at nothing.

"Can we see her?"

"Yes, we're transferring her to a room now." The doctor headed out of the room.

Jason walked forward but Russell stayed shaking his head. "Come on. She can't be alone." He stepped backwards,

not turning until Russell followed.

The doctor led them through a maze of corridors. Jason was sure he would never be able to find his way out of this hospital again. Every room seemed to hold some sort of despair or potential for sadness and at last they were guided into their own hellhole.

"Jason."

At last Russell spoke, and Jason looked back at his friend. Any color had long left his face and now seemed to take on a greenish-grey hue.

He spun back and caught sight of what made Russell appear as if he were going to land in his own hospital bed.

Lauren wasn't big to begin with, but

the bed, the tubing and the machines surrounding her made her seem tiny. If he blinked she would disappear. A car couldn't have done this much damage, more like a semi-truck, there seemed not one spot on her that wasn't bruised or bandaged.

Russell went around to one side of the bed, sat down and took her hand.

Jason followed suit, taking the opposite side and the opposite hand and there they sat with only the intermittent wheezing and clicking of a ton of devices he didn't understand to keep them company.

Her hand was limp, cold, nothing at all like when he would grab her during sleep. Even if she were exhausted she

would moan or give him a squeeze, but now, nothing. Russell must have noticed it as well. He had Lauren's hand lying flat in his and was simply staring down.

He looked between Russell and Lauren. Her between them, them on either side. This was how things should be. "You know it did start out as an experiment."

Russell raised his head, but didn't speak.

"I thought it would be good for us, do what we always wanted. I thought we needed it." He swallowed. "Damn it, I wanted the inspiration."

Russell pursed his lips and nodded.

"Then it changed."

"What changed?"

Jason turned away, studying a pain scale hanging on the wall. Zero was a happy face with no pain and ten was a sad crying face. With everything, with Lauren, with Russell, with sitting in this hospital room, he would say his pain rated about a twelve and he wondered what that face's illustration would be, maybe someone's head exploding. "Somewhere in there I started to care." He faced Russell. "You and Lauren turned into more than my best friends. Both of you."

Russell didn't respond. Jason didn't expect him to, not yet. He could tell Russell was chewing on the inside of his

mouth as if he needed to masticate and digest his words.

Jason waited, the weight on his chest pressing down, getting heavier with each passing second.

Russell slid his free hand across Lauren. He looked right at Jason and turned his hand over offering it to him palm up.

Jason inhaled for the first time in a week and took the gift Russell gave him, first putting his hand in his and then moving up and grabbing hold of his wrist.

Russell smiled and reciprocated the action. "It is more."

"It is." Jason looked at Lauren. "I hope she knows it."

"Me too." Russell tightened his hold. "Why was she running through Beverly Hills?"

He shook his head. Dr. Dalton and his handbag of wonders were in Beverly Hills. The douche was probably still there injecting people who didn't need it while they were here with Lauren. "I hope she knows we're here."

Chapter Thirty-One

On the fourth ring Russell wanted to slam his cell phone into something, instead he only squeezed it tighter. Lauren got him this cell phone when the three of them upgraded to the family plan.

Now he was on the fifth ring.

Before the sixth ring was over, there was an answer. "Hello?"

Russell swallowed. "Dad?" He tilted his neck from side to side and the bones cracked inside his skull.

"What's the matter?"

He lowered his voice not wanting

Lauren to hear, if she could hear.
"Lauren was in an accident."

His father grunted.

He ground his teeth together and waited for the magic answer.

"Are the three of you still doing whatever you were doing?" His father's question was more of an accusation.

He wanted to ask if it mattered. Wasn't the only thing that was important that Lauren was hurt? What about his son needing him? It didn't matter, and if he wanted anything he would answer. "Yes." He didn't have any further elaboration. Yes, they were doing what they were doing as long as Lauren still wanted them when and if she woke.

"How bad is she?"

Russell could picture his father taking a notepad out of his desk drawer and his pen and he lifted his own notes on Lauren's condition and read them to his father.

After a long silence, his father asked another question. "Where are you?"

"Cedar's." He exhaled.

"Who is her doctor?"

Russell balled his fist. The man was going to do something. "Bryan Roberts."

"We will be there soon."

A click echoed in his ear. No goodbye. No reassurances she would be all right, nothing, but Russell didn't care, he needed to play this hand and he set his phone down. His father knew

people, people who may help, doctor's and specialists who owed the most powerful attorney in the world a favor. For once Russell didn't have the answers.

"Look what I got." Jason trotted back into the room and held up his find. "That nurse lady showed me where they keep the good stuff."

Russell took the orange sherbet and wooden spatula to be used a spoon. "I will never understand how you get these things."

"Old ladies like me." Jason grinned for one brief second and then turned to Lauren. His happiness over his score dissolved like a tablet in a glass of water.

Russell put his snack down on the hospital tray meant to hold a patient's food, only in this case it was only being used to house their snacks, magazines and laptops. Lauren hadn't eaten a thing. She hadn't moved in two days. Hadn't woken up. Where was she?

They didn't really talk about it. They didn't move from the hospital. They only sat together trying to keep the other from going insane, but now forty-eight hours after their lives changed, they would have to talk about something other than which vending machine didn't eat dollar bills and trying to play guess the disease with the rest of the patients in their hallway. "Jase."

"You know I wanted to take a third cup for Laurie but Nurse Nancy told me that after she wakes up she will be on clear liquids, so it will have to wait." Jason tossed his ice cream cup on the tray as well. "She really likes tomato bisque, but I guess that's not clear. I'll smuggle some in though. Just as soon as..." He stood and turned toward Lauren's IV.

He supposed it was Jason's turn to lose it. The man deserved it. Jason kept it together when he could not and it was nice to have someone take over for once. But now he needed his control back. He stared at Lauren's face. Every hour she remained locked away was

another hour lost, their chances of getting her back fading. They both knew it. He wanted to demand she wake up this second, he wanted his family back. His family. Not the man on the phone, but the two people right in front of him. "I'm going to do something."

Jason spun back toward him. "What are you going to do?" He held his arms out. "What, Russ? We're trapped. We've asked for specialists, we've stalked everyone here down to the janitor. What are you going to do?"

He looked at her once more. Part of him wanted to grab her shoulders and shake her, the other wanted to lay his head down on her chest and sob. "I'm working on something." He pointed at

Jason. "This doesn't end this way, Lauren wouldn't allow it." He sat back down. Truth of the matter was they didn't even know what would transpire when she woke up. Why was she running through Beverly Hills and not driving? Could they resuscitate their relationship?

"I called my parents." Jason shook his head, crossed his arms and resumed studying Lauren's IV bag. "They're coming down here."

He put his hand to his forehead and squeezed, wishing he could force a thought in his head. Yesterday Jason didn't need to call his parents because Lauren would be up and calling them

and they could do all the mom and dad things to her. However, even with that revelation, he could top it. "I called mine. They will be here soon."

Jason ran his hand through his hair.

"What's the temperature today? Do you think it's cold enough for a jacket?"

Russell frowned, wondering why he would randomly ask that question. "Low seventies, probably need something light."

Jason nodded. "The nearest gas station, do you know where it is?"

"There are three around here. One across the street if you go out the front entrance," he said. "Why? Are you leaving?"

"No." Jason waved his hand behind him, shooing his question away. "Tell me, is today a day to buy stocks or sell them?"

"It's a buying day." At this second he wished he were buying, even selling if that meant Lauren would be all right.

"Then tell me this." Jason never looked at him. "Do you think I'm going to be able to buy Lauren that soup tonight?"

He rubbed the stubble on his chin wanting to ask Jason if they should shave since Lauren hated them scruffy.

"Do you know what Lauren was doing the day she was hit?" Jason balled his hand into a fist.

Neither of them knew, they only had speculation and suspicion.

"Oh my God I just heard." A foreign voice rang through Lauren's room.

He stood and Jason turned.

"Where's her chart?" Dr. Dalton rushed inside with a nurse and two other people behind him. "I said get me her chart!"

The man showed, his blood raced, heating his skin, and both he and Jason moved in front of Lauren's bed.

The doctor grabbed the requested folder from the nurse and stopped in front of the two of them.

"Did you expect this?" Jason elbowed him.

"I'm surprised he didn't come sooner." Russell crossed his arms. Until they knew what was happening this man wasn't getting any closer to Lauren. She would have to tell them herself she wanted the doctor. "We only want family here right now."

The doctor shook his head. "I have privileges here, and we can argue about family all day long."

"Do you know why Lauren was running through Beverly Hills?" Jason took a step toward him.

Russell waited. It was the first question he wanted to ask as well.

The doctor looked between the two of them. "Yes. She was on the way to

my office."

Lauren was almost there. She only needed to walk across Wilshire Boulevard, leave one high-end hotel to go to one high-end doctor, but her phone went off. Maybe her prayer was answered and it was Russell or Jason.

She had to get to her phone. Where was it? Why wasn't it in her hand? Or was it?

Wait. She wasn't on Wilshire. It was too dark, too quiet. Where was her phone?

Around her wasn't the buzz of cars and people, only a strange low hum and

some rhythmic clicks, and she wasn't going across the street, she was lying down. Something was wrong. She swallowed, but her throat was dry, rough, constricted. She needed Jason or Russell, actually both, right now. Her hands were weighed down and she couldn't move. Her breath caught, her heart sped up and she tried to sit up, but her body wouldn't hold her, everything, every inch hurt, throbbing, aching, and burning.

Where were they? Where was she? The pain drowned out her thoughts, but she tried to push it away, tried to think.

Oh god. The last time she saw them they were leaving, all separating, Jason

put them on display and Russell wanted to keep them hidden. She wanted them, but her dream died.

Did she die?

Did death have this much pain?
Wasn't she supposed to feel nothing?

Funny, the falling sensation of the loss of her loves hurt more than the aches. Maybe that was why she couldn't move.

Still unable to open her eyes, she took a breath, and tried to focus. Something happened to her, she was injured. She had to be in a hospital. The last thing she remembered was being at that hotel by herself.

Alone.

Like right now.

She concentrated, tried to hear anything around her except for what had to be machines. She had both Russell and Jason listed as her emergency contacts on all her medical records and at work. They had to be here. Didn't they?

Her eyes fluttered, but before she gave in and opened them, she made a deal with herself. When she left the hotel she knew she had to talk to them. She was holding the purse from Dr. Dalton, but she needed them. If they were here...

She couldn't allow herself to finish her deal. What if they weren't here? What if they were contacted and didn't

come? No matter what was wrong, she had to see them. She only had to get out of the limbo that trapped her. "Please."

"She's coming to. Everyone move back."

A male voice she recognized, but couldn't place, spoke. It wasn't the right voice, one of two voices she wanted to hear. Everyone? Who was everyone? It may as well be no one if the right ones weren't there. If they weren't, she wouldn't need any heart monitor to announce hers was broken, beyond repair. Whoever everyone was may as well leave and let her be. She shook her head, or thought she did and opened her mouth.

"Lauren. Wake up."

A voice she would know forever spoke her name, and it was only the owner of the voice who would demand she wake up. She wasn't alone.

"Lauren?"

Russell squeezed her hand. He was on the right side, the side he always took and the weight she noticed before wasn't a weight at all, it was an anchor, it was Russell. Though demanding, his voice was off, tired and heavy.

But where was Jason? They both had to be there. They had to. She couldn't be the cause of destroying their friendship. It would never be the same if it weren't the three of them.

"Talk to her," Russell whispered.

Her other hand was lifted, held by a hand that even through the haze she knew all too well. "Laurie."

The pressure built behind her eyelids, releasing in tears that crawled down her cheeks. They were both here. Both of them and some unknown voice, but it didn't matter they were there.

"Don't cry, just open your eyes and say something, please." Jason pressed her hand to his chest. "Please."

"You're here." Her voice didn't even sound as if it were connected to her body.

"Of course we are." Russell lifted her hand as well.

Yes, of course they were. She

wanted them to be closer, do more than hold her hands, but she had no idea where they stood. The deal she wanted to make with herself seemed silly, of course they would come to her no matter what happened before. Her deals never worked out, she needed to stop shuffling the cards. "What happened?"

"I'm here as well," the third person spoke again. "I'm going to check her."

Russell and Jason's voices were imprinted in her mind, but this voice required a visual and once more she forced her eyes open. "Dr. Dalton?" Her heart stalled at the sight of him. Before she could focus on her other two men, a penlight was thrust into her face. She flinched as her world became blinded by

light. How did the three of them end up together? No doubt her fantasy was over if Dr. Dalton was here. Did they make her choice for her?

"You gave me quite a scare." He checked both eyes.

Gave him quite a scare, not them. This man also gifted her one of the most expensive purses on the planet, more importantly, her tangible symbol of security. She blinked the spots out of her eyes, and summoned her courage to glance to her right.

Russell sported more than a five o'clock shadow, she was pretty sure he was wearing Jason's shirt, and his hair was a disaster as if he didn't comb it for

days. She swore he seemed aged, and he was not as much staring at her, as he was Dr. Dalton.

She inhaled and glanced over at Jason. He now held her hand in both of his. He wasn't looking at anything in particular, but what she noticed most was the stubble on his face. Over the years, Russell would experiment with the more rugged look, but never Jason. Jason was always smooth, as if he willed the hair away. His hair hung around his face, and his shirt smeared in what appeared to be dried blue paint.

Neither of them spoke, kissed her, or did anything but hold her hand.

Obligation. She turned into one giant obligation.

"Follow my finger. You were hit by a car walking across Wilshire." Dr. Dalton held his index finger in front of her face. "I'm going to check your vitals and then we'll talk. This is all my fault."

The morning in the hotel she remembered deciding she didn't want the bag. But in one of life's unexpected twists she was handed a do over. Maybe the universe was yelling at her to make the right decision. She weighed her choices, and right now there seemed to be only two. Accept the gift and Dr. Dalton, or go see what life held for her.

No more deals, no more games, no more searching for what wasn't there. She needed to make up her own mind,

take ownership for her actions and if nothing else face Jason and Russell. She paused for half a second wanting a sign.

"You never told me what you thought of my present." Dr. Dalton winked at her.

She opened her mouth to answer, but in one almost coordinated move, both Jason and Russell shot up out of their chairs.

"You asshole!" Jason pointed at him.

"A real doctor is on his way here." Russell swiped the penlight away from Dr. Dalton.

She bit her lip and held her breath.

"What do you think I am?" Dr. Dalton motioned to himself.

"Don't make him answer that." Jason

took the penlight and threw it. The little piece of lighted metal hit the curtain and thumped to the floor. "We all made a deal to let her choose, and you can't swoop in and pretend you saved her or ask her about that overpriced leather."

Choose? What choice. Her mind reeled as she tried to keep track of a conversation she obviously entered in the middle.

"You didn't even get here until a few hours ago, we have been here for three days." Russell leaned over her. "Don't even think you get to take credit for this accident. If it was anyone's fault it was mine."

Three days? What day was it? She

put her hand to her chest. The room temperature seemed to increase fifty degrees in a nanosecond.

Jason waved his hand in front of Russell. "We decided it was my fault."

With the entire ruckus, the bed shook. Sour bile rose in the back of her throat, and a cold sweat overtook her. She raised her hand.

"I believe you and I decided to collectively share the fault, but he gets to take no fault."

The bed continued to move, and she shut her eyes. She didn't need to look to know Russell's jaw was jutting out as he spoke. "Russ."

"Fine." Jason patted her. "I will give you fifty percent of my fault, though I

still want one-hundred percent."

"Jase." Either one of them would do at the moment. Her stomach lurched.

"You know, you're right. The reason Lauren is in this condition is completely your fault." Dr. Dalton hit the bed. "The two of you and your insane situation. She deserves something better, something normal."

The bed rocked with her stomach. Now she had to address this. She swung her arm, hitting Jason's leg. "It's my fault."

"What?" Jason bent down. "Laurie?"

"Lauren." Russell took her hand again. "Let's get you a doctor."

Dr. Dalton cleared his throat.

"I need to say something first." She glanced between the three of them.

Dr. Dalton went to the foot of the bed. She focused on him. "About the gift."

Russell made a noise, Jason turned away, and Dr. Dalton smiled one of those manufactured smiles. Maybe her company should put those in a box and sell them instead of lip plumpers.

"Anyone would love the gift." She nodded. The purse was a symbol. Once it represented success and stability, now it would only be tangible proof she sold out and gave up. "But, I think you need to save it for someone who will truly appreciate it."

"Lauren." He crossed his arms.

"You had your fun and let me see what I wanted, and in turn I can give you what you want."

Her body tightened, not sure if she was going to laugh or heave. They shared the same fantasy. Now she understood Anne's cryptic message. No one would ever be enough for him. The only person who could come close would be someone who could satisfy two men. "It doesn't fit my things." At last, she said goodbye to the Valerie bag.

The room took on a breathless silence.

"All right." He gave her foot a squeeze. "I'm going to get the doctor on call, but I will have it be known that I

worked in the ER for three years." He tilted his head and left.

Along with the bag, she said a silent goodbye to Dr. Dalton, and found herself looking between the two men she loved. As Dr. Dalton said, she lived the fantasy and for that she would forever be grateful. She had more than a Valerie bag even in the scant few weeks they were together and she wouldn't allow them to live with obligation or regrets, theirs or hers. If nothing else she would tell them what she wanted. "I need to tell you both something."

"Maybe we should wait for the doctor." Russell came closer.

"No, now." She needed to do this her

way.

"Then I will talk first." Russell sat and moved his chair to the bed.

"We will talk first." Jason took his spot on the other side.

"No." She pulled her hands away from them and wiped her forehead. "I will talk first."

"Laurie." Jason reached for her.

She held her hand up to stop him from touching her. Though by the looks of things she may need a crutch to walk, she wouldn't use one now. "I came home that day to intercept the bag. Maybe I wanted a backup plan or maybe I was scared."

Neither of them said a word. She stared down at the hospital blanket. "I'm

still scared."

"Lauren." Russell's tone told her he was desperate to interrupt.

She closed her eyes and forged ahead. "I'm tired of being scared. No matter if we're together or not, I will always love both of you. I was selfish and wanted it all."

"Do you still want it all?" Jason leaned down until he was in her field of vision, his bangs falling down into his face.

"She just turned away a handbag that costs the same as some people's homes." Russell took her hand back.

"Maybe she had it all, but would prefer us two instead." Jason took her

other hand.

Along with her fear of everything else, now she was scared to look at them.

Russell kissed the back of her hand. "I've never been as lost as when the two of you left, and I've never been as terrified as when I got the phone call saying you were hurt. I wanted to die. I love you."

"I thought I was going to lose it." Jason laid his head down on her lap. "These were the worst three days of my life. I love you, too."

Somehow, after everything, she had her life back. She closed her eyes, waiting for the two kisses that would be more healing than any medicine, but a

knock at the door interrupted their reunion.

"I hear Ms. Redmond is doing much better. I'm Dr. Roberts." A man in blue scrubs and a white coat came over to her bed, nodded at her and looked at Russell. "I will oversee Ms. Redmond's care until your father returns with Dr. Parker."

"Your father?" She turned to Russell for confirmation. The situation with his parents haunted her.

"My parents wanted to be here when you woke up, but they went to go pick up some specialist flying in from Colorado. I called them, and they came right away." Russell leaned over.

"My parents are at the house making no bake cheesecake and lasagna." Jason gave her hand a squeeze.

"And club soda?" She couldn't stop the tears.

"Of course." Jason wiped her eye.

"Would you like some privacy while I check you?" The doctor went to the IV. "We normally allow only next of kin here, but you listed both men."

They both tightened their hold on her and she looked between them. "This is my family." At this moment their other issues didn't matter, not Jason's art, or Russell's insecurities, and even her insecurities, she had next of kin.

Chapter Thirty-Two

"I will bring breakfast into the bedroom." Russell called from the kitchen.

"That's good since our girlfriend needs crutches to get around." Jason pursed his lips and pointed to the clock. "Though by the time we got you to the table, he may actually be finished."

Lauren laughed and glanced at the time. Fine, it was a little late for breakfast, or brunch, but for someone who only days ago thought she would never have Russell's potatoes again, it was worth the wait.

They brought her home from the hospital yesterday, and proceeded to treat her like a piece of fine china. No complaints would leave her mouth, she relished in the way they doted on her. She only pushed back when Russell tried to go to the bathroom with her. There was a line.

"Breakfast is served." Russell entered carrying three plates. He gave one to Jason, put his down on the nightstand, and got in bed with her dish.

She reached for the food.

Russell shook his head, pierced a piece of potato, blew on it and held the fork out to her.

"I can feed myself." She frowned.

"I want to do it." Jason scooted over. He didn't bother with grabbing her food he simply scooped up some scrambled eggs from his plate. "Open up."

With no choice, she managed to get her mouth open right as Jason shoved the fork in her face.

"You are terrible at this." Russell shooed his hand away and proceeded to feed her the potato.

"Fine if we ever have a kid you can feed it." Jason took a bite of his breakfast.

At Jason's words her heart sank, they finally got over being together now wasn't the time to add anything else to

the mix.. During her time in the hospital she thought about these things and decided she was willing as long as they were together. She made sure to avert her eyes from either of them until the awkward moment went away.

"Maybe before we have children, we should have a talk." Somehow Russell managed to get a piece of bacon on the fork and put it to his lips before feeding it to her. "I'm pretty good at this."

"Yes, I have a few things I need to go over as well. Very serious business." Jason sat up.

She managed to swallow the food and glanced between them, willing the color to remain in her face.

"My mother couldn't believe you gave

up the Valerie bag." Russell put her plate aside. "But she said everyone has one now. We actually had a conversation."

If the three of them never mentioned the purse again, she would be fine. She had a feeling this wasn't as much about the bag as the man who gave it to her. "Yes, we do need to talk. I don't want the bag or Dr. Dalton."

"That's good." Russell leaned over the bed and came back up with a white box tied with a pink ribbon. "But since your purse got a little banged up in the accident, we thought you may like this one." He put the box on her lap.

She licked her lips and untied the

ribbon with her right hand. Jason put his plate aside and helped her lift the lid. "Oh." Damn it, she loved purses, and at first glance she knew this bag. The shiny black leather, the chain strap and the logo on the closure dripped of two of the best words in the fashion industry – vintage couture. "They don't make this brand anymore."

"No, they don't." Russell handed it to her. "Only the most elite ever get to own a Christopher Marks handbag. Everyone from the queens, actresses and even first ladies have carried this bag."

"This bag has history." Jason ran his hand across it as if showcasing it.

"It's magnificent." She pulled it toward her. Never in her dreams did

she picture owning one of these. They went up for auction every once in a while, but while the Valerie bag was unattainable, this was impossible. "Thank you."

"I thought you may want to wear the bag when I take you and Jason to my holiday party in a couple of weeks." Russell stared at her.

She looked at him then Jason. "Both of us?"

"Maybe Laurie needs one more accessory to accept your invitation, something more concrete." Jason opened the bag.

Both he and Russell reached in the purse and pulled out their own red

velvet box.

Her heart sped up and she prayed they didn't give her too many painkillers and now she was hallucinating.

"It will only ever be you two." Russell opened his box revealing a diamond eternity ring and a plain platinum band. He handed the plain band to Jason and slipped the other ring onto her finger. "I never want any doubts about our relationship again, and we'll figure out a way to make it even more official."

"Oh my God." She glanced at the diamonds. The stones glimmered even brighter through her tears.

"Yes, both of you are very taken. We are truly a trouple now." Jason opened

his box. Inside was a matching set of rings. "We are family."

As if they were performing some ritual, Jason handed Russell his ring and put hers on her finger and his face broke out into one of his traffic-stopping smiles. "While I want the world to know about our status, I think there are some things that are sacred and need to be kept between the three of us. I hope the two of you don't mind supporting the starving artist for a while longer while I get myself another agent."

Now Russell smiled, a once rare event that she prayed she saw more often.

She held up her hand admiring the

two most magnificent rings and men in the world.

"The two of you may bring out my creativity, but I don't think it needs to be quite that literal." Jason got out of the bed and went to the closet. "Even though it will take longer, this is the type of art I would like to show." He pulled out a canvas and turned it toward them.

The tears started afresh. This wasn't a painting in their most intimate moment, but it was intimate none-the-less. True to Jason's style, abstract swirls of blue, purple and pink created the ideal background of the three of them hand in hand with her in the middle crossing a finish line with a ribbon across their chests. He propped it up against the

dresser and returned to them.

"It's amazing." She could study his art for hours and still never make out all the nuances in his pieces.

Russell kissed her first. He let his fingers graze her cheek and tilted his head to Jason. "Come on, kiss our woman."

Jason licked his lips and kissed her as well, his lips lingering as if he wanted more. "What do you think of my interpretation of a trifecta?"

"I think it's a work of art." Russell grabbed Jason's shoulder.

She took both of their hands, completing the circle. "I think we all won."

THE END

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