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Kate Watterson

Beautiful Triad

3 SEXUAL
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BEAUTIFUL TRIAD

Sexual Studies 3

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SIREN POLYAMOUR



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DEDICATION

For Karen and Aggie with thanks and affection

BEAUTIFUL TRIAD

Sexual Studies 3

KATE WATTERSON

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Chapter One

The only thing to mark the drive was a discreet lip of asphalt off the winding road, and Drew missed it the first time. It wasn't until they wound up on a loop back to the small county highway that they realized it.

It was fine with her, Lauren Hanes decided as she looked out the window at the late afternoon sun dappling the crowding trees and sending shadows across the hood of the car. The later they were, the less time they would spend on this vacation. Every lost minute was a reprieve. She'd actually been grateful for gridlocked traffic on the interstate for the first time in her life.

With a muttered expletive, Drew turned the car around on the narrow road and they headed back. "Rob said it was hard to see. I guess he was right."

She glanced over. They been dating about six months now and she knew he was tense just by the set of his wide shoulders, probably from the five hour drive. In profile, his familiar features were clean cut, with a slight frown gathered between his fine brows, the sifted light through the forest coming in the window accenting the nice line of his lean jaw. Thick dark blond hair, always a little unruly, gave him a surfer boy look, as did the honed athletic body beneath the Purdue

University tee-shirt and tan shorts. Blue eyes the same color as the summer sky above the canopy of trees narrowed in concentration as they drove much slower back the way they had just come.

It was popular opinion Andrew Fletcher was very hot and she was a lucky girl.

She *was* a lucky girl. That was part of the problem. He wasn't just attractive, but also intelligent and considerate...

Shake it off. Stop thinking about it and maybe it will go away.

"Is that it?" She pointed at gap in the trees. "There's a mailbox."

"It's got to be. I guess when he said private, he meant it." Drew carefully pulled his expensive sports car into the narrow lane, which immediately curved to the right through the woods. She had her first glimpse of the water, a sparkling peek as they slid around a corner. It was a half a mile at least before they spotted the cabin, and a few minutes later berthed the car next to a silver pickup truck also sporting Indiana plates.

Some cabin, Lauren thought with amused assessment, trying to ignore the knot in her stomach. The place was gorgeous, with a pitched brow front three stories high overlooking the lake, all glass windows and huge decks. The area around the structure had been carefully landscaped to look natural, but was free of the tangled shrubs and wild vines and instead planted with a variety of ferns that hung delicate lacy leaves over the pine needles. The effect was expensive rustic at its finest, but then again Rob had mentioned his uncle was filthy rich.

Drew switched off the engine, took a look at his watch, and gave her one of his hundred watt smiles. "What a place."

"That's an understatement." She stared at the house, amazed.

"Only an hour and half late. I guess that's not bad, but I'll be glad to get out of this car. I'll get the bags and you go on in."

"No, I'll help you."

"It's okay, I've got it." He pushed a button and slid out to go around to the trunk.

Since there really wasn't much choice, she got out, too, and had to admit even though the very idea of this week made her uncomfortable, the air did smell fresh and clean, and the view to the lake was spectacular. Down a narrow path to the water, she could see a boat slip and the jut of the dock, and then a vista of deep blue water all framed in thick trees and not a soul in sight.

"It's pretty." The remark was a little inane, but she wasn't at her finest, the hours in the car aside.

Not staring the week from hell in the face.

"Gorgeous." Drew hefted both their bags and nodded at the steps up to the first level of the house. "But I'm going to have to admire the view later. After you, babe. I'm dying for a cold beer."

Even as she turned to comply and started to go up, a tall man came out of one of the sets of French doors on the front lower deck. Like Drew, he was dressed in an old comfortable tee-shirt and shorts, and a welcoming smile lit his face. "It's about time. I was just about to call your cell and ask what the hell was going on. Come on in."

The only things she carried were her purse and cosmetic bag, and Rob Hanson came forward politely and took them from her despite her protest. The antithesis of Drew in every way, except he was just as good looking, there was nothing boyish in his dramatic dark coloring; wavy black hair, ebony brows, and skin bronzed by a light summer tan. Even his lashes were thick and dark, framing eyes that were a startling gold-green hazel. His gaze flicked over her skirt and silk blouse, inappropriate for the wilderness surroundings, and she said defensively, "Drew picked me up from the office."

"You look great, but you might want to change and just be comfortable. After all, we're all on vacation. Let me show you to your room." He didn't bat an eye but turned to lead them into the house, the interior proving to be just as stunning as the outside. Vaulted ceilings went up three stories in the great room, and there were lofts above on two levels. A huge stone fireplace, scattered leather furniture in comfortable groupings, and an open state-of-the-art

kitchen did not really represent the fishing lodge he'd offered for their proposed and much discussed mutual vacation. Somehow she'd pictured pine walls and cots, not this luxury.

"This is awesome," Drew commented as he followed with their luggage.

"Yeah, Uncle Jim is in some sort of technology group that scored big a couple of decades ago. He spends most of his time in Italy now, and this place sits empty. Not bad, huh? Up here. You have the master suite."

He climbed up the first set of stairs. As she followed, Lauren felt a frisson of apprehension. She objected, "We can take a guest room."

"Karen isn't coming. I don't need a room this size just for me. You two can have it. Wait until you see it."

What?

He turned around and she realized she said it out loud. Rob lifted his brows a fraction. "She had to cancel. I thought Drew told you. It's just the three of us."

* * * *

No, Drew hadn't told her a damn thing, and the expression on her face spoke volumes to him. Lauren looked even more unhappy than she had the whole drive down through Kentucky and Tennessee, and though most people of his acquaintance would love a free vacation courtesy of a friend's distant uncle with way too much money, she wasn't exactly jumping for joy.

As long as she didn't jump overboard on their relationship. That was his real worry.

"You don't like her much anyway," Drew said causally as he walked past her into the room. "I figured you'd be more relieved than anything." It was true, and actually neither of them was very crazy about Rob's latest girlfriend. She was shallow, something Lauren

definitely was not. A little stubborn maybe...well, a *lot* stubborn at times, but not shallow.

“Drew!” Color flooded into her smooth cheeks. Looking mortified, she gave Rob an apologetic smile. “I’ve never said that, by the way.”

Rob didn’t look offended, his face impassive. “That’s all right. To tell you the truth, my heart didn’t exactly break when she told me she had to work on some emergency case that came up. We’re more off than we are on these days, and we were never that serious anyway. This way, you can relax, read, swim, do whatever you want instead of hanging around with her. Fletcher and I plan to fish the day away and drink copious amounts of beer. No rules this week, just whatever anyone wants to do.”

Lauren murmured in a halting voice, “That’s sounds nice.”

The bedroom was enormous, with a fireplace, huge windows facing the back of the house, the expanse of forest around them, and a bed the size of a football stadium. The carpet was lush, and the private bathroom had a jetted tub, marble floors, and a separate walk-in shower built for two. There was even a small bar with a refrigerator and a flat screen television on the wall.

Lauren seemed unmoved by all the opulence, slender and standing very still just inside the door, her body betraying a language he didn’t have to be a psychology major to read. Drew had been interpreting the signals without any problem for some time now and just wasn’t sure what to do about it. Maybe he should be pissed, since it was the logical reaction. But logic didn’t seem to apply to this situation, not if he wanted to keep her.

And he did. More than anything in his life.

Rob eased away from the doorframe in a smooth athletic movement. “I’ll go downstairs while you all unpack. There’s a deck chair with my name on it and a cold one on the table next to it.”

“We’ll be right down.” Drew made the promise as he deposited their suitcases on the floor. As soon as Rob was gone, he asked, “Are you upset?”

Lauren gave him a look he couldn’t quite interpret. “Because Karen ditched out? I won’t miss her, I admit it, though you weren’t supposed to announce it to Rob. What if they stay together and eventually get married or something, Drew? Now he’ll always know I don’t care for her.”

“They won’t.” He spoke with complete confidence because he’d known Rob Hanson since they were both in grade school. Rob was not into his latest girlfriend except in the most casual of ways. Drew was pretty sure they weren’t even sleeping together before this trip and apparently that wasn’t going to happen either. “They haven’t dated very long. He seemed relieved to me she didn’t come and I’m personally happy as hell because I couldn’t quite picture her enjoying the vacation in the woods theme. The woman can’t even stay off her cell phone for five minutes. You said you wanted to sleep in, read, lie out in the sun, and swim a little. Think of it this way, you’ll be able to do whatever you want and not feel obligated to entertain her. It isn’t like you don’t know Rob pretty well, babe. We’re all friends. It’ll be fun.”

She moved toward the suitcase he’d set down, unbuttoning her blouse. “A week with the guys? Hmm, I guess as long as I don’t have to go fishing with you two or do all the cooking, it’ll be fine.”

“You have my word on it.” He watched her slide the silk material from her shoulders, a familiar hunger shooting from brain to groin. Lauren was beautiful in an understated elegant way, slender but feminine. She had perfect firm, high breasts, not too big but still shapely and sexy as hell, a slim waist, and nice long legs. Her hair was a rich chestnut brown that glimmered with golden highlights, worn down past her shoulders in a simple elegant straight swing, and her skin in contrast was fair and flawless. The almost fragile beauty of her face was striking with enormous dark blue eyes under arched

brows, high cheekbones, a straight nose, and a very soft, pink mouth she rarely accented with anything but clear gloss. Other than a little mascara, he knew she wore little makeup, but she didn't need cosmetics anyway. Mother Nature had done it all for her. She was a knockout and the physical part of their relationship was more than satisfying. All he had to do was look at her and he got an erection on the spot.

It was happening at the moment, he thought in amused self-disgust as he watched her step out of her skirt. In just her bra and skimpy bikini panties—both a delicate pink that turned him on even more—she bent over to rummage in her case, and he got a world class view of her tempting, perfect ass and his cock went on full alert.

Later, he promised himself, adjusting the bulge in his shorts. When they went to bed for the evening he'd start the vacation out in a way she wouldn't forget. It had taken him months to finally get her to sleep with him, but the wait had been more than worth it. With her looks, he'd been astounded to discover that at twenty-four, she'd been practically a virgin, her sexual experience limited to a shaky romance her freshman year in college that fizzled after a few months. Shy but responsive was a sexy combination, he'd found, and as they grew more comfortable with each other's bodies, he could tell she enjoyed it more and more when they made love. A little experience went a long way and she was a natural when it came to sex, her innate sensuality a huge turn-on.

He was head over heels, heart and soul in love with her. But they had one big issue he had a feeling wasn't going to go away and part of problem was her refusal to acknowledge it.

Lauren found a pair of white shorts, slipped them on, and then pulled a pale blue tank top over her head. She shook back her shining hair so it fell gracefully over her slim shoulders again. "You go on down if you want. I'm going to brush my teeth and put a few things away."

"The minute you join us, I'll pour you a glass of wine."

She smiled, a tempting curve of her mouth that lit her face with the familiar warmth. “That sounds pretty fabulous.”

“You’re fabulous.” He walked over, pulled her into his arms, kissed her lightly, and looked into her eyes. “I’m really looking forward to spending this week with you, Lauren.”

Her hand lifted to touch his cheek and lush dark lashes lowered a fraction over the deep blue of her eyes. “I feel the same way.”

He believed her. That was part of his problem. She felt it. That was part of *her* problem.

“I’m glad.” Drew let her go before she figured out he had a hard on just from watching her change her clothes. “Take your time. It sounds like we’ll be out on the deck.”

“It’ll just be a few minutes.”

The house really was spectacular, he thought as he went down the stairs and through the open great room. Rob was on the porch as promised, sprawled carelessly in an Adirondack chair, the light breeze ruffling his dark hair. Without a word he reached into a nearby cooler, pulled out a dripping bottle, and handed it over.

“Thanks.” Drew twisted off the cap and dropped into the chair next to him. “This is pretty sweet. How big is the lake?”

“A couple hundred acres. Not huge, but all private, and from what I’ve seen when I’ve been up here, pretty much all ours. Most of the houses are like this one. Big expensive places built by people too busy to use them much. On the weekends there are some boats out, but during the week it’s dead quiet.”

“Heaven on earth is what you’re describing to me. I was going to take Lauren someplace in the Caribbean, but the thought of a crowded beach doesn’t do much for me, honestly. When you and I went in college for spring break that year it was a little different.”

Rob took a drink from his beer bottle and laughed. “Yeah, that whole trip is a bit of a blur. Who knew we’d someday turn into responsible adults and prefer peace and quiet? Hell, before you got

here I even made a salad, put the steaks in the marinade, and got the baked potatoes ready.”

“You’re a regular Martha Stewart.” Drew grinned.

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far. That’s a pretty elaborate meal for me. I can do a decent spaghetti, but brace yourself for burgers and brats the rest of the week. I don’t have time to cook. You aren’t a culinary genius with your schedule either, Fletcher.”

It was true, Drew acknowledged. Six years before, they had both graduated from Purdue with honors, and Rob was now a computer engineer for a software company. Drew had managed to capitalize on a love of flying and ended up a corporate pilot. They were busy as hell, both of them, and he was out of the country half the time, so this week was even more special because they’d get to spend some time together. Of course, he would also get to be with Lauren.

“Simple is fine with me. Besides, Lauren is a great cook, and though she said she doesn’t want to get stuck with all the cooking, I’m going to guess she’ll be more than happy to pitch in if it comes down to the bologna sandwiches I can make.”

“She unhappy about Karen not coming or is what you said true?” Rob sounded casual—almost too carefully casual.

“She’s fine.”

“That’s good.”

The ensuing silence was just a little strained, and Drew uttered a silent curse at the situation that was fast becoming the norm between two friends who were as close as brothers.

Just one word summed up his feelings.

Fuck.

Chapter Two

Lighting the candles was too much in retrospect. Candlelit dinner for three. *That's romance for you, Hanson.*

Rob took another bite of his steak. It was actually really good, the spice rub the butcher had recommended doing the trick, and he managed to get it just medium rare with a nice char on the outside. Even the baked potatoes weren't underdone, which he had a habit of doing since he seemed perpetually in a hurry.

Maybe that was why he couldn't completely relax.

Yeah, right, who was he fooling?

The real reason sat across the table, the theatrical light playing over her shimmering hair as she sipped wine and picked at her food. Since the steaks were delicious and it was hard to go wrong with potatoes and salad, he knew it wasn't the food. Just what it was affecting her appetite he wasn't sure, but he hoped the only vibe he was sending was platonic brotherly affection.

He was doing his best anyway.

"...back to Japan again," Drew was saying with a small grimace. "It'll be the third time in two months."

Rob jerked his attention back to the conversation. "I've always wanted to see it and now that we acquired that new company, I might have to go someday, or so they've mentioned in a couple of memos."

"Believe me, *I've* seen it." Drew lounged in chair and grimaced, toying with the stem of his wine glass. "Once we get there, I have nothing to do until they're ready to leave. Last time we were there ten days. It's an interesting place, but you can only play tourist for so long."

“You could fly commercial.” It was an old debate, and Rob grinned, knowing the answer.

“No thanks.” Drew shook his head.

Lauren, who had been quiet through the meal—the whole evening, actually—spoke up. “Heaven forbid he be boring and conventional and have a regular schedule.”

“Like I said, no thanks.” Drew smiled at her, the expression on his face teasing with the intimacy of a lover. “I thought you liked that I’m not another *boring* executive in an Armani suit like the ones constantly hitting on you.”

“It’d be nice if you were around a little more, that’s all.” She smiled back, but it was fleeting and she got to her feet to gather her still mostly full plate. “That was delicious, Rob. Thank you.”

“You didn’t eat much,” he pointed out in a neutral tone.

“I’ll save the rest for tomorrow for lunch. I don’t know why, but I’m really tired tonight. I went in early to work to try to get as much done before noon when Drew was picking me up. Maybe that’s it.” She moved gracefully toward the kitchen, a slender shape in the inadequate lighting, though a spectacular moon had risen and was visible through the glass wall facing the lake, helping light the cabin. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go up to bed after I help clean this up.”

“There isn’t much to do.” He got to his feet with alacrity and switched on the light in the kitchen. “I’ll take care of it. I know where everything goes. You can have clean up duty tomorrow if you want.”

“Okay...fair enough.” She relinquished her plate as he reached for it.

Unfortunately, their fingers brushed. Just a touch, but enough to make his entire hand tingle in some ridiculous adolescent way that—if it was physically possible—made him want to kick himself.

She’s off limits, bud.

For a second her eyes, so lovely and luminous with those dark thick lashes and indigo color, widened almost as if she could read his

mind, and then she turned to leave, brushing past Drew with little more than a murmured good night, and hurrying up the stairs.

“Not exactly how I’d thought the evening would go.” Drew’s tone was joking, but there was an underlying edge to it. He sat and stared at where Lauren had disappeared into the small hallway to the master bedroom. “She’s been pretty edgy lately and I’ve been trying to figure it out.”

Well, shit.

“Maybe she *is* just tired.” Rob hoped he sounded casual as he moved to find some plastic wrap and put it over her plate. “We all work hard. That’s why we’re here. Tomorrow, when all she has to do is sleep late, hang around catching some sun, and maybe go for an afternoon boat ride, she’ll relax.”

“Our relationship has always felt solid, right from the beginning.”

Why did they have to talk about this *now*? “It’s seemed that way to me all along.” Rob slid the plate into the refrigerator. It was true.

“I’m so in love with her...whoa, what the hell was that?”

The doors to the deck were open to the sound of the creaking insects and the gentle lap of the water on the shore. The faint sound came again, an eerie high pitched keen that seemed to echo in macabre desolation until it died away.

It sounded like a woman screaming.

Both of them stopped still, he in the act of walking back to the table and Drew in the midst of lifting his wine to his mouth. After a second, Rob said, “Could be a bird.”

“You think so?” Drew frowned, turning to stare at the open doors. “I’ve heard screech owls before. I suppose that could be it. Maybe we should take a look outside. It’s hard to tell how close it was.”

“If we hear it again, maybe we can judge better.”

They waited, but from outside all that came was the constant sound of the cicadas in the trees and the chorus of what seemed like a million frogs.

"I'm going with the owl theory." Rob sat back down and reached for the almost empty bottle of merlot to pour the last into his glass. "We going to get up early tomorrow and try for some largemouth bass? This lake is well-stocked."

"What's your idea of early?"

"Uhm...six maybe." Fishing was a safe comfortable topic. Much better than discussing how deeply his best friend was in love with the woman Rob couldn't seem to get off his mind.

How maybe they *both* were in love with her.

"Six?" Drew's brows shot up. "Well, yeah, I suppose that's fine since Lauren will probably sleep in anyway. I just don't want her to feel like a fifth wheel since Karen bailed out."

"I think I'm the fifth wheel." Rob took a studious sip of the red wine and looked out over the moonlit lake.

What an understatement.

* * * *

She was restless, even though she was exhausted and the night had cooled off nicely, the breeze coming off the balcony brushing across her skin. Even the skimpy nightgown she'd put on seemed to cling to her body and she slid out of bed and slipped it off.

The look on Drew's face as she went by him and rushed upstairs had obliterated any possibility of sleep. It wasn't guilt precisely that kept her tossing and turning, it was just plain confusion. She was in love with Andrew Fletcher. It was unsettling, because she'd never felt that way about anyone, not with same intensity. The flash of his mesmerizing smile, the way he moved with such easy masculine grace, the reverent way he touched her...

The pleasure in his arms.

Before him, she'd thought sex overrated, a Hollywood commodity peddled like plastic surgery and breast implants. An illusion, when the

reality was more about messy, less than satisfying intercourse with absolutely no rockets exploding in the heavens.

Drew had changed that the first time they'd slept together.

Maybe this current state of turmoil was all his fault, she mused in disgruntled discontent as she punched the pillow under head, kicked off the covers, and closed her eyes for the hundredth time. He'd made her aware of her body, of how a woman could respond to a man, and as a result, she was having some very disloyal and entirely erotic fantasies about Rob Hanson.

She *loved* Drew. Why was she so aware of Rob? The problem had been growing for the past few months and she had a feeling Drew might have started to notice. For that matter, Rob seemed just as uncomfortable around her as she was around him, and she had begun to have a conflicted reaction to the idea of double dates. A traitorous part of her wanted to see Rob. A more practical part of her brain told her it was better to just stay away.

She'd finally found a great guy who was everything any woman could want, they got along, laughed together, enjoyed a very healthy satisfying sex life, and there she was, having impure thoughts about his best friend.

You're an idiot, Lauren.

Maybe it was because the two men shared a lot of the same characteristics. They were both self-confident, intelligent, had a good sense of humor, but while Drew tended to be straightforward and dealt with life in a very direct way, Rob seemed more sensitive and actually a bit old-fashioned, if Karen's complaints held any truth. She had never gotten him into bed, his girlfriend had confided with bitterness the last time the four of them had gone out together for dinner and she and Lauren had gone to the restroom at the same time. A successful attorney, statuesque and blond, Karen seemed more than a little irritated with his reluctance over sex, so maybe the vacation cancellation wasn't that much of a surprise after all.

Rob's girlfriend had speculated he might be interested in someone else.

Me?

It wasn't like he'd ever done or said anything that could even be remotely construed as flirtation. He wouldn't do that to Drew. Lauren just got this feeling his unease around her might be a reflection of a similar problem to the one she had with him.

She rolled over and was suddenly aware the figure of a man lounged in the doorway, one broad shoulder against the frame. With the moonlight, it was easy enough to see Drew's face in angles and planes, his gaze riveted on her exposed body.

"Hmm, nice view. Gorgeous naked woman in my bed, it doesn't get better than that. Waiting for me? I'd kind of given up hope since you said you were so tired."

"I guess not as tired as I thought. I can't fall asleep." Her voice sounded husky, even to her own ears, and her nipples tingled and stiffened. She watched him come into the room through heavy-lidded eyes.

"Can I help?" He moved toward the bed and jerked his shirt off over his head. His bare chest was ridged with muscle and his abdomen flat and taut.

"Maybe." She needed him touching her, kissing her, inside her, anything to take her mind off of her chaotic emotions. "What do you have in mind?"

"How about a little mind-blowing sex?" He unfastened his shorts and pushed them down his lean hips. One of the things she'd learned about him as a lover was he could get an erection in an impressively short amount of time. Drew was well into the process of full sexual arousal, his cock high and stiff against his stomach.

"That sounds promising," Lauren murmured as he climbed onto the huge bed and settled on top of her. His knees separated her legs, spreading them wide and she opened willingly, languid desire replacing her inner musings.

“Doesn’t it?” he asked in a husky voice, and for a moment their gazes locked before he slowly lowered his head and captured her mouth. They kissed with mutual open hunger, his tongue tangling with hers, the weight of his body pinning her to the bed. Lauren ran her hands down the muscled contours of his back, feeling the iron hard length of his stiff cock against her inner thigh.

Drew licked a trail along her jaw to the sensitive spot below her ear as he cupped a breast. “This is more how I envisioned our vacation, babe. Damn, you feel so good.”

So did he. Hot, male, and hard. Lauren tugged his mouth to hers for another long kiss and rubbed suggestively against his erection. The slow circle of his thumb around her nipple made her shiver.

Releasing her, he kissed her throat and moved lower until he replaced his thumb with his mouth, sucking her nipple with gentle adhesion. The delicate play of his tongue across the crest made her gasp, the sensation so pleasurable she could feel the rush of moisture in her pussy as she arched in response. She sank her fingers into his hair, the soft strands warm and thick.

The moist heat of his mouth transferred to the other breast, teasing and suckling it to a tight point. A roaming hand caressed her hip and then slid between her legs. Long fingers parted her labia and found her clitoris, stimulating it with a gentle rotating motion than made her give an involuntary moan. Belatedly, she realized he hadn’t even closed the door.

“The door is open.” Her whisper sounded thick and off-key.

“So what?” Drew licked her collarbone and gave her a wicked grin as he applied just the right amount of pressure on her clit to make her eyes shut briefly at the streak of sensation between her legs.

“I don’t want anyone to hear us.” Lauren fought back another telling moan.

“The only other person here is Rob and I hate to break it to you, babe, he knows we sleep together.”

“Still, I...”

“Relax. His bedroom is on a different level anyway, so feel free to make those sexy little sounds that turn me on so much. Damn you are really wet, Lauren.”

She probably was, for her whole body tingled. “I want you.”

“I’m damned glad of that because the feeling is entirely mutual. I’ll be happy to demonstrate.” He shifted position and removed his hand, using it instead to guide himself into position. The tip of his cock teased her entrance and then pushed inside.

“Do you have any idea how you feel around me?” Drew asked the question as he watched her through half-closed eyes, an intense look on his face as he joined their bodies. “So hot and tight I could lose it right this second, but don’t worry, you’re going to come first, count on it.”

She did count on it, because he’d never left her less than deliciously satisfied, not even once. The way his cock stretched her vaginal walls as he pressed into her caused a tightening coil of excitement in the pit of her stomach and she spread her legs wider to accept him. “Drew.”

“Right with you, babe.” He bent to kiss her and then slid backwards to give a long, slow thrust back in.

Lauren quivered in response, the erect tips of her breasts brushing his hard chest. “Yes,” she whispered as he settled into an erotic rhythm of sex into sex, her hips naturally lifting into each surge, her hands at the small of his back. The slippery friction was tantalizing, inherently primal, and she embraced it.

He was an excellent teacher, for now she knew how to recognize and flow with the tension that rose, the rapturous, frantic need for release. Braced on one arm, he fingered her clit as he moved and the dual sensation of his thrusting cock and his skilled manipulation brought her to the edge quickly.

Some of it was probably due to the fantasy earlier that had her hot and bothered already, she thought as she realized her orgasm was imminent.

It exploded, the force of it tearing a low cry from her throat, all thoughts of the open door gone. Lauren shuddered as her inner muscles tightened in small spasms, the raw pleasure of her climax so intense she dug her nails into Drew's biceps and held on for dear life.

"Jesus." His voice was hoarse, almost unrecognizable, and he went still as he came, the pulse of his cock as he ejaculated making his tall body jerk.

Gradually, she became aware again of the pulse of the insects outside through the open windows, the soft feel of the huge bed, and the uneven breathing of the man sprawled on top of her, his weight supported just enough by his elbows.

"Hmm." Lauren smiled and touched his face with a brush of her fingertips. "I somehow think I'll be able to drift off now." It was true, she felt sated and physically content.

"Call on me anytime," he told her, gently withdrawing and rolling to his side. His arm came around her waist and pulled her close so they spooned together with her back to his front. His breath tickled her nape. He kissed her bare shoulder. "We okay?"

A flicker of warning shot through her. "After what just happened, you have to ask?"

"You've been a little tense lately."

"I have?"

"I notice everything about you." Drew stroked her arm with a light touch. "You can always talk to me, you know."

Not about this. She tried to picture the conversation in which she mentioned her romantic fantasies involving his best friend. How on earth would he understand if she didn't understand it herself?

Yeah, that would go over well.

"Nothing is wrong, Drew." Her voice softened. "I love you."

His arm tightened a fraction. "That works out, since I love you, babe."

Lauren gave a theatrical yawn. It was not the time to start thinking about her idiotic problem again. She was a grown woman, not an infatuated teenager and this would pass.

Or she certainly hoped it would.

Chapter Three

At mid-morning, the brilliance of the sun reflected off the water in a dazzling sapphire blaze and he'd decided sunscreen might not be a bad idea. Drew reeled in his line and opened the cooler to retrieve a bottle of water. Rob was right, the lake was very quiet and they were the only boat in sight.

He took a drink and adjusted his sunglasses. "Who owns that place?"

Rob glanced in the direction of his pointing finger. A rooftop stuck up from the trees, the expansive length of the visible structure giving an idea of the size of the house below it. It had to be enormous. "Uncle Henry said the place next door to his is owned by some professor who wrote a few books that made it big."

"Yeah, well, he didn't buy that place on a university salary." Drew capped the water bottle and set it aside.

"True enough. I want to say the guy is some sort of psychologist. I can't remember his name off the top of my head, but I don't think he's owned the house very long."

"The boathouse is larger than my condo."

"I'm sure it cost some bucks."

It was true. The structure by the elaborate dock was two stories, with three bay doors for the boats undoubtedly inside, and the exterior impressive. It looked as deserted as the rest of the lake.

"I wonder if Lauren is awake." It was a neutral comment. "She's an early riser usually, but she was still sound asleep when I got up."

Rob said nothing, piloting the boat back toward their dock. The wind ruffled his dark hair and his face held no expression at all.

That was a big part of the problem, of course. They were both being so careful about it, so deliberately indifferent to each other, and if he hadn't seen that moment the night before, Drew might even buy into it.

The act of handing a plate to another human being wasn't significant usually. People had more physical contact on the subway each day and it meant nothing, but the look Rob and Lauren exchanged over a barely touched plate of steak and potatoes had been telling.

He wasn't even sure when he'd first noticed something was up. Yes, they double dated often enough with Rob and whoever was his latest girlfriend because he and Rob had always done that, since before college. Through various girlfriends for each of them there had never been a conflict of interest before, but he had the feeling there sure as hell was one now.

Lauren was upset over the attraction, and since Drew knew Rob almost as well as he knew himself, it was clear there was an ethical dilemma there as well. Neither one of them would ever do anything about it. Drew was as sure of it as he was the sun would come up the next morning.

The good news was, he knew Lauren meant it when she said she loved him.

Desire wasn't an unhealthy emotion. It just depended on how the parties involved dealt with it. Some cheated, but that didn't apply to this situation. Just what did apply was the question.

Lauren *was* awake, he saw, and must have heard them approach because she walked out onto the long dock just as they berthed the boat. Drew took in the scenery with pure male appreciation, her dark blue bikini revealing a great deal of smooth flawless skin, her long hair loose and shining down her back. The rich color was accented by the sunlight and the light breeze tugged a silky strand across her cheek. She pushed it away and smiled. "Any luck?"

He felt pretty damned lucky at the moment. As she bent to set down a beach towel, bottle of suntan oil, and a paperback novel, her breasts swayed provocatively under the thin, barely there material and he got a bird's eye view of a great deal of enticing flesh.

"We caught a few small ones." Rob turned to start carefully tying up the boat with a line around a post.

So he wouldn't get caught looking with that unguarded expression on his face? *That* was an educated guess.

"It's a beautiful morning though." Drew vaulted out to secure the other line. "Perfect for getting a little sun and maybe a swim."

"My thoughts exactly." She sank down and picked up her book, folding her long, slender legs underneath her.

"After we take our gear back up to the house, I may change into my trunks and come down for a bit."

"I'll be here." She flashed them both another smile and then flipped open her paperback.

They gathered their poles and took the path up toward the house, the sun warm on Drew's back. Rob seemed in one hell of a hurry for someone on vacation, a good two yards in the lead right off the bat. It was an easy enough assumption his friend's goal wasn't so much where he was going as it was getting away from Lauren with all due speed, and Drew stifled an expletive.

He really didn't know exactly how to handle this, but he wasn't going to pretend all week long he didn't notice the tension. It wasn't his style, and besides, this problem wasn't limited to the next six days either.

Drew stowed his fishing pole on the porch and followed Rob into the cabin. He leaned against the counter in the kitchen, and declined a glass of iced tea as his friend rummaged in the refrigerator. Finally he simply said, "We need to talk, man. Now seems as good a time as any with Lauren down by the lake."

Rob glanced up from dropping ice cubes in a tall glass. "Talk about what?"

"I bet you could give it a good guess, Rob." Drew lifted a brow. "You know how I hate bullshit and as far as I know you aren't into it either, so let's cut through it, okay?"

"What particular bullshit are we referring to?" Rob gave him a level look, but there was a grim set to his mouth.

"I get the distinct impression you want to fuck my girlfriend. That's about as blunt as I can be."

There was an antique clock hanging above the fireplace in the great room. In the ensuing silence, Drew could hear it tick with startling clarity.

Rob said nothing at first until he exhaled and ran his hand down his face. "There are times I wish we didn't know each other so well. For the record, I don't want to fuck her. Make love to her maybe, but it's different. I wish you'd never noticed anything, because I swear I've tried to just ignore it."

"Yeah, well, Lauren isn't doing too great a job in keeping it under wraps either."

"Lauren?" Rob's hazel eyes took on a glitter.

"Don't tell me you haven't noticed she seems uptight around you, too. I know I have." Drew groped for the right words. "Look, I am not interested in losing her *because* of you anymore than I'm interested in losing her *to* you. She isn't the kind of person who would easily live with the idea she put a strain on our friendship. Already she feels guilty as hell for being attracted to you and it's a problem."

"She hasn't cornered the market on guilt." Rob seemed to remember the pitcher on the counter and lifted it to pour tea into his glass with a hand that wasn't quite steady. "I feel like an asshole. I wish I could tell you why I can't go for Karen, who's gorgeous and smart, or any other girls I've met lately instead of thinking about—"

"...Lauren all the time." Drew finished the sentence. "Don't forget, I know exactly what you mean. I'm in deep with her. Deeper than I've ever been."

“The difference is you *have* her. I don’t. I know it, don’t get me wrong. I’m even happy for you, because she’s not only beautiful, but terrific in every other way. This whole situation isn’t something I wanted to happen, believe me. If you’re pissed, I understand, but it wasn’t intentional. I’m the miserable one.”

Since the misery wasn’t all one sided, Drew could not agree. He was apprehensive over the future. Lauren felt uncomfortable for thinking about another man. Rob was frustrated and guilty.

Surely there was some way to work this out.

He could only think of one.

“She’s fantastic in bed.” He said the words softly, as if testing himself, vocalizing the idea. “She loves sex.”

Rob’s mouth tightened into a caustic line. “Thanks for sharing. I suppose I deserve that, but I just told you none of this was because I want to interfere in any way in your relationship, Drew. If you hadn’t said anything, I was more than willing to never talk about it.”

“Are you jealous of me?”

“Don’t *you* be an asshole over this, Fletcher.”

“I’m not. Answer my question.”

Rob made a helpless gesture with his hand. “Yes. I’m jealous. There. Can we drop this?”

“Are you jealous of me in the way you’d like to rip my guts out, or are you just jealous I have Lauren?” He added with emphasis, “The question has a purpose, so just answer it honestly.”

There was a pause and then Rob said, “The latter. Like I said, I’m happy for you. Why?”

“Good. Because if you were sleeping with Lauren, I’d feel the same way. Maybe it’s something to consider if we both can handle it.”

* * * *

Rob stared at his friend, not certain he'd heard the words correctly. Drew's expression wasn't overtly hostile considering the context of their conversation, and he had to give him credit for it. "I think you just lost me."

Drew rubbed his jaw and his smile was rueful. "I really can't believe I'm about to suggest this, but here goes. You want Lauren, right? So do I. She seems to be in the same predicament when it comes to the two of us. There's a logical solution."

Maybe it seemed logical to Drew, but he was having a hard time figuring it out. "Come again?"

"Is there some reason she can't be with both of us?"

Is he fucking serious?

Rob gave a shaky laugh. "I could swear you just suggested I sleep with the woman you tell me you're in love with, Drew."

His friend's good-looking face was serious, not even a hint of his usual humor in evidence. "I *am* in love with her. As far as I can tell, so are you. I've seen you around a lot of women. You look at her in a different way."

Was it love? All he knew was how he felt was unique in his experience. It rocked his world. Rob muttered in protest, "She's yours."

"For now. Until the situation makes her so unhappy she decides to forget it. The equation is pretty simple. If she continues in a relationship with me, she'll have to see you at least now and then. The way things are, I don't think she's going to be able to handle that in the long term. If the only issue was how you felt, it might be different, but this is a mixture of how I feel about her, about you, and how she reacts to both of us. Maybe I should be threatened, and if it were anyone else I would be, but I don't think the idea is a bad one."

Sharing the same woman? Rob wasn't sure he could wrap his mind around it. A three way relationship? It certainly had been done before, but he'd never pictured himself in the middle of one.

But if I could be with Lauren, even one time...

“She won’t go for it.” His tea glass slapped on the counter with a wet sound as he set it down too hard. “I’m trying to imagine her agreeing to this, and no way. Women want a committed relationship, not to shack up with two different guys.”

“I’m committed. She can have anything she wants from me. How about you?”

How about you? The question hung in midair, like some sort of damned test.

Rob looked out the wall of windows toward the lake. He’d thought about her way too much in the past few months, and spent more than a few lonely nights because he couldn’t touch the woman he wanted, so he didn’t touch anyone. It affected his whole life. He’d even come up with the not-so brilliant idea of using the cabin instead of letting Drew take her off to some tropical paradise because it was just too tempting to get to be around her for a full week. Oh, hell yes, he’d known it would be torture, but he’d done it anyway.

With difficulty, he said, “I’d do anything she asked of me, even if it was to get lost. Considering how I feel, that says it all.”

“You’ve been tested lately, right? She’s gone on the pill so we wouldn’t have to mess with condoms. One of the things she’s discovered she likes is to be spontaneous.”

Rob still felt an incredulous sense of disbelief over the conversation. Lauren liked to be spontaneous...Jesus, was Drew trying to kill him? “I’m perfectly healthy, but—”

Drew interrupted, his expression reflective. “It’s a relief for me to finally get this out in the open. If you feel the same, I imagine she will, too. Only you’re right, it sounds a little crazy. There’s really no way I can think of to say to her I’m okay with the fact she is interested in you too. Not for a minute do I want her to think I’m not into her one hundred percent. If I *wasn’t* so worried about her being happy I wouldn’t ever have thought of encouraging her to have sex with you if that’s what she wants.”

The idea of getting permission to screw someone else's girlfriend wasn't exactly an easy one for Rob to swallow either. "This isn't just about having sex."

"Hell no, it better not be. If I thought you just had a hard-on for her, we wouldn't be having this conversation." Drew's mouth tightened. "As someone who is neck deep in the middle of this, who knows you both really, really well, I can tell she senses you are emotionally involved, Rob. She's thrown by it, I'm going to guess by what I've seen, intrigued, and then confused over how she could think about you when she's in a good relationship already."

He *was* emotionally involved. And somehow the idea of both of them in love with the same woman wasn't all that surprising in retrospect. They were pretty alike in some ways and always had been. There were also some very different aspects to their personalities that made them compliment each other. It was part of the reason they got along so well.

Rob cocked a brow. "You sure about this?"

"I'm sure things can't stay as they are. We're all going a little crazy here." Drew rubbed his jaw and gave a faint smile. "As for the question of sex, I'll be there, too, remember? She's an old-fashioned girl and was not sexually experienced at all before we met. Once she discovered how much she likes it, she has really warmed up in bed."

If the soft moans he'd heard the night before were any indication, Drew was exactly right. Rob had stuck a pillow over his head to muffle the sounds of them making love and had only been semi-successful. He'd ended up with an erection and cursing himself for being a voyeur, but the acoustics in the house with the giant open floor plan had made him feel like he was right in that bed with them, even with his bedroom on a different level.

Tonight, maybe he would be. Just the idea of hearing her make those same sexy sounds as he touched her made a jolt go straight to his crotch.

He argued. “We can hardly inform her we’ve decided she should sleep with both of us. It’s not our choice for one, and makes us both sound like arrogant idiots.”

“No, it’s not our choice,” Drew agreed, “but I do think if we go about it the right way, she’ll actually love it.”

Or she’d flat out reject the idea, maybe reject them both for even thinking it. Drew must really be sincere about this off the wall suggestion because he was smart enough to know he was taking a chance of losing her altogether.

Rob remembered the way she looked at him the night before, her lovely face vulnerable in that instant their fingers brushed, her soft mouth parting just a fraction. He was experienced enough to recognize that look in a woman’s eyes.

She *was* attracted to him, he knew it.

Tonight he hoped to find out for sure.

* * * *

If the man hadn’t glanced side to side, she would never have thought anything about it. Lauren watched him walk to the end of the dock several hundred feet away, his gaze scanning the water in a full sweep. What he was looking for was a mystery, for the lake was deserted except for a pair of Canadian geese placidly swimming nearby.

It had been hot in the full sun and she wasn’t too much for overdoing sunbathing anyway, so she had taken her towel and moved to the bank where a small willow hung trailing fingers into the water and the cobalt shadows were thick and cool. Propped on one elbow, her open book in front of her, she saw the stranger turn and press a device in his hand. One of the boathouse doors lifted and she realized it must be some kind of thing like a garage door opener. He disappeared around the back, and a moment later the low hum of a motor started and a sleek speedboat backed out of one the bays.

It was interesting he was wearing dress slacks, a long-sleeved button down shirt, and a tie. Not exactly boating apparel, in her opinion. His hair was fair and cropped close to his head, and he had prominent nose that dominated his face.

The boat pulled up to the dock and the man clambered out, wrapped a line around a metal anchor on the dock, and walked down the length of the pier.

He dragged an oblong object quickly to the edge of the craft and dropped it. It wasn't lightweight. The boat rocked as it thudded down and a second later he jumped in, unwrapped the rope, and started to idle off. As he bent over, he must have caught sight of her sitting there on the bank for the first time. He visibly froze and stared her direction before turning away. The engine roared as he swung the boat around and opened the throttle.

The whole thing felt off-key, especially considering the bright sunshine and the peaceful quiet lake.

"Hey, babe."

Shaken out of her contemplation of the wake left by the departing speedboat, Lauren glanced up. "Hey."

Drew dropped beside her on the towel beneath the tree and smiled in his heart-stopping way. "Sorry it took me so long. Good book?"

She glanced absently at the paperback. "Oh, yes, it is."

He removed it from her hand with a small grin and studied the jacket. His dark blond brows rose. "*Seducing the Highlander?*"

"I adore Scottish historical romances." She snatched it back and laughed. "So sue me."

"Hmm. I like modern day romances where the women wear sexy, skimpy bikinis, have the most beautiful blue eyes, and smell like sun block."

"Do you? I haven't read that one." He had the knack to make her pulse pick up the beat when he looked at her the way he did at the moment, the intensity in his azure eyes mesmerizing.

“It isn’t fiction.” He leaned over and brushed her mouth in a slow seductive slide, his tongue teasing her lower lip. He murmured against her mouth, “The water looks great, doesn’t it? How about a swim?”

“I was waiting for you.”

“Come on then.” In a swift athletic movement he got to his feet and reached out a hand. In only his swim trunks, his tanned chest bare, he looked all gorgeous male.

Unfortunately, so did Rob, she realized with the usual shimmer of dismay. He strolled out on the dock just behind them, wide-shouldered and tall, his dark hair just slightly tousled, accenting the chiseled features of his face. Nice hard muscles tapered to a flat stomach and she couldn’t help but notice the slight line of dark hair from his navel disappearing into the red swim trunks that hung off his lean hips.

Drew pointed at the rippling water. “Ladies first.”

Lauren shook her head and took a step back, seeing the teasing look on his face. “It’s probably cold. I’ll get in slowly, thank you.”

He advanced. “Chicken.”

“Andrew Fletcher, don’t you dare throw me in.” She took another step backwards and ran solidly into Rob, who she didn’t realize had moved to stand right behind her.

A strong arm slid around her waist and he held her there, against the solid heat of his body. “Don’t worry, Lauren, I’ll protect you from this loser.”

“Loser? Look who’s talking.” Drew gave a shrug and winked at her. “Okay, okay, since you have reinforcements I guess I’ll go first. I was just going to help you get it over with quickly, that’s all.” He then turned and ran a few steps before diving off the dock into the water. The resulting shout when he surfaced told her she was right about the temperature of the lake.

Drew tossed the hair out of his eyes and treaded water. “You two going to stand there and cuddle all afternoon or are you coming in?”

It was true, Rob hadn't let her go, still holding her pressed against his front. Maybe it was her traitorous imagination, but she could swear she felt an impressive bulge where her backside nestled against his groin.

To her relief, he loosened his arm and a laugh stirred her hair. Two seconds later he stepped past her to cut the water with a clean dive.

Why the hell am I trembling, she demanded in silent furious self-reproach. It had been just casual contact, and certainly Drew had thought nothing of it.

Of course not. He trusted her. He trusted Rob.

But she had felt the clear tension in the tensile strength of the arm wrapped around her waist and could swear the moment before Rob let her go and jumped in the water, his mouth had grazed her temple in a feather brush caress.

There was no way she was going to survive another six days.

Chapter Four

The images flickered across the screen and thankfully the credits began to roll. He and Drew had lost the toss of the coin and instead of the action adventure flick they'd opted for, Lauren had chosen a romantic comedy that was definitely geared toward a female audience.

Not that it mattered to him, Rob thought, so aware of her it was like a physical touch. He'd watch cartoons if she wanted.

Drew snorted and pressed a button on the remote, shutting off the television. The small media room was just off the main part of the house, comfortably furnished with a leather sectional and a couple low glass coffee tables, the sole focus a vast, expensive entertainment center with a massive theater system. The three of them were seated the couch, and Lauren, in a thin tank top and light shorts, looked enticingly pretty with her slender legs curled under her, an after dinner glass of wine in her hand.

Arched brows lifted as she gave Drew a mock glare. "What was that sound for?"

"Sorry, babe, but these chick movies all end the same."

"Chick movies? Better watch yourself, Drew, you sound like a misogynist with a comment like that. Why was it a chick flick? Because there weren't a bunch of bad guys with guns being foiled by a bunch of good guys with guns?"

Drew looked at him. "Did you hear that? Misogynist? Back me up, Hanson. Don't these movies all end with the same sappy kiss? That one wasn't even a good kiss." He gestured at the now blank screen with the remote.

Rob grinned and shrugged. "From a male perspective, I have to admit it looked like a substandard kiss to me. She probably yawned afterwards."

"I thought it was romantic." Lauren took a sip of wine and then made a gurgle of protest as Drew plucked the glass from her hand and set it on the table. "Hey."

He turned toward her and gave her a slow smile. "I'll be more than happy to show you how it should be done."

She laughed. "Really, Drew, that isn't necessary at the moment."

He ignored the protest, his hand lifting to brush her hair back from her shoulder in a familiar gesture. One finger traced the line of her collarbone and he looked into her eyes. "You see, what we just saw was not an I-want-to-fuck-you kiss."

"Drew." There was outraged protest in her voice. "That is the least romantic word in the world, by the way."

"Fuck? Probably. But it *can* be sexy." His gaze dropped her mouth.

"I'm not going to comment."

"Well, shouldn't it have been?"

"What?"

"An I-want-to-fuck-you kiss. The director left us at the bedroom door. If so, the way it was done was all wrong."

"Oh, you're an expert, is that it?" Lauren's tone was teasing, but her lush lashes lowered a fraction as Drew leaned in, pinning her to the back of the couch with his body as his mouth descended to capture hers.

Rob didn't move, just watching. His friend kissed her with slow deliberation, angling his head, his hands moving slowly. At first she stiffened, probably in objection to someone right next to them, and then the gradual relaxation was apparent as she began to respond. It was a very intimate kiss, and Rob was surprised at himself to find the sight was actually arousing rather than sparking the jealous reaction a man might usually feel to see the woman he wants in the arms of

another man. Drew loved her, he knew that, and it was evident in the light movement of his fingers across her upper arms, and the way he melded their mouths together.

Lauren sounded a little breathless when they broke apart, her breasts lifting quickly under the material of her thin shirt. She was also blushing.

With a smug smile, Drew asked, “Well?”

In answer she gave an exaggerated shrug, her cheeks a vivid pink. “That was okay, I suppose, but—”

“Okay?” Drew caught her shoulders to turn her to face away from him, toward where Rob sat. “That’s a challenge if I ever heard one, Hanson. Let’s see how you do.”

For a moment their gazes locked over the top of her head.

This is it.

Lauren’s eyes widened and her lips parted in alarm as she stared at him, obviously off balance. “I...I don’t think we need to take this too far here.”

“I don’t get an opportunity at the best kiss title?” Rob felt his heart begin a slow pound, knowing he had this chance—and this chance only maybe—to convince her to at least consider the idea of two lovers. Drew had more than done his part and the ball was definitely in his court.

She didn’t answer and he guessed from the expression on her face she realized Drew had essentially just given them permission to do what he hoped like hell she wanted to do as much as he did.

He didn’t wait for her to think about it. Instead he slid closer, his gaze riveted on the tempting curve of her lips, his hands closing over her slim waist as he lowered his head. With the first touch of his lips she gave a betraying tremble. Then her mouth parted for the brush of his tongue.

Heaven.

She tasted like wine and warm woman, and he felt the reaction in his cock, which was already at half mast just from watching them. His

erection surged as he tugged her closer, the roundness of her hip pressing his thigh, his exploration of her mouth gentle but urgent. Lauren's hands came up to clasp his upper arms and he noted the lack of resistance with a surge of triumph.

It was definitely an I-want-to-fuck-you kiss as he teased and tasted. It might have even qualified for an I-want-to-make-wild, passionate-love-to-you-all-night-long kiss. He broke away, captured her mouth again, and she made a small sound that he easily interpreted as pleasure, because it was clear she was kissing him right back with encouraging enthusiasm.

Finally he lifted his head and stared into her eyes. He saw her consternation over what had just happened, and she seemed at a loss for words and more than a little shaken. In a not quite steady voice, Rob asked, "Well, how'd I do?"

* * * *

What just happened?

Lauren felt surreal, as if maybe she was having some sort of bizarre dream, because she really could not believe her boyfriend—the one she was sure was truly serious about their relationship—had just not only let her kiss another man, but suggested it himself.

Definitely some sort of female wet dream.

Rob gazed at her, his hands still at her waist, his vivid hazel eyes both direct and questioning. A charming, tentative smile twitched at the corner of his lips.

Oh yeah, he'd asked her a question. He wanted to know about the kiss.

"Fine," she managed to say.

Fine? Am I crazy? It was fantastic.

Behind her, Drew leaned over and lifted her hair, kissing the sensitive skin of the nape of her neck. An involuntary shudder rippled

through her. He murmured, “I get an okay and he gets a fine? Come on, babe, admit we both turned you on. You felt into with me, and just looked into it with him.”

Considering she could hardly put together a coherent thought, processing that request was nearly impossible. He *knew* Rob had that effect on her? That they both did? Now what did she do?

“I...er...well, maybe,” she managed to stammer out like an idiot. They both were over six feet, outweighed her by a good seventy pounds each at least, and she was currently sandwiched between them. She could feel Drew’s lips feather down her neck and the firm hold of Rob’s long-fingered hands. “What are you doing?”

Drew’s hand slid under the hem of her shirt and his fingers stroked her bare stomach. “Whatever you feel like doing.”

Things were not getting less confusing, especially when Rob started to kiss her again, his tongue brushing into her mouth even as Drew inched her shirt higher. A strangled sound escaped her throat and she wasn’t even certain it was a protest.

God, why did they both have to smell so good, like spicy male, and the combined sensation of Rob’s persuasive kiss and Drew’s skilled hands made her feel the reaction deep in the pit of her stomach and lower. Her pussy moistened in a rush her body understood even if her mind still struggled with the reality of what was happening.

“Lift your arms.” Warm breath ticked her ear. “I want this shirt off you.”

In front of Rob?

Oh yeah, definitely in front of Rob who sat back and helped tug the garment up, as, for whatever unfathomable reason, she didn’t object. Drew unfastened her bra with a deft flick of his fingers, and it slid off her shoulders, baring her breasts. She was barely aware he tossed it carelessly halfway across the room.

Okay, now she was half-naked with two men staring at her.

No, not just any two men, Rob and Drew.

“Damn, you are so beautiful, Lauren,” Rob told her in a husky tone, his gaze fastened on where her nipples were already tight and erect.

“I agree one hundred percent.” Still behind her, Drew reached around and cupped a breast in one hand and gently squeezed. She gasped when Rob did the same thing to the other one. Long fingers stroked and fondled, and her body reacted with almost dizzying speed and even more so when Rob leaned forward to lick an upright crest with a warm slow swirl of his tongue.

Is this really happening?

“That’s hot,” Drew murmured in her ear, kissing the sensitive spot beneath it. “I can tell you like what he’s doing to you and it’s way fucking hot.”

She wanted to deny it, but it felt better than good when Rob began to suckle, exerting just the right amount of pressure on her nipple while Drew rolled the other one lightly between his fingers, and instead she gave a small telling shudder of pleasure.

A part of her—the old-fashioned girl—was shocked to her very prim core at both Drew’s comment and her own lack of protest. Another part, one she didn’t know existed until this moment, was aroused by the idea of both of them touching her.

Rob freed her nipple, the peak jewel hard now, and trailed his mouth down her ribcage, pausing to tease her bellybutton before nuzzling just above the top of her shorts. He unfastened the button and slid the zipper down, then glanced up and gave her a very wicked smile. “Mind if I take these off?”

There wasn’t much question he was giving her a choice, a clear chance to back out if she felt she couldn’t handle what they wanted. Drew said nothing, still lightly holding her against him.

Was she really going to do this?

Maybe if she wasn’t well-aware of what he was going to do when he got her shorts off she would think about it more. Or was it that

intense, beautiful kiss—the one each of them gave her after the movie—that told her this wasn't just casual for them.

“No, I don't mind.” It came out as little more than a whisper and she immediately felt Drew edge backwards, so she settled on the couch on her back just as Rob eased her shorts and panties down her hips and the length of her legs. Warm hands ran up from knee to inner thigh and urged her legs apart.

Rob's dark head settled between her open legs and she felt cool air wash over sensitive, slick tissue as he parted her labia and exposed her clit. The silk of his hair brushed the skin of her inner thighs and she moaned even before he flicked his tongue with delicate precision in just the right spot. At the same time, Drew began to play with her already taut breasts, the dual stimulation making her arch as pulses of pleasure shot straight to her womb.

The wayward response of her body shut down her brain, her entire focus the intense rapture of a warm mouth on her sex and skillful hands at her breasts.

She had never climaxed so fast in her life. It took her by surprise, rushing in like a runaway train, crashing through her body, making her give a small scream. Her hands flew to sink into Rob's hair as he kept her there through each erotic spasm, her pussy contracting as he continued to stimulate her clit until she moaned for him to stop and tried to twist away.

Limp and struggling to regain her breath, she lay sprawled on the couch in stunned disbelief at both the force of her reaction, and the fact that she was stark naked and the two of them were still fully dressed. She probably should be embarrassed, but in the aftermath of such a fantastic orgasm, she really couldn't summon the strength.

Drew bent down, scooped her into his arms, and said succinctly, “Bedroom.”

“Good idea,” Rob agreed and followed them out of the room.

* * * *

Sharing a lover was hardly the same thing as sharing a college dorm room or playing on the same basketball team, not to mention the childhood secrets and even talking about girls, but Drew wasn't jealous, which was a relief. As much as he thought he could deal with the idea that Lauren could enjoy having another man make love to her, he hadn't been completely convinced until he'd watched Rob kiss her. He hadn't gotten pissed off or possessive, he'd gotten hard instead, and the arousal surprised him a little. The chemistry was definitely there, and since he loved them both in very different ways, he was more convinced than ever that maybe this was the best solution.

When his friend had touched her beautiful tits, he'd loved the unguarded enjoyment on her face, and it was even better when she'd come, her breasts in his hands, Rob's mouth buried in her delicious pussy. How this was all going to work in the long run he wasn't sure, but he knew at the moment he was about as hard as he'd ever been in his life.

The enormous bed was made, courtesy of Lauren being a neat freak, and he nodded at Rob to pull down the comforter before he settled her on the cool sheets. She seemed to be recovering a little, and looked more than luscious with her tumbled glossy hair and a pink orgasmic flush to her smooth skin. Between her thighs, her neatly trimmed snatch glistened with evidence of her sexual excitement and her breasts were still high and taut in arousal. Long lashed dark blue eyes looked at him and he saw there an uncertainty about his reaction to her abandoned climax.

What he did *not* want was for her to feel ashamed or guilty about anything.

He stripped off his shirt and saw Rob was doing the same thing, both of them shedding clothing at a record pace. Drew climbed into bed first, his hunger to touch her a palpable thing as he drew her

close. He murmured against her mouth, “You are so sexy, babe. I’d bet everything I have Rob agrees with me.”

“You’d win.” The mattress gave as Rob settled on the opposite side of her, his erection prominent and high. He didn’t touch her but just watched the two of them through heavy-lidded eyes, rolled up on one elbow.

Drew had never imagined it would turn him on to not only watch, but be watched. Making love should be a private thing in his opinion, but somehow it still felt that way, even with Rob right there. Something flickered in Lauren’s eyes, and he wondered if she wasn’t thinking along the same lines. Her hands smoothed his back and she lifted her mouth for another kiss. He obliged, his tongue spearing in to tangle with hers, need surging through his body.

He suppressed a groan and wedged her legs apart. That she was wet and receptive wasn’t exactly a news bulletin because he’d been more than there for her shattering climax on the couch. The slide of his stiff cock into her pussy made her eyes close and she gave a very erotic sigh. “Yes.”

“Oh, babe.” He thrust into her, relishing the clench of her vaginal muscles. “You are so fucking tight.”

In response, she ran her hands down his back and exhaled against his neck, the warmth of her breath fanning his already out of control need. They moved together in sync and the exquisite sensation of it made him groan with each hard stroke into her body and lift of her hips to take him.

Whether it was because she was sensitized by her recent release or just excited as hell by the idea of both of them making love to her, she started to come with gratifying swiftness. Thank God, because he was dying, drowning in the need to ejaculate. The minute he felt the first betraying ripple of her inner muscles he lost it altogether. A fine sheen of sweat broke out over his whole body as he groaned and emptied into her with such force he felt the eruption all the way to his toes.

Panting, damp, and almost weak, he shifted to his side and waited a minute until he could catch his breath before he slid his cock free.

Rob waited until Lauren's eyes fluttered open before he reached over and slipped his hand over the still quivering muscles of her taut stomach. He leaned closer and said in a low voice, "That looked like fun."

She looked at him through the veil of her long lashes, and Drew wondered how on earth any woman could look so gorgeous, so inherently sexual.

Rob shifted so his erect cock pressed her hip and merely stroked her bare shoulder as he gazed into her eyes. She turned to face him and ran her hand over the plane of his chest as if in exploration, her slender fingers touching him lightly, skimming his hip, and then running the length of his penis from testicles to tip. Rob froze at that light touch and made a low sound from deep in his chest.

A rumble of approval no doubt, Drew guessed, for what else could it be with a beautiful woman fondling your rock hard dick?

"Jesus, Lauren, I'm pretty on the edge here." He caught her wrist, brought her hand up to his waist and slid on top of her to kiss her hard, an open-mouthed, sizzling kiss; chest to bare soft breasts, his hands tangled in her silky hair.

Like with that first kiss, Drew couldn't believe how riveting it was to watch them together and even more so when she spread her legs in an invitation no healthy, aroused male ever misinterpreted. Rob didn't miss it, that was for sure, and as he entered her, he whispered in her ear, "I wanted this from the moment I first saw you, Lauren, and God it's so incredible, better than I imagined...Jesus."

It was incredible to the extent it was sexy as hell to see them both so into it, moving naturally in the rhythm of sexual intercourse. The wet sounds of his thrusts into her pussy, mingled with Lauren's open moans of enjoyment, made Drew's now only semi-erect cock respond despite his recent release. She was as gorgeous as ever as she gave into her third orgasm of the evening, her thighs clamping around

Rob's surging hips as he went rigid and his tall body shuddered in response. His groan echoed with her telling scream.

As they lay still tangled together in post-coital relaxation, Drew slid out of bed and went into the luxurious bathroom. He ran a wash cloth under warm water, rung it out, and then went back to the bed. Rob had rolled off her and lay on his back, his chest still lifting rapidly. Lauren looked very small and delicate in comparison next to him, her slender body dwarfed by the big bed, right in the middle.

Where she apparently belonged.

In the middle. Between them, but not dividing, instead maybe uniting.

Drew sat down and reached over to gently wipe the residue from her damp thighs. "Do you want to talk now, or in the morning?"

"I don't know if I'm capable of coherent speech right now." To his relief, her smile didn't reflect regret, even if it was a little tremulous. "But I agree we should."

"That's okay. I want to go first anyway." He frowned and tossed the washcloth on top of his discarded clothes, wondering how to explain that he encouraged what had just happened for a damn good reason. "I'm crazy in love with you, Lauren, you know that."

She nodded, her eyes looking enormous in the understated illumination. "I feel the same way, Drew."

"Just about me?" He lifted a hand palm forward before she could answer and gave her a reassuring smile. "Don't answer that yet. Look, the trouble is, I was beginning to get the impression I wasn't the only one feeling that way about you. Rob and I haven't ever kept secrets from each other that I know of, and this particular one was making us all feel awkward as shit. You were jumpy and quiet when he was around, and he wasn't any better. As someone who isn't blind, deaf and dumb, I could sense there was an attraction. I think I can safely say I was right."

Rob propped himself up on the pillows and ran a hand through his already tousled hair. "I tried to ignore it," he said in a quiet even voice. "I wouldn't come between you two for anything."

"I know what you mean about ignoring it." She gave a shaky sigh and tugged the sheet up to cover her nakedness, which was a damned shame in Drew's opinion. "I've been a little bit uncomfortable around you since practically the day we met."

Rob gazed at her. "But not tonight."

"I...I..." she trailed off and her cheeks looked flushed as she bit her lower lip. "No, not tonight. I don't suppose I can deny that." She looked at Drew. "I'm sorry."

"Why the hell should you be sorry?" He reached over and touched her cheek. "It was my idea, babe. If both Rob and I have the same feelings for you and you have them for us, well, it seems like a simple equation to me. We might need to lay a few ground rules to make sure we're all on the same page, but we're intelligent and reasonable adults."

Lauren's hand tightened on the sheet she clutched to her breasts. "Are you seriously suggesting we do this all the time?"

"I want to be with you. This thing between you and Rob was starting to cause a real problem for us."

Rob reached over and clasped her free hand, twining his fingers with hers. "I want to be with you, too, Lauren. Now more than ever."

She looked back and forth from each of them and then shook her head, her glossy hair moving against her shoulders. "I don't believe this. I'm...I'm not going to lie...I'm pretty confused about how to react."

"You should stop analyzing it too much." Drew gave her a glimmering smile. "Seems to me the sex was great and we have this week to see if we can deal with the dynamics of how it will work out."

"It sounds logical to me." Rob backed him up, still holding her hand and giving it a light squeeze. "I was getting past miserable and

into severe frustration, and I don't mean just sexual, but there was that, too, believe me."

"Oh God, what would my mother say?" Lauren gave a small moan, looking deliciously chagrined.

"Don't tell her," Drew suggested and reached over to switch off the bedside light.

Chapter Five

Dr. Benjamin Heaton set aside his tepid cup of coffee and looked at the sheriff's deputy. "I hope you realize how serious this is. My wife has apparently been missing for two days. At first, I just thought I was having trouble getting a hold of her, but when I became truly alarmed, I drove down from Louisville."

The young man gave him a brisk nod. "We take every report seriously, sir."

"I hope so." He'd finished the paperwork and was at a loss as to what came next. "What do I do now?"

"Please contact us if you get any new information. We'll be out to look at her car and talk to the neighbors, see if they saw anything."

Well, that sounded reasonable, but he did have to wonder how skilled any police officer in this quiet little corner of Tennessee would be. It was extremely rural and isolated and if he had to guess, the local law enforcement departments didn't regularly deal with possible foul play.

The question was, if Regina had arrived at the cabin—which the presence of her car indicated she had—where could she be? On foot it was twenty miles to the nearest town. Obviously that was out of the question.

Any missing person was difficult to trace. Out here, it might be impossible.

"There aren't really any neighbors. It's on Woods Lake, as you can see from the address. It's private and pretty inaccessible." He pointed it all out with as much detachment as possible.

"We'll do our best, sir."

Benjamin got to his feet and left the small, utilitarian government building, stepping out to ninety degree heat and equal humidity. He slid into his BMW and flipped on the air after starting it, wondering if it was in severe bad taste to go right from the police station to the liquor store, but desperately wanting a drink. Almost immediately his cell phone rang and he saw his mother-in-law's number with a twinge of dismay. The woman was in full panic mode and it wasn't helping to soothe his nerves one bit.

With reluctance he answered. "Hello, Margaret."

"Ben, where are you?"

"Just outside the police station in Heltonville. I've reported her missing, I'm afraid."

"Oh God." There was a small sob on the other end of the call.

"You haven't heard anything, have you?" He squinted in his side mirror and pulled onto the quiet main street.

"Don't you think I'd have called?"

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry. I'm not exactly rational right now. This has me in a tailspin. Can you blame me?" It came out too curt, and he calmed himself down with effort. She was worried and he knew that.

"I know, I know, we're all just frantic here." His wife's mother sounded both contrite and on the edge of tears.

Not what he needed. He said with as much composure as possible, "Of course you are. And when I know anything I'll call immediately. Either way, we'll talk tomorrow. Just pray in the meantime she calls with whatever explanation there can be for her absence."

Even as he pressed the button to end the call, he knew they both were aware there really couldn't be one other than the obvious reason. Regina wouldn't ever leave him without making a giant production out of it. They'd had their troubles—most married couples did now and again—and every single time she'd made sure everyone knew about it.

She wouldn't just vanish.

It was pretty evident something bad had happened.

* * * *

Lauren opened her eyes, shut them tight, and opened them again. She was alone, sunlight glowing against the lowered blinds in the huge bedroom, and if it wasn't for the fact the bed was a disaster of rumpled sheets and she was naked and still a bit sticky, she might have passed off the night before as some very naughty erotic dream.

A pretty wonderful, incredibly sexy dream.

For someone who had drank only a couple of glasses of wine, she felt like it was the morning after a binge, not because she felt hung over, but because taking inventory of what she'd done the night before was a little difficult.

Had she really had sex with *both* Drew and Rob?

Actually, if she were honest, the question was, had she really had *fantastic* sex with both Drew and Rob. They had all slept together in the enormous bed, for she'd rolled away from Drew in the middle of the night and found Rob's rangy body on the other side of her, his dark lashes resting on those wonderful cheekbones as his broad chest lifted in a steady rhythm.

It should have felt all wrong.

Somehow it had felt right instead.

Two men.

Oh God.

Never in one million years did she imagine she would do such a thing. Never in two million years did she imagine Drew would encourage it. Rob wasn't someone she pictured in such an unconventional situation either. Maybe they'd all just gone insane. Perhaps the well was tainted...yeah, that was it. They all ingested some obscure poison...

No, she couldn't blame the drinking water, Lauren acknowledged wryly, her emotions chaotic as tried to be honest with herself. She'd

wanted them both. Always she'd thought of herself as a nice, conservative girl. Certainly she'd stayed a virgin longer than any of her friends, and she did not sleep around, Drew being only her second lover, if the first one even qualified for that term. It was quite a leap from conventional, almost uptight, Midwestern small town moral standards to multiple partner sex.

However, though she maybe *should* feel differently about it, she found even in the morning-after disbelief, that she didn't have regrets. Both Drew and Rob had made love to her. Because the sex had been spectacular didn't detract from how it had also been tender and as much about feelings as physical desire.

Now what?

Obviously they had talked to each other about it beforehand and that seemed an odd concept. Drew had said it was his idea. Whatever happened next, things would never be the same, and somehow the three of them were going to have to work this through.

A traitorous part of her was now glad they had the rest of the week alone together.

Swinging her legs over the side of the bed, Lauren headed for the shower. A half hour later, she knew she couldn't put it off any longer and headed downstairs.

Just how awkward was this going to be?

Both of them were in the kitchen. She could smell bacon frying and Drew said something, making Rob laugh. As she reached the bottom of the staircase and had a clear view, she saw they were moving efficiently around as they prepared breakfast, and the table was set for three.

Table for three. Well, that was symbolic. If there was going to be awkwardness, it wasn't between the two of them, and she found it amazing. Most men were possessive, and up until now, Drew had been no exception. He had been more than unhappy when he'd found out one of the partners in the insurance firm she worked for repeatedly hit on her. When they were in public, he tended to make

sure he touched her in some way, waist, hand, arm, anything to show they were together, whether it was conscious or not.

It wasn't that she wanted him to be jealous, but this was a little difficult to absorb.

She cleared her throat. "Good morning."

They both glanced up and smiled. Drew with his charismatic charm, and Rob with that almost boyish curve of his lips that was so indicative of his more reserved nature. Drew said, "Morning, babe. I hope you're both hungry and not too picky. It's hard to ruin bacon and toast, but I can't vouch for Rob's scrambled eggs. He's a lousy cook."

"Are you kidding me? He burned the first batch of toast, so don't let him fool you. Check the trash." Rob turned back to the stove and neatly scooped out the eggs like a typical male, straight onto the plates, no serving dish provided. "Let's sit down before it gets cold. Your timing is perfect, Lauren. Do you want coffee?"

The moment slid past—for them anyway—without any embarrassment or hesitation, their usual banter in place without an apparent hiccup. They seemed perfectly at ease with each other and her arrival.

That was good, wasn't it?

She murmured, "Yes, please."

"I'll get it." Drew grabbed a mug out of the cupboard, filled it, and handed her the sugar bowl along with the cup.

It would have been fine, except she blushed as she accepted the offering. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." He turned back to help Rob by putting bacon on the plates.

It was Rob who deposited her plate with a flourish and they all sat down. "You're spoiling me," she said, looking at her full plate, which actually did smell delicious.

"Just wait." Drew scooped jam on a piece of toast and gave her that little sexy grin that was his alone.

The implication made her face flush warmer, but it also sent a small quiver of anticipation through her.

“Rob and I were thinking we might all want to go on a picnic later. On the other side of the lake there is a fantastic cove, sheltered and private with a small beach. We thought maybe we’d go there and hang out for a while.”

“It’s supposed to be a gorgeous day.” Rob looked at her, his hazel eyes reflecting memory of the night before. “A beautiful afternoon and a beautiful woman. Sounds good to me.”

She was the lucky one, having two wildly attractive men making her breakfast, planning romantic outings, and then later...

Later. Just the thought of it made the twist of excitement curl tighter in the pit of her stomach and her nipples tightened under her light blouse. The inner slut in charge, she told herself with some mortification. The one she didn’t know existed but liked the idea of a repeat performance of the night before.

Was it possible somehow she’d fallen in love with two men? She hadn’t even realized it was happening with Rob. The attraction had been very real and there from the beginning, but part of the reason she’d been so bothered about his presence was the way her feelings had grown. He was intelligent, considerate, steady, and the physical side of what she felt was only part of it.

“Lauren? The eggs aren’t that bad, I promise.”

She realized she was just sitting there staring at Rob, her fork still sitting by the side of her plate. In a quiet voice, she admitted, “I am still...in shock a little, I think. What I did last night...what *we* did last night...”

Her voice trailed off. She wasn’t sure what to say.

“I know.” His smile was a little rueful. “Believe me, *I know*. I think I’m a traditional kind of guy. I live by rules and this relationship is breaking all of them.”

Relationship? Was that what she wanted? A relationship with *one* man was hard enough, but two? It was gratifying and a relief to know

he didn't just think she was an easy lay or something—because she wasn't—but wrapping her mind around a romance involving one woman and two men was a bit staggering.

“As the free spirit of the group, I think I see things a bit differently.” Drew broke a piece of bacon in half in his long fingers, his expression neutral. “You’re an actuary, Lauren, and Rob is a computer engineer. You think in terms of order. Finding neat slots for everything; going to work from nine to five. That’s all fine and good, but life doesn’t necessarily work that way. Slots exist, but if you don’t fit, don’t sweat it.”

Free spirit definitely described Drew, who didn’t mind flying off to China, spending three weeks exploring the countryside, eating exotic native dishes while he waited for the boring executives to conclude their business and need transportation home. Of course, that was part of the problem, too, since he wasn’t around very much. Most of the time, his job took him out of the country.

“How *does* it work?” Lauren had to ask the question, her feelings completely in flux.

“We have this time to find out, right? We’re alone, it’s private here, and no one cares what we do. Why not forget the rules for now and go with what feels right instead?”

As always, his straightforward approach tended to be on the simple side. She doubted it would be that easy, but maybe he was right, maybe she shouldn’t overanalyze the whole thing for the next few days.

Maybe she should just...enjoy.

The sound of a car pulling up outside broke into the discussion, making all three of them glance at each other. Rob murmured, “So much for being alone. Who the hell can that be?”

* * * *

The sheriff's deputy licked the tip of his pen, which was a mannerism Rob could never understand. Surely ink tasted like shit. The young man glanced at Lauren. "When was this, ma'am?"

She frowned, looking impossibly pretty in a silk sleeveless top and tan shorts, her hair loose around her slender shoulders. "Yesterday. In the late morning."

"You're sure he took a boat from the property next door?"

"I'm sure."

"Can you describe this man?" The deputy jotted something down.

There was no hesitation. "Yes. Under thirty, blond but with very short hair, prominent nose. If I saw a picture I would recognize him, I think, but the thing I most noticed is he wore a shirt and tie, which seemed really seemed inappropriate for going out in a boat."

Rob looked at Drew and they both seemed to register the same reaction. He said slowly, "Did you say you're looking for a missing woman?"

"Yes, sir." Short and freckled, his face ingenuous but his eyes holding a shrewd intelligence, the officer nodded. "Regina Heaton hasn't been seen for two days, but her car has been found."

"We heard what could have been a scream night before last." Drew straightened away from where he leaned against the wall by the front row of windows. "We thought it might be a bird and didn't hear it again, so we didn't think much about it."

"What time?"

"Just after nine." Rob remembered clearly enough because Lauren had abandoned her dinner and gone up to bed. He'd known then it was going to be a very long week, but that was before everything had changed.

Before they'd made love the night before, which was indisputably the best sex of his life. He didn't know if it was because it felt forbidden with Drew right there, because he knew she wanted it—like he did—even though they shouldn't, or because he might be in love for the first time in his life.

This was not going to be as simple as Drew thought it would be, and Rob knew Lauren felt that way, too. Maybe Drew was right, they thought differently, but then again, their lives were not a series of take-offs and landings in exotic places.

“...if we need more information, we’ll be in touch.” The deputy stood, flipped the notebook shut, and nodded. “We appreciate the help. If you think of anything else, let us know, please.” He inched a card out of his pocket and handed it to Lauren.

She accepted it. “Okay.”

The sound of the patrol car starting as he left seemed to stir them all into activity. Lauren got up and said something about them cooking and how she should clean up. Drew watched her, his expression thoughtful as she walked to the kitchen. He glanced at Rob. “You go help her. I’m going to get our fishing gear together and put it all in the boat. I’ll just wait down there. If you two need a chance to talk, this might be a good time.”

They probably did need to talk one on one about the new slant to their relationship; the one that had drastically changed for all three of them. “She seems pretty quiet.”

“She liked it. It’s a problem for her.” Drew’s succinct assessment was made with a hint of humor. “Just like she couldn’t figure out why she was attracted to you in the first place, this isn’t easy to rationalize in her overly analytical brain. Which is why I am going to let *you* talk to her about it. For my part, I wasn’t jealous. I thought it was fun to see her enjoying herself with you. It was a turn on, in fact. I’ve come to terms with this. It’s you two who need to work on it.”

Rob gave his friend a rueful smile. “Yeah, well, you like to oversimplify things, Fletcher.” The truth was, it had been arousing for him, too, to watch.

Go figure.

“Nope, I just don’t sit around thinking about details all the time. At any rate, I’m heading down to the boat. Come along once you’ve talked to Lauren. Take your time.”

For someone who didn't do a lot of analyzing, Drew had a pretty good grasp on things usually. Rob walked back to the kitchen and saw Lauren running water into the sink, the soapy egg pan in her hands. He said, "I can do that."

"No trouble. Breakfast was great." She didn't look up but rinsed it and set it aside. "That's pretty frightening about the missing woman. I hope they find her soon. It's so peaceful here."

"Maybe she'll turn up safe and sound. That happens more often than the other way around."

"What about the scream?"

"I'm not convinced it was one. If Drew and I really thought that, we'd have gone out there and checked it out, you know that. It was pretty faint and I'd still guess it was a bird."

"I hope so." She started to wipe the counter and kept her face averted.

How the fuck was he supposed to do this? He was as much out of his depth as she was. Honesty seemed best, but a blunt approach was more Drew's forte. He stood there and studied her lovely profile, the set of her slim shoulders, the sweep of her shining chestnut hair and was...moved.

He was lucky. And unlucky because it was going to be complex. And about one thousand things in between.

Did this mean he'd only have half of her? No, he didn't think so. All of her for both of them? Well, in the bedroom anyway, if last night was an indication, but he wanted more than a lover. Sex he could get if he wanted it.

Suddenly, he knew what to say. "This is going to seem like the most tired line ever, Lauren, but I have never felt this way before. It is the only reason last night happened for me."

She froze. After a moment, she turned and gave him a level look. "I do love Drew. But I can't stop thinking about you either and it has been driving me crazy."

“I think of Drew as a brother, if not closer. How do you think I felt when I realized I wanted you more than anything?”

“Like you were a little bit out of your mind?” There was just the hint of a wobble in her voice.

He nodded.

“We’re in the same place then, I guess.”

“Pretty close.” He smiled at her, the luminous uncertain look in her blue eyes really getting to him. “Let’s not misunderstand each other, okay? This isn’t casual.”

He should have said it wasn’t casual for him. But the way he phrased the sentence was exactly right, he realized. It wasn’t casual. Period. Lauren wasn’t built that way. If she slept with him, she had definite feelings about him.

It seemed entirely natural to step forward and take her in his arms. The sponge slipped from her hand and hit the floor as she slid into him like silk. When she lifted her mouth he took it, the resulting kiss a mixture of hunger and discovery. Her lips were soft and warm, and he could feel the pliant weight of her breasts against his chest through the thin cloth of her blouse and his tee-shirt, the sensation evoking a clear memory of how it felt to be inside her.

Jesus, he thought as he finally pulled back and took a deep breath. No, this wasn’t causal *at all*. Lust had taken on a whole new meaning since he’d met her, and couple that with all the other complicated emotions he’d never had before, it was no wonder he was completely off-balance.

“Lauren.” He managed to sound like a teenager, his voice breaking. He tried again, fighting an embarrassed, self-deprecating laugh. “Lauren, we’re going to figure this all out.”

She stepped back as if she also needed to put a little space between them. “I hope so, because I don’t want this to ruin what I have with Drew, and I absolutely don’t want it to destroy a friendship you two have had for over twenty years. I know what that would do to

both of you and if I was in any way the cause, I'd feel guilty probably only for the rest of my life."

Rob wasn't sure how, but it was the truth when he said, "We seem okay with this. Maybe that's why. Drew and I know each other. It isn't a competition, either. As a matter of fact, we were getting pretty tense with each other over just the opposite, and last night took care of all that."

She brushed a tendril of silky hair back from her cheek and her gaze was direct. "When you invited us to come along with you and Karen, did you imagine this?"

There was no way he could blame her for being a bit suspicious. It was probably obvious he and Drew had discussed the possibility of both of them sleeping with her ahead of time. He shook his head in decisive denial. "No. First of all, if I had, I would never have invited Karen. Second, though I might have dreamed often enough about making love to you, I *never* imagined it would happen. If Drew hadn't caught on about how I felt, I would never have said a word or made a move. Yesterday he confronted me about it and said he thought maybe you were having the same problem."

"I was," she admitted on a small sigh after a moment. "I was not very enthusiastic over coming down here, to be honest. I figured it would be worse than ever if I had to be around you all week and it definitely started out that way. Now I don't know how to feel. I'm relieved, but I'm also...confused. My whole life I've thought things between men and women don't work this way."

"You aren't the only one." He bent over and retrieved the sponge to toss it in the sink. "But, when it comes down to it, Drew is right. What we do is no one's business but ours."

"That mindset might work for the rest of this week when we're all hidden away here, but real life is waiting out there."

"I know." He reached over and took her hand, interlocking their fingers. "We'll deal with it. Drew doesn't seem worried. Maybe we shouldn't be."

“Maybe.” She finally smiled and there was a teasing lilt in her voice. “I have a feeling most women would lie, cheat, maim, and kill to be in my position anyway. Tell me, if Karen had come along, what would you have done?”

He lifted his brows. “Would I have slept with her, you mean, when the entire time I was thinking about you? No. I was trying damned hard to not be honest with myself when I invited her in the first place, but when it comes down to it, I don’t believe in casual sex.”

Her face changed and slender fingers tightened on his. Indigo eyes held a soft light as she gazed at him. “That’s a pretty smooth line, Mr. Hanson. Drew is very straightforward. I take it you’re going to be the romantic one.”

Rob grinned. “I try.”

Chapter Six

Ben gave the sheriff a blank look that probably reflected his shock over the information. “I wasn’t aware there was anyone around. The cabin next door is rarely used. You say they heard a scream? Good God, what does that mean?”

“Don’t panic and assume the worst, Dr. Heaton. I said the two young guys there thought they *might* have heard one. As far as the timing goes, it could coincide with your wife’s arrival.” The sheriff was a big man with a gut, and a small goatee he stroked at intervals. “You say the house was locked when you got here?”

Glancing around at the expensive interior, decorated in what Regina thought was a country style but reflected more a downtown New York City notion of rustic, Ben nodded. “Yes. Nothing was disturbed. It’s like she never came inside. Her car keys were still in the ignition, but we frequently do that, anyway, up here. This place is very private.”

“It’s a nice area, sir, I agree.” Sheriff Barker eyed the coffee table in the den as if dubious over the elaborate curved legs and distressed finish, all topped with a shining mirror surface and several pieces of delicate blown glass sculptures. “Her suitcase was in the trunk?”

“Yes.”

“Can I ask why you looked?”

A flicker of disquiet stirred. “What kind of a question is that? I can’t get a hold of my wife. I drive almost five hours because I was in a panic and didn’t know what else to do except come down here to check on her, and when I saw her car but couldn’t find her, of course I searched it.”

“Don’t get defensive, sir. I was just curious.”

The bland expression on the man’s face irritated him. Ben clasped his hands together and leaned forward. “My sister-in-law called you, didn’t she?”

“We get leads from all sources, but in a disappearance like this, the family is usually the most helpful.”

In other words, yes. Helen was such a stone cold bitch.

He summoned a pleasant smile. The fact he despised Regina’s older sister wasn’t the sheriff’s problem, but he did need to make things clear. “I can imagine what she had to say about my marriage, but then again, she has never cared for me. For the record, yes, Regina and I have had a few troubles now and then. We’ve been married for fifteen years, so that shouldn’t stun anyone. It happens.”

“Troubles enough you might jump to the conclusion she took off with another man? Is that why you looked for her suitcase?”

Ben leaned back and reached for his cup of coffee. “If she was having an affair, I am unaware of it. Besides, why would she drive here to drop off her car? If she wanted to run off with someone—which I am skeptical would ever happen—why not just leave from home? I go to the university almost every single day. An elaborate ruse would not be needed.”

“Was having an affair?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You spoke in the past tense.” The sheriff merely lifted his bushy brows. “And, yes, her sister says she’s been unhappy.”

Past tense? Well, he supposed he had. He was coming to terms with her disappearance and past tense seemed to suit. Ben murmured, “Her sister is an unhappy person that wishes that fate on everyone else. There’s a difference.”

The sheriff’s mouth quirked. “I’ve got one of those relatives myself. Now, one more thing, Dr. Heaton. Can we take a look at your boathouse?”

“Of course.” Ben took a sip, found his coffee skimmed over, and set the cup aside in distaste. “I’ve looked there, but we can check it out if you want. It was ridiculous for me to expect Regina to be there when I arrived, but I suppose I was grasping at straws so I looked everywhere. I don’t know why she wanted this house since she never goes near the water.”

“All of the boats there?”

Ben gave him a thin smile. “I think I would have noticed a missing boat. Yes, they all are there. Regina wouldn’t go out in the boat anyway. I don’t believe she’s ever even started one.”

“Any idea how someone else would get the keys, much less the opener, for one of the bays so they could take it out?”

So, this was the real reason for the oblique questioning. A small chill rippled through him. He rested his hands on the arms of the chair. “Someone took out one of my boats?”

Barker checked his notebook. “We have a witness that says she saw it. He was a young man. Blond, crew cut, prominent nose, dressed up. Any ideas?”

He had an idea he might have a small heart attack at the implications of what this revelation meant. Screams in the dark, a strange man seen on his property...

“No. But, my wife’s purse is missing and she naturally had keys into the house. Though it doesn’t look to me as if anything has been disturbed, I suppose someone might have come in and taken the opener for the boathouse. The keys for the boats are in there. It’s convenient.”

“Maybe we’d better look at what you have and even do a fingerprint dusting on the opener. You can never tell what it might turn up.”

“Be my guest.” He felt a churning in the pit of his stomach and he wondered if he looked pale, because he sure felt sick.

This new information was like a blow to the gut.

He got stiffly to his feet. “I’ll show you where I keep what you want.”

* * * *

The setting sun threw spectacular red and gold streaks across the sky, like someone had dipped their fingers in paint and drifted them above the horizon. Drew stood over the grill, keeping a close eye on the pork chops, a beer in one hand and the tongs in the other. The brown sugar mustard glaze Lauren had concocted smelled fantastic, and she had mentioned something about pasta with pesto and fresh bread on the side. She not only liked to cook but was damned good at it and it was a definite bonus.

It had been a great day so far, the meal promised to be delicious, and he really couldn’t wait for afterwards either. They were all three thinking about it, he knew it. It had hung in the air like an electric charge all afternoon, even through the lazy picnic at the cove, the long swim afterwards, and now, as they all fixed dinner together in relaxed camaraderie. Rob was inside, ostensibly helping Lauren, but he seemed a lot more interested in leaning on the counter, drinking his beer, and just looking at her. The hunger he’d taken such care to try to hide for the past few months showed clearly in his face.

Drew knew exactly how he felt. One hundred percent. She was very much worth admiring, all long lightly tanned legs and chestnut hair, her natural beauty fresh and clean, like the bucolic setting of woods and water. He’d meant it when he proposed they just forget the grind waiting at the end of the week when they returned to Indiana. This was like living a fantasy and he was all for it.

A very sexy, intriguing fantasy.

“How are the chops coming?” Lauren opened the screen and gave him an inquiring look.

“Almost done.” He tested the center of one with his spatula. “It smells great.”

“Yeah, it does, doesn’t it? The pasta is ready when you are.”

“Babe, I’m always ready.” The best theatrical leer he could summon curved his mouth.

She raised her delicate brows and laughed. “I seem to have noticed that a time or two.”

They ate outside on the deck and between the beautiful sunset, the great food, and since he was with two of the people he cared for the most in the world, it was one of the best meals of his life. Lauren seemed to be relaxing a little into the new energy of their changed circumstances and as far as he was concerned, it beat the hell out of the growing tension of the past months. It had bothered him more than he realized, and seeing Lauren and Rob interact in a completely different way than their constant discomfort with each other was both interesting and a relief. He knew he was by far more liberal than either of them, but he had a feeling this unconventional arrangement might be the best thing that had happened to all three of them.

After they were done with the meal, they lingered, just talking and enjoying the perfect evening. The shadows thickened under the trees, the night breeze carrying a cool scent from the lake. When the mosquitoes got persistent despite the citronella candles Rob lit all over the place, they cleaned up the dishes while bickering over whether to watch another movie from the impressive collection in the media room or play cards, the byplay friendly and competitive.

“I vote for cards. I’m sure you’ll both insist it’s your turn to pick out a movie and I have a feeling I’ll end up watching some action-packed film with a muscle bound hero. By the way, who *can* fight off an improbable number of armed attackers with his bare hands and jump from an airplane and land on a speeding car unhurt?.” After that long speech Lauren gave them each a quelling look. “There’s way too much testosterone going on around here anyway.”

“Cards it is. But it’s only fair we get to choose the game.” Rob gave her an innocent smile.

Drew knew exactly what he was thinking and grinned. “Sounds good to me.”

“Uh-oh. That was way too easy.” Lauren put her hands on her slender hips and stared at them suspiciously.

“One nice friendly game of strip poker coming up. There has to be a deck of cards around here. I thought I saw one.” Rob went to one of the kitchen drawers and rummaged around, finding what they needed and holding it up. “Here we go.”

“I never agreed to play strip poker.” The objection was only half-hearted, softened by her laugh.

Drew balanced one hip against the counter and crossed his arms over his chest. “Macho movie, or strip poker? Last night we did what you wanted, babe.”

The indirect reference to what had happened on the couch first, and in the bedroom later, didn’t escape her. A slight flush rose to her cheeks. “It seems to me it worked both ways.”

“It worked all right,” Drew said in a soft voice. “I think we’re all in agreement on that point.”

“No argument here.” Rob went to the table off the kitchen and dropped into a chair as he opened the package and slid out the cards, shuffling them smoothly in his long fingers. “Shall we play?”

He didn’t just mean cards and they all knew it. Drew eased away from the counter and went to pull out a chair for her. “Any game that will get Lauren out of her clothes is good with me.”

“What makes you think you’re going to win?” She came over and sank down, sending him a challenging look.

“Let’s just say I’m damn hopeful. Deal, Hanson. I’m usually lucky as hell at cards, as you know.” Drew sat down opposite.

“I know you always claim it’s skill.” Rob flicked cards in front of each of them with deft precision. “Which is a crock as far as I can tell.”

“I’ll have both of you naked in no time.”

“In that case, I hope you win.” Rob gave Lauren an amused glance. “What are the rules or are we winging this?”

“The winner is the one who has on an item of clothing when the other two are sans apparel.” Drew picked up his cards and lifted his brows with exaggerated emphasis. “Uhm, nice start. I also say the winner gets to make a victory request of his choosing.”

Rob leaned back, the soft lighting playing across his fine features. “I take it this request is of a sexual nature?”

“It’s up to the winner, of course. I already have something in mind.”

Lauren shook her head. “You are so cocksure, Andrew Fletcher. It must be that swaggering pilot thing.”

“Damn, I love it when you say cock, babe.”

“I didn’t say...oh, you’re impossible sometimes.” The reproof in her voice was belied by her laugh afterwards.

“Part of my charm.” He gave her wink.

“I wasn’t aware you had any charm,” Rob said dryly. “Now, want any cards?”

“Nope. I’ll stick with this hand right here.”

Rob and Lauren looked at each other. She asked, “Is he bluffing?”

“Not usually,” Rob admitted. He glanced at his hand, and back at her. “Cards?”

“Two.” She set her discards on the table, pushing it toward him with her slim fingers.

The dealer also took two and promptly folded with a small groan. When Drew smugly set down his three tens, Lauren made a similar noise.

Rob took off a shoe. Lauren slipped off a sandal.

It was a nice beginning, Drew thought with an inner grin.

* * * *

The slip of lace hit the floor and Lauren sat back down in her chair, feeling the night breeze coming in through the French doors onto the deck brush her naked body. “Fine, I suppose I lose,” she grumbled. Two sandals, a blouse, a bra, shorts, and now her panties. Considering she was wearing more than either of her competitors at the beginning of the game, how come she was the first one nude?

Drew, in fact, still had on everything but his shoes, but Rob was down to his underwear. It was no lie about Drew’s luck because he seemed to get the most incredible cards, and neither she nor Rob had won more than two hands. If she hadn’t have known better, she’d have accused Drew of cheating.

The breeze came through again and she wanted to blame it for the hardened peaks of her nipples, but it would have been a lie. She was wet, too, and sincerely hoped when she stood up she didn’t leave a telltale damp spot on the chair. It didn’t help that instead of continuing the game they were both just staring at her, the open admiration flattering but she was still getting used to the idea of both of them as lovers, so it was also disconcerting.

“Don’t you have a last hand to deal?” The pointed question was due both to a tinge of embarrassment over the formerly forbidden idea of sitting naked with two very gorgeous men who obviously wanted to make love to her, and the fact she was excited by the idea of it.

It was still a bit hard to reconcile, but she was definitely coming around.

“Yeah.” Rob tore his gaze away from her bare breasts and looked at the cards in hand. “Sorry, lost my concentration there for a minute. Don’t know why.”

“I do,” Drew chimed in, his heavy-lidded eyes holding a wicked glint. “This game is really getting fun. Give me my cards so I can kick your ass, Hanson.”

“I might win yet.”

“Don’t bet on it.”

The banter went on, though Lauren could tell from the minute Rob glanced at his hand he was not exactly delighted with what he'd been dealt. A poker face he did not have. He took two cards, didn't look any happier, and waited.

"Unless you can beat a full house, drop those boxers, Hanson."

Rob stood up and grumbled, "How the hell do you do that? That's the second one you've had tonight. I got two pairs one hand and was grateful to get that."

"Your luck is about to change in a minute."

"Is that so?" Rob eased off his shorts, and Lauren saw he had an impressive erection already, his cock high and stiff against the taut plane of his stomach.

He gave her a smile that held a hint of apology for his arousal. His hand made a gesture at his crotch. "You're here and naked. No way I can help this."

"Time for my request, right?" Drew looked at her and a faint wicked smile hovered on his mouth. "Come here and kiss me and I'll tell you what I want."

The husky note in his voice made her give a small shiver. "The kiss isn't the request?"

"No. I just like to kiss you, babe, and even more so when you're so close and so damned hot."

Acutely aware of Rob watching, she stood and up and walked around to where Drew sat, feeling his hands gentle at her waist as he urged her onto his lap. His mouth brushed hers and then settled into a deep kiss as she felt the coil of sexual need tighten in her stomach.

When he finally moved his mouth away, it was to her ear and his warm breath made her shiver, her nipples now tight and very erect. "I want to watch you suck his cock."

It was startling to know he enjoyed seeing her with Rob, but she'd already gotten that impression the night before. On occasion, he also liked to talk dirty, but hearing what he wanted from her was a bit shocking when put so bluntly.

As if he could feel her confusion, Drew whispered in explanation, “It’s like watching the hottest porn ever, with the added bonus that you’re actually enjoying yourselves.”

Lauren glanced at where Rob sat. Intense hazel eyes caught and held her gaze. He murmured, “I’ve never been so happy to lose at anything in my life, but don’t feel pressured to do something you don’t want. I’m sure Drew feels the same way.”

“You can always say no, babe, you know that. We want you to be comfortable.”

That was the best thing about this relationship; she knew they both meant it. That she could trust them was definitely a positive point toward the possibility this might actually work out.

Well, they had certainly taken care of her the night before and she had the feeling she wasn’t going to be disappointed this night either. If they both wanted it, she wanted to please them, not to mention that had been a definite part of her fantasy a few nights ago. One thing her involvement with Drew had done for her was adjust her attitude about sex in general, and that included a more relaxed feeling about oral sex.

Lauren slid off Drew’s lap and felt her breasts sway as she walked with provocative slow steps to where Rob sat in his chair, watching her. “Since he’s the grand winner, I suppose we don’t have much choice, now do we?”

“You always have a choice.” Rob leaned back, his muscular thighs slightly spread, his erection high and swollen. Hazel eyes looked at her with direct sincerity. “Keep that in mind.”

“I will.” She leaned down and placed a hand on either side of his hips, braced on the seat of the chair, and licked her lips for their audience.

Where does this wild side come from, she wondered even as she lowered her head. The idea she would ever give someone a blow job besides Drew was shocking, not to mention in front of him...

But it was Rob shutting his eyes and taking in a sharp breath as her parted lips slid over the swollen crest of his erection. And it was Drew who sat in a sprawl with his gaze riveted on them, and somehow, it didn't feel dirty but instead very, very arousing.

Because she loved them both.

Drew, with his quirky sense of humor and innate honesty was not only an inventive caring lover, but also a balance in her life.

Rob was steadier, more even keeled, perhaps more a sensitive soul mate in the aspect she knew they thought more alike, were more in tune in everyday life.

It was hard to analyze, she decided as the tip of Rob's engorged cock touched the back of her throat. This wasn't everyday life. This was a wicked fantasy and she was about to do the formerly unthinkable.

The taste of his semen was slightly salty and she heard the uneven sound of his respiration with an inner smile. She began to move, to take him deep and then slide upward until he was almost free of her mouth, her tongue gliding in languid strokes over the tip of his rigid penis.

"Christ," Drew muttered in the background and she heard his chair creak as he restlessly shifted his weight.

Rob said thickly, "Oh...yeah."

Long fingers brushed her face in a light caress and then he sank his hands into her hair. A groan came from his throat as she continued to lick and gently suck, and he became more and more tense even though his legs sprawled farther apart and his fingers flexed against her scalp.

It was amazing, but she felt not only immensely turned on by the idea of Rob's enjoyment but also Drew's rapt attention. If she was wet before, she was drenched now, and she could feel the warmth between her legs with acute awareness.

"Stop." It was a gasp. Strong fingers forced her head up and she saw Rob's face was dark and his chest heaved. With his rumpled dark

wavy hair and smoldering eyes he resembled a romance novel hero, aroused, handsome as sin itself, his cock wet from her ministrations. "I was about to come in your mouth," he said in hoarse explanation. "I don't know if you do that."

She never had, but she hadn't done a lot of things before this vacation.

Besides, she was selfish. Wanting. Hot and bothered beyond belief.

"We can finish another way." Lauren straightened, realizing her legs were a little wobbly.

It was Drew who said, "Hell yes, you can. Climb up, babe."

Was she depraved because she liked the idea he found watching exciting? Maybe. But at the moment, her heretofore unknown depravity didn't matter. She wanted Rob inside her. She wanted to feel his entire length, she wanted to take him to the hilt, and she wanted most of all to know they both found pleasure as she did it.

Looking into Rob's incredible hazel eyes, she straddled his lap and joined him on the chair. He helped, his hands at her waist, guiding her into just the right position so she could sink down on his erection.

Long. Hot. Hard. Yes...just what she needed.

Her eyes drifted closed even as Rob kissed her, his mouth gentle in contrast to the urgency of his body as he thrust upward into her pussy.

Sex in a chair? It didn't sound good, but it felt incredible. She was so aroused that her body caught fire immediately and when he began to move his hips, rocking against her, she moaned into his mouth. The tips of her breasts were against his chest, and somehow the position was more intimate than she imagined. They were together, one creature, and the subtly of the motion as he moved inside her added to the pleasure.

Dear God, the pleasure.

Like the night before, he was different from Drew, so different. His taste, the way he kissed her, even the way his erection filled her, so...different.

Yet one thing felt the same. His arms were strong and supportive and his movements reverent as he made love to her in a rocking motion of pelvis to pelvis, the angle exactly perfect. With each small thrust, the pressure on her clit sent small waves of sheer bliss through her entire body.

Lauren pressed her face against his neck and held on as he began to move faster, her breasts now flattened hard against his bare chest they held each so closely.

It was good...so good.

"Sweet Jesus," he muttered hoarsely. "Please tell me..."

She didn't hear him finish the sentence because her world imploded at that moment. The rush of her orgasm was fierce and bright, the sound of her cry ringing out so it echoed in her ears, even as she trembled against Rob, clinging to him desperately. In turn, his body stiffened and he groaned in a low, erotic sound and she could feel the pulse of his ejaculation and thundering of his heart as it matched hers pound for pound.

Sex in a chair.

No, rephrase, she thought hazily. Heart-racing sex in a chair.

With someone watching.

With Rob. With Drew watching.

This was definitely not an ordinary vacation.

* * * *

Being a voyeur had its merits, Rob decided in lazy contemplation, his gaze riveted on the couple on the rug in front of the stone fireplace. Drew was right to a certain extent, watching him make love to Lauren was arousing, but in his opinion, it didn't resemble porn in the least. There was a seedy element to pornographic film, because in

the back of your mind the knowledge always existed that the people were acting, were getting paid to turn you on, and so the excitement produced was tarnished and a bit tawdry.

On the other hand, watching two people you love pleasure each other and knowing there was nothing fake about it, was really pretty damned beautiful.

Drew whispered something and Lauren gave a laugh that turned into a gasp as he slid his mouth downward and took one perfect, very erect nipple between his teeth. Nude, her lithe body gleaming in the soft lighting, Lauren was on her back, legs bent at the knee, her eyes languidly half closed in a way that Rob found a turn on despite he'd just had one hell of a fabulous orgasm. Drew was taking his time, letting her recover from her recent climax, nibbling at her mouth, her breasts, and then kissing her neck.

"You taste so good, babe."

"Hmm." She stirred a little and smiled, drifting her fingers through Drew's hair.

When you were involved in the moment, it was different, Rob realized, sprawled on the couch as he observed the intricacies of seduction as Drew moved, tasted and teased her back into arousal. It was a dance of desire and invitation, both blatant and understated at the same time, a signal as subtle as the slight lift of her hips sending a message as obvious as a blazing beacon on a moonless night. Just the right sigh, measured in timbre and volume, the faint flush on her skin...

And of course, the way she parted her legs and murmured his name.

His friend didn't misinterpret that one. He shifted, covered her, and slid his cock into her in one smooth thrust.

She gasped and it was amazingly sexy to hear, even if Rob wasn't the one making love to her.

Damn, she was gorgeous, naked, damp, her shining hair in disarray around her shoulders, the dreamy, abstracted look on her face

intensifying as Drew moved between her legs, his buttocks flexing as each inward glide became more and more urgent. It was easy to gauge their mutual upward climb to climax by the motion of Lauren's hands on his back and the increasingly fierce expression on Drew's face. It happened for her first, and Rob saw her begin to shudder, her throat a pale arch as she went over the edge. Drew went still a few moments later, his tall body tense as he came.

"I love you, babe..." Drew's whisper floated in the hush of post-coital silence.

I love her, too, Rob thought, not sure whether to be troubled or happy about it. Would he rather have her all to himself? It was hard to tell because it seemed to be the package deal was how things were and he was surprising himself to death with his reaction. The erotic imagery of them still entwined and joined sparked nothing but a healthy appreciation for how good he knew it must have been for them both.

He *wanted* Lauren to love Drew.

Rob also wanted her to love *him*.

If Lauren thought her mother would faint at the idea of their relationship, his would go into similar cardiac arrest.

Drew's mother might just shrug. She was used to his eclectic, freewheeling approach to life. She also very much liked Lauren. Rob knew this because Mrs. Fletcher had treated him recently to an excruciatingly long discussion on the subject. At the time, it had amounted to torture because he'd been forced to agree that yes, Lauren was very pretty, remarkably intelligent, and what was more, might be an incentive for Drew to finally settle down.

In short, yes, the perfect girl.

For both of them, apparently.

Chapter Seven

The cabin was much like his, an overblown version of recently acquired wealth, certainly ostentatious as a vacation home. Ben considered the three stories of glass and logs as he hiked down the small slope and cynically remembered what it felt like to be nothing but a professor at the entry university level, teaching wide-eyed freshman sociology and psychology.

It had sucked, actually.

Little money, lackluster lectures to mostly mediocre students who took his classes to fill up slots in their electives, assuming it would be easy...damn, he did not miss that at all.

The first book hadn't sold well. He'd wanted to address the psychological aspects of the basic needs of human beings, the primary one being nourishment. Why do some people overeat, dislike certain foods, what are the dynamics of the family meal, and so forth. The mediocre response was disappointing, and the second book did only a little better, concentrating on the impact of sleep disorders. The third, however, so well timed for the market, was a smash. Slap the title sex on anything, he'd discovered, and it tended to make people part with their money. If the author has a bunch of letters after his name and pretends to know something about it, all the better. His current work in progress—already contracted—was about some of the more unusual aspects of relationships and sex. Kinky sex was going to sell even better than the more straightforward edition, or so his editor believed.

Regina had laughed about it, but she had loved the change in their lifestyle.

There were two vehicles parked in the smooth gravel drive and he noted the Indiana plates with interest. Since there really wasn't a formal front door, he went up the steps to the spacious first deck. Several sets of French doors were open to the warm day and he could hear voices inside. One was deep, and then another male spoke, and a woman laughed, the musical lilt of it drifting out.

He rapped on the doorframe, the sound sharp. "Hello?"

The man who came to the door with a curious expression on his face was tall, athletically built and dressed casually in only a pair of jeans. He had a nice muscular chest and his features were chiseled and striking, his good looks accentuated by wavy ebony hair and a light summer tan. He lifted his brows. "Yes?"

Ben attempted a pleasant smile. "I'm Dr. Heaton from next door. I understand the sheriff has been here and you were able to give him some information. I wondered if you would mind telling it to me as well."

The young man—at guess in his late twenties—showed comprehension in the slight widening of his eyes. "I'm...well, yes. Please come in."

How did one talk to a man whose wife was missing? Uncomfortably, Ben was learning. No one knew what to say. Not even him, though he'd thought about it a lot.

He accepted the invitation, stepping through as the screen door opened, giving his host a slight nod. The younger man stuck out his hand. "Rob Hanson. My uncle owns this place."

Ben shook the offering and allowed a slight smile. "I don't believe I've ever met him."

"He doesn't come up much and lives in Europe most of the time. I'm just using it for vacation."

"It's a nice place." Ben glanced around. It *was* nice. He liked it better than all the fancy crap Regina had dragged into theirs. Rustic suited the surroundings. Leather chairs and a few scattered antiques. Perfect.

“Yes...thanks. Uhm...I assume you want to talk to Lauren. Drew and I really don’t have much information except we might have heard a scream the other night. Obviously, if we thought it was someone in distress we would have done something.”

Guilt. Well, Ben supposed he might feel the same way if their positions were reversed. He inclined his head in silent agreement.

The other two occupants of the house were in the kitchen. A blond man similar in age to Rob Hanson introduced as Drew Fletcher, and the young woman who had apparently seen the man who took out his boat. Lauren Hanes shook his hand, a look of grave sympathy on her face, and murmured, “I suppose if you are here, there hasn’t been any word about your wife.”

Ben politely took and released her slender fingers. “No, I’m afraid not. I’m sorry to bother you with this again, but can we perhaps sit down and you tell me exactly what you saw?”

“Of course.” She led the way back into the open living area and chose a seat on a leather couch. The two men followed, one sitting down next to her and the other perching on the arm on the other side.

There was a slight protective air about the position he found interesting. Miss Hanes was a strikingly pretty brunette with what he liked to term as a willowy figure, slender but with nice curves in the right places. She wore only a bikini top and a pair of shorts and there was a hint of pink across the top of her smooth shoulders. It was easy to guess the three of them had been out earlier on the water and maybe just came in for lunch.

He cleared his throat. “Apparently you saw a trespasser on my property a few days ago?”

She nodded. “I was reading down by the lake. It was a little too hot in the sun so I was sitting on the bank in the shade. I noticed him first because he seemed to be looking around. It wasn’t suspicious particularly, but did strike me as odd at the time. Then he took something out of his pocket and opened one of the bay doors and backed out the boat up to the main dock. When he saw me sitting

there he really gunned it and sped off, but a lot of people drive boats that way.”

“Can you describe him for me?”

She did so in a way that told him she’d got a fairly good look or else was more observant than most people, right down to the color of his shirt. At the end of the recital, she slowed and trailed off, a tinge of horror suddenly showing in her face. “...odd he was wearing a tie...I...”

The ensuing silence was acute for a moment after her stammering halt, a contrast to the sunny, expensive room. The blond reached over and squeezed her hand. He had that tanned Key West kind of handsomeness of sun-streaked hair and clean cut features, his brow currently furrowed in concern as he stared at the girl next to him. “Lauren?”

“He put something in the boat.” It was said very quietly. “I hadn’t thought about it until now. As far as I knew, I thought it was the owner of the house I saw, Dr. Heaton, and he had every reason to be there. That’s why he backed the boat up to the main dock, to put whatever it was inside.”

Very carefully, because his palms had gone damp, Ben asked, “Something? Did you see what it was?”

She must have caught the undertone in his voice anyway. Her cheeks had paled slightly. “No, not really. He did it quickly and I wasn’t paying all that much attention at the time.” Then she added with obvious reluctance, “It was heavy enough to make the boat rock.”

None of them turned to look out over the spectacular view of the lake. Ben had to give them credit for it since they were now all thinking the same thing. He didn’t have equal self-control and glanced out the huge windows. The sun reflected in dancing sparkles over the water.

It was not only big, but pretty deep in places.

There wasn't much question. It could make one very large, two hundred acre wet grave.

He needed to get out of there before he completely lost his composure in front of three strangers.

Ben stood on legs that weren't quite steady. "I appreciate you talking to me."

* * * *

The perfect day had disintegrated as clouds began to build in the distance, beginning with a few white wisps that gradually gathered forces until they became towering anvil shaped monoliths. The heat turned from pleasant to cloying, the humidity and thunderheads promising an explosive exhibit of Mother Nature's abilities.

A stormy evening, a possible dead body in the lake...a murderer out there...it sounded like a horror novel premise. No wonder Lauren was a bit jumpy. Drew had suggested they go out to dinner because, more than anything, they all wanted to forget a woman was still missing. Lights, laughter, and other people might banish Lauren's uneasiness.

The parking lot was crowded as they pulled in, which was always a good sign in a restaurant. He parked his sports car between a gleaming, new SUV and a battered truck just as the first rumble of thunder sounded, jumping out to go open Lauren's door. Rob unfolded himself from the miniscule back seat, and they all went inside. Even on a weekday night it seemed there was a wait at Gino's and they chose the bar, ordering their drinks as they perched on stools. As usual, Lauren drew more than one glance from an appreciative male and he saw with amusement that Rob noticed it just as much as he did, a slight look of annoyance on his face. In a pale pink sheath dress that managed to be both casual and stunning at the same time, Lauren was worth looking at with her long legs and bare shoulders. The lights caught glints of gold in her shining hair.

The normalcy of the busy room did the job. As she picked up her glass of wine, Lauren smiled at him for the first time since Dr. Heaton's unexpected visit. "I can smell the garlic in the air. Italian was a great choice. I am in the mood."

"Maybe we should all order the same thing," Drew teased her, as always captivated by the curve of her tempting mouth. He leaned forward until his lips almost touched her ear, inhaling the fragrance from her soft hair. "Because later on, if you're in the *mood*, we can notch things up a little."

She drew back, laughing and shaking her head. "Drew."

But it was too late. He'd seen the flare of interest in those gorgeous blue eyes. She was intrigued. Good, it would keep her mind off of other things. Her sexuality knocked his socks off. Couple it with the fact she was smart and at heart a nice girl, it was no wonder both he and Rob were so hooked.

On the other side of her, a glass of bourbon on the rocks at his elbow, Rob raised a brow. "I'm almost afraid to ask what he just said. Knowing Drew, it could be anything."

"I'm going to ignore that comment, Hanson. Besides, I was just mentioning I had an idea or two for the rest of the evening, that's all."

Rob's brow went up higher. "I see. I take it back with deepest apologies, Fletcher. At times—and we all know the ones I'm thinking of—you can be a damned genius."

Lauren blushed. Vividly.

At that moment the hostess came to tell them their table was ready. They trailed through the sea of glass-topped tables, the subdued lighting and soft classical music adding to the ambiance. Eventually they were seated in a corner that was perfect, secluded yet still part of the crowded room. Leather bound menus were handed out and he and Rob looked theirs over briefly and set them aside. Lauren pondered, her soft mouth pursed.

She glanced up at him and then at Rob. "You already know what you want?"

Rob shrugged and reached for the wine list. “I’m having the chicken cacciatore. I’ll lay odds Drew is having it, too.”

Drew smothered a laugh. It was somewhat of a standing joke between them that they tended to order the same thing off the menu, purely by coincidence. Or in retrospect, considering the past few days, maybe it wasn’t coincidence after all. He said in a mild tone, “He’s right. We seem to have the same taste in food, and apparently other things as well.”

It was oh-so true.

She was living, breathing proof.

The arrival of the waitress cut off whatever Lauren was going to say in response. Rob chose a bottle of Chianti to go with their meal and the young woman nodded and headed off. Though it seemed like Lauren was absorbed in selecting what she wanted for dinner, Drew had to wonder if the abstracted look on her face wasn’t due to something else.

They were out in public together for the first time since everything had changed between the three of them. They’d all gone out to dinner often enough, but those were always double dates, her at Drew’s side, Rob’s date next to him, the chemistry of the situation quite different. The subtle tension between her and Rob had always cast a slight shadow and now it was gone. Drew knew *he* felt a great deal more relaxed.

The wine arrived and was uncorked, poured, and Lauren decided on ravioli with a light sauce of butter and basil, her gaze following the waitress as she took the menus and left. “She’d love to figure out which one of you to flirt with,” she observed dryly, “but probably afraid she’ll step on my toes by picking the wrong one.”

Drew hadn’t noticed anything, but his radar didn’t pick up all signals when he was around Lauren. Zoned in was an appropriate phrase for his awareness of her presence at any time. He said softly, “It wouldn’t do her much good either way.”

Rob lifted up his glass of wine with a glimmering smile of agreement. “We could be just three friends out for dinner. Who’s to know?”

A mischievous twitch quirked the corner of her mouth. “Maybe people will think you two pretty boys are the couple.”

That hadn’t occurred to him, but Drew doubted it, not the way they both looked at her. The words possessive and predatory came to mind, and it was something every other male in the room could recognize. However, he wasn’t going to mention that point and make her self-conscious.

“They might, I suppose.” He looked at Rob in mock assessment. “I suppose he’s a decent looking guy, so I could do worse.”

“Yeah, right, like I’d pick you if I were so inclined.” Rob gave a small derisive snort.

Drew couldn’t help it, he grinned. “I remember when you got hit on at that one frat party our sophomore year at Purdue. You had no idea the guy wasn’t just making small talk. The rest of us were rolling it was so funny.”

“I recall the incident and you pack of drunken laughing hyenas, Fletcher. Do you really want to start telling stories? I have a few Lauren might find interesting about you. Let’s talk about that one high school football game, for instance, the one when—”

Well, that was a good point. Drew interrupted hastily, “Consider the subject dropped.”

“I thought that might be his take on it.” Rob winked at Lauren, who was openly laughing.

“I’m not sure I want to know.” Slender fingers lifted her wine glass gracefully to her mouth.

“Let’s just say without details it is a miracle we are both still alive and friends after that escapade.”

Their friendship had survived a lot, Drew agreed. It wasn’t like they’d never had their differences, but they had a fundamental bond

he understood was special, completely different for what he felt for the woman sitting across the table, but just as powerful in some ways.

As a pilot, he relied on instruments, panels, tower instructions, flight plans, but a lot of times, he used intuition. Weather changed, gauges failed, and any number of other small details could take a routine flight into disaster. The ability to think on his feet—or more aptly, from the cockpit—could save or destroy lives. He never ignored his instincts. He couldn't afford to.

In that spirit, he crossed his arms on the table and looked at his two companions. First at Rob in unspoken communication, and then at Lauren, admiring the way the lighting emphasized her perfect cheekbones. He said, "This vacation will be over in a few days. What do you think of us buying a house and moving in together?"

* * * *

Lauren's mouth hung open as the waitress set her plate down in front of her. She managed to snap it shut, thank the dark-haired young woman in a mumble, and was simply too stunned to resent the saucy look the girl sent at Drew as she delivered his food. Rob was treated to a similar flirtatious routine, but he had the same bemused look on his face as she suspected she did on hers.

Move in together? *Is he serious?*

"Don't look so surprised." Drew picked up his fork, his brows elevated a little in open amusement. "It makes sense. Rob has been talking about buying a house for the past year. We've even gone together to look at a few and discussed about going in together as an investment. You've always hated living in an apartment, babe, and your lease is nearly up. I could sell my condo at the drop of a hat. I don't have time for a yard and all the stuff I know you want, but Rob isn't out of the country half the year and he actually gets excited talking about riding lawn mowers, if you can believe that."

Lauren started to speak, cleared her throat, and tried again. “That’s a little bit crazy, Drew.”

“Lawn mowers? I know. How wide can I yawn?”

“Drew, that isn’t what I mean and you know it. It’s just...insane.”

“How so?” He put a small piece of chicken dripping in sauce in his mouth and made a low sound of appreciation. “Damn, that’s good.”

Her food smelled pretty fabulous, too, but she couldn’t concentrate on it at the moment. “I...I can’t live with two men.”

She could have predicted the argument wouldn’t faze Drew.

“People do it all the time. No one needs to know we aren’t just roommates. In this day and age all kinds of male/female arrangements are made on a purely platonic basis. People would probably think less of it than you having dinner here with the both of us. Rob and I are friends and you and I have been dating half a year. Why wouldn’t we eventually move in together, and why couldn’t we live with Rob?”

Good God, he liked to break things down to black and white in a gray world. “Because...” she floundered, seeking the right argument, not sure she even *wanted* to argue.

“It’s not a bad idea.” Rob spoke slowly, fingering his silverware but not picking it up. “I’ve saved with intention of having a big down payment, but a couple of the things I want—an in-ground pool and a big lawn come to mind—are a bit impractical for only one person. I asked Drew if he’d be interested a while back.” He gazed at her across the table, looking at her as if she was the only person in the room. In the world maybe, from the intense expression on his face. “You’re worried about how things would be when we get back to real life. Drew is right. This would be a great way to arrange things.”

Arrange things. That was an interesting way of putting it. What he really meant was so they could go on sleeping together—or rather she could go on sleeping with both of them.

No, that wasn’t exactly fair, for she had been having a wonderful time aside from the sexual slant of the past days. What woman

wouldn't want the company of two very attractive, considerate men? Their relationship with each other was so comfortable, she almost felt like the outsider sometimes, rather than the focus of all their attention. Yes, the sex was great, but she also got pleasure from something as simple as them all eating a meal together, or taking a leisurely walk in the woods.

So far, everything seemed to somehow work. But playing house with the two of them for a week was one thing. Living with them both was something else entirely.

"I think it's a big commitment," she said finally, finding her voice a little unsteady.

"Think about it, babe." Drew's tone was persuasive. "I know you'd prefer a nice house to your cramped apartment and I've thought about asking you to move in with me before, but my condo isn't much bigger. I didn't need a lot of space when I bought it, and I hadn't met you."

She still hadn't taken one bite of her food. "I didn't realize you wanted us to live together."

"I was trying to figure out how to ask you. Because of Rob, I wasn't sure you'd say yes."

It was startling almost because of how things had changed, but he was right. She probably wouldn't have agreed just because when Drew was home, he and Rob tended to hang out together quite a bit and she would have shied away from the idea of being there all the time when Rob was around. Those double dates had been bad enough.

Before now. Tonight was...nice.

"There are a couple of really great places just outside of my comfort range price-wise I've looked at, but if Drew is in, we could buy any one of them. You should see the kitchen in the one I like the best, Lauren. A state of the art kitchen wasn't that high on my list of must haves, but this one will wow you, I'd guess. I'll take you to look at it when we get back. I love the yard and it has a great pool."

It was impossible to miss the growing enthusiasm in Rob's voice. He hadn't started to eat, either, but sat holding his glass of wine, smiling.

"I'm in," Drew said. "Now all we have to do is convince Lauren she's the roommate of our dreams."

"You've got that right," Rob murmured, his voice dropping to a murmur, a shimmer in those incredible hazel eyes.

They were *so* different.

Rob wanted to buy a house and mow the lawn.

Drew wanted to fly all over the world, dropping back in now and again but refusing to put down roots in the ground, because he belonged in the air, or somewhere new, exploring a foreign country.

How could she fall in love with both of them?

Because, she thought as she took a sip of wine, I'm a damned lucky woman?

* * * *

The sound of a soft snore made Rob suppress a chuckle, barely audible over the threatening approach of another storm. Drew was the one who insisted he wanted to watch the baseball game and he had promptly fallen asleep. On the couch, one arm carelessly extended over his head, he looked down for the count and the noise of rain slashing against the window didn't seem to rouse him.

A nudge made him grunt, but he still didn't move.

Rob could really care less about baseball and the knowledge Lauren was up in bed reading made his choice pretty clear. He flicked off the television with the remote, went and checked to make sure the doors were shut and locked, left one light burning so Drew wouldn't break a leg when he woke and went to bed, and climbed the stairs.

Other than that one kiss in the kitchen, he hadn't ever touched her when Drew wasn't there. It seemed reasonable though—if Drew

wanted them all to live together and knew he would be gone half the time, he didn't mind the idea of them alone.

She was propped against the pillows, paperback book in her hand, a look of absorption on her face as she flipped a page. Soft, gleaming hair trailed over her shoulders and she wore some sort of nightgown with thin spaghetti straps in a lacy material that molded to her breasts in a very sexy way.

The idea of living with her appealed to him so strongly he felt almost overwhelmed. It wasn't just lust prompting his enthusiasm over the idea, it was so much more, and he was a bit stunned by his quick acquiescence when he usually thought things through before making a monumental decision that could affect his whole life.

This idea sparked no inner debate at all.

It said a lot about the depths of his feelings.

He should be scared—scared to death—because he knew she loved Drew.

But he wasn't somehow.

She glanced up, sensing his presence because he hadn't moved or made a sound since he hesitated in the doorway. Arched brows lifted a fraction in unspoken question but a small smile touched her mouth. "It's really storming, isn't it?"

How the hell she had the ability to make him tongue-tied with just a look was probably a direct result of the fact all his blood seemed to go to his crotch the minute he saw her. No brain function left.

He found his voice with effort. "Yes, it is."

Now that was brilliant, Hanson.

She waited, just sitting there with the covers drawn to her waist, book in hand, an almost heavy expectant look in her eyes.

He managed a coherent thought. "Mind if I join you?"

"You've slept here the past two nights." Long lashes lowered a fraction.

“Is that a yes?” He didn’t move. “Drew is asleep downstairs and I really found I couldn’t watch the game because I was thinking about you.”

Her mouth parted at the urgent tone of his voice.

Damn, he hadn’t meant to speak with such raw emotion, but it was how it came out. Rob took a moment and a deep breath. Then he said quietly, “Like I said a few days ago, I have never felt this way about any woman. Ever. Period. I don’t get exactly why you’re different, but you are. It isn’t something I can put my finger on. It just...is.”

“I know.”

Two words had never sounded so poignant. Or so good.

Rob walked toward the bed and sat down on the edge, reaching over to touch her face, skimming her lower lip with one fingertip. “I want to make love to you, Lauren.”

In answer, she slid back the covers and rose to her knees, putting her slim arms around his neck as her mouth touched his in a soft erotic offering.

Hell yes...

He kissed her back, their lips clinging, his arms going around her to bring her close to him. A low groan held in his throat as he felt full arousal throb to life, his erection surging in flat record time. He was still wearing jeans and a polo shirt and he felt her hands fumble at his waist, tugging his shirt out of the waistband and up.

He wanted it off more than she did. Rob withdrew for a lightning moment as he whipped it off his head and then he reached for her again for another searing kiss. Tongues tangling, they pressed together and he inhaled her breathless whimper as his hands cupped her ass through the barely there material of her short nightgown.

Firm butt cheeks, so warm and smooth...Jesus, he was lighting on fire. Outside thunder rumbled like the wrath of God. Who cared? His fingers kneaded gently.

Jeans off, his brain instructed frantically. Or was it his dick calling the tune, he wasn't sure.

Get rid of the nightgown, pronto.

Insistent hands explored his bare chest and he made a low animal sound of approval. Somehow he managed to unfasten his pants while still kissing her, his fingers clumsy on the button and zipper.

Where had his intention gone to make slow sweet love to her?

"Rob." The erotic quiver in her voice made him want to explode.

"Off," he ordered, with effort pulling away so he could disentangle himself from his jeans and underwear. The curt instruction wasn't exactly romantic but she didn't seem to mind, grabbing the hem of her nightgown and pulling it up over her head in a flurry of fabric and silken hair.

There was more to Lauren than her centerfold body, but at the moment, it was his main focus. He stepped free of his clothes, his erection prominent and throbbing, before he crawled on the bed and tumbled her to her back. His mouth went to one breast, licking the tip in a wicked sweep of his tongue before he took the nipple.

Deep. So deep she gasped as he sucked hard and her hands flew into his hair.

A crack of lightning was punctuated by the sudden darkness as they lost power. He barely noticed, his mouth ravenous as he suckled her, not sure if he'd ever been so out of control in bed. She arched, her breathing ragged, the lashing of the deluge against the windows adding an elemental edge to his need.

"Yesss..." It came out as a low hiss, her pelvis suggestively lifting against him. "Oh...yes."

All right. If the lady didn't mind his wild approach, he'd be more than happy to fuck her, and maybe later they could make love.

He slid a hand down her stomach, found her pussy, and one finger sought entrance. Hmm, nice and wet, soft and slick, incredibly hot and ready...

Drew had been right. Lauren loved sex. Not all women were built for it in the same way, and it was beyond arousing to hear her breathless pants as he finger-fucked her in a slow rhythm. He added a second finger to the first, pushing into her vaginal passage as his thumb massaged her clit until she started to arch wildly against the motion.

He loved she loved it.

He loved *her*.

Nuzzling her neck, he drifted his mouth to her ear. Her nails grazed his back and he asked hoarsely. "Do you want something else inside you?"

Her hips rotated. "I...think...that's...obvious."

That he could make her so breathless she couldn't speak gave him a great deal of satisfaction. The fact he wanted the same thing was gratifying also. Rob shifted and she opened for him, the warm cradle of her thighs a perfect fit.

Her welcoming pussy was exactly right, too, tight, slick, gripping him as he pushed inside the very core of her body and they became one.

He wasn't usually poetic, but the realization that the primal joining of their bodies made them as close as any two human beings could be was moving, even in the moment of the most excruciating sexual need he could ever remember. As he began to thrust and she moved with him in open acceptance, he found not only acute pleasure but also a sort of bewildering introspection.

In and out. Hard and fast. Pleasure rolled over him in enveloping waves. Between jagged bolts of lightning, it was pitch dark but he could feel her, feel the communion of their bodies, and it was beyond incredible and somewhere into exquisite or something equally sublime.

"Touch me." Lauren moaned. "Rob, I'm so close...please."

The words registered in his brain but weren't apparently necessary. Even as he reached a hand between their undulating bodies

she gave an inarticulate cry and he could feel the first ripple of the tremors of her release. The sudden squeeze of her inner muscles clenched his cock and he was gone, lost in a flash of white hot light that wasn't the result of a violent summer storm sweeping through the area. The force of his ejaculation made his entire body shake.

When he could move again, he shifted his weight to the side, keeping her close against him. The storm was either losing force or moving away for the flares against the windows were less frequent and the thunder dimming.

What did one say after sex that amazing? He was surprised he was still breathing.

It was Lauren, her head resting against his shoulder, who murmured, "If you were just trying to convince me about moving in with you, that was a pretty persuasive argument for your case."

He laughed at the dry note in her voice, an interesting sensation since his still fairly hard penis was inside her. "I can argue again, if you like, but you'll have to give me a few minutes."

"Uhm...I might pass out."

He laughed again. "I think I did just a few minutes ago."

"Most of the time it would be just you and me." The statement was made without inflection and he knew she was thinking out loud and maybe even testing him a little.

His fingers drifted through the softness of her hair. "That's very true. Drew is gone all the time. You'd have to be comfortable with that."

"Roommates with benefits? Isn't that the phrase?"

He wished he could see her face. Very slowly, he said, "I don't think you can define this relationship, Lauren, and I've already told you this is different for me. I'm confused as *hell* as to why I'm all good with the idea of a three way love affair, but somehow I seem to be. In a lot of ways it blows my mind."

"That's an understatement for me."

“Drew is very okay with all of this. I think what happens next is up to us.”

“I believe you’re right there.” She lifted her head and one hand rested on his chest, right over his heart. He could tell she was peering at him in the darkness. “I keep telling myself parents have different numbers of children, and whether it is just one or ten, they love them all. And that’s okay. People get married more than once, so they’ve fallen in love multiple times. If I’ve just done it at the same time, two different men...it’s okay, too.”

The inner struggle was no surprise to him. He smiled, whether she could see it or not. “Yes, I agree, but keep in mind I’m not unprejudiced in this situation. If you want my take, I’ll give it. I think Drew loves this idea because he is never going to be a nine to five guy, but he believes deep down that’s what you want. Maybe he can give it to you anyway, through me. He obviously guessed pretty easily my feelings toward you, so to him it makes perfect sense. I’m so nine to five-computer geek-suburbs-two-point-five kids that it’s scary.”

Lauren laughed. The sensation was interesting since they were still intimately joined. Maybe he could get an erection again faster than he thought. He was still pretty hard—considering he was sure there wasn’t a drop of sperm left in his balls after that explosive orgasm. She said in a husky tone he found very hot, “Rob, I don’t think any woman would see you and think geek. You know what you look like. I assume you use a mirror at least to shave.”

He didn’t care what other women thought of him. But he did care—to a sobering extent—what *she* thought. “If you find me attractive, I’m glad, but you know it’s going to be more than this.” He moved a little, a shift of his hips, pressing his stiffening cock a little deeper inside her. Moving his mouth to her ear, he nibbled on her earlobe and felt the resulting shiver of reaction with satisfaction. “It’s going to be whether or not I leave the seat up or down, a newspaper in the driveway, the color of the couch, what’s for dinner...”

“Trying to scare me off?” There was just the right breathless note to her voice that told him she knew he was catching his second wind and getting his erection back.

“I’m just being practical.” He nuzzled her neck. “Fair warning, I do that. Analyze things to death on a regular basis.”

“For God’s sake, I’m an actuary. I use calculus every day. Give me a break, Hanson.”

“So we’re both practical.”

Lauren gave a brief exhale he understood was pleasure. “Let’s be practical tomorrow, okay?”

He agreed without saying a word.

This time he’d make love to her, long and slow.

Unless another storm rushed in. And he wasn’t thinking about the weather.

Chapter Eight

Day five.

With each day that passed and no sign of Regina, surely the police would become more and more concerned and involved.

Right?

He wasn't going to think about it, or at least keep it out of his mind as much as possible. Ben walked out across the deck and adjusted the expensive telescope his wife had given him one Christmas, the tripod permanently mounted on the deck off the upstairs master suite. A spotting telescope, ostensibly it had been so he could bird watch even across the lake—which had never happened—but at the moment, it served very well as a tool so he could spy on his neighbors.

He was actually working.

The two choices he had right now were to worry, or gather information for his work in progress. Since the topic was unconventional sexual practices and how they fit in modern society, having three healthy young subjects so close by seemed too good a chance to miss. It had been a coincidence—but only to a certain extent since there were few decent restaurants nearby—to see them the night before at the Italian place where he and Regina ate regularly when they were down for a weekend. His wife didn't cook at home, much less on vacation, and neither did he, for that matter. Under the circumstances, he wasn't about to start, so when he found himself drinking scotch alone at five o'clock and realized from the burning in his stomach he hadn't eaten anything all day, he'd decided to go out. When the trio was seated at a tabled near his, he'd at first felt as if fate

was toying with him, not giving him even a brief respite from thinking about the young woman vacationing next door and what she'd seen the morning after his wife disappeared.

His boat.

A blond man, cropped hair, slightly prominent nose, blue shirt, patterned tie...he was a little surprised she couldn't tell him the color of the guy's eyes. Miss Hanes *was* an observant person.

So was he.

The couple plus one had proved to be an interesting distraction instead of ruining his enjoyment of his Veal Marsala.

In an abstract way, he'd wondered when he'd talked to the three of them just which young man was the girl's boyfriend, but it had been a passing thought, his absorption more on getting as much information as possible. Their body language had been a little on the confusing side, and as a trained psychologist, he prided himself on being able to read actions and weigh them more than words. Briefly he'd considered private practice as a therapist, but it didn't really interest him and he felt more at home in academia anyway. Still, during the course of getting his PhD he'd done clinical stints and learned quite a bit about how the mannerisms of the average person could tell you a great deal.

People lied on a regular basis. But their actions rarely did and he couldn't help but notice that *both* the men sitting with his pretty witness seemed to exhibit proprietary behavior toward Lauren Hanes. A hand at the small of her back, pulling out her chair, touching her arm during conversation, a wink, a long look...

Two males. One attractive female.

Fascinating.

On a purely professional level, of course.

His cell phone rang then, and he took it out, flipped it open, and registered the number with a twist deep in his stomach. "Hello?"

"Dr. Heaton?"

Who the fuck else would it be, he thought in unwarranted irritation due probably entirely to stress. “Of course.”

“This is Sheriff Barker. I have some news about your wife. It isn’t encouraging, I’m afraid.”

It was about time. He needed *something* to tell him what was going on with the investigation. “What is it? Just tell me.”

“Her purse has been found in a state park in Georgia.”

“Georgia? Why would it be there?”

“Well, sir, we were kinda hoping you might help us figure that one out.”

“As far as I know, she had no reason to go to Georgia.” It was true.

“No friends or family there?”

“None, Sheriff.”

There was a small cough on the other end of the call. “The Georgia State Police are searching the area. The purse was dumped near a campground and the terrain is forested—”

“Good God, she really was abducted, wasn’t she?”

Barker said heavily, “It is a possibility, sir.”

* * * *

Lauren looked over the shimmering expanse of the lake, her arms wrapped around her knees, and shook her head. She couldn’t help but think about whatever the man had dumped in the boat. “I don’t feel very much like getting in the water.”

Neither Rob nor Drew argued with her.

The evening storms the day before had left everything lush in the aftermath, the air was warm and humid, and the sun shone in a brilliant post-front sky.

“Mind if we go out and fish for a bit then?” Drew touched her lightly on the shoulder, his dark blond brows lifted in question.

“No, of course not. Have fun.”

“You’re invited.” His blue eyes held a teasing glint.

“I’ll skip it if you don’t mind,” she remarked dryly. “Fish is fabulous fried, baked, broiled, or grilled. Otherwise, I am not interested.”

“Is that a challenge for us to catch dinner?” Rob grinned, bending over to deposit his tackle box in the boat. In tan shorts and a simple white tee-shirt, he looked pretty incredible.

Drew, dressed with similar simplicity, was also pin-up calendar boy material with his unruly blond hair and dazzling smile.

Good God, what woman on earth could resist either one of them? She certainly couldn’t. Or hadn’t, anyway. “I’ll thaw out some hamburgers, just in case.”

“Oh ye of little faith.” Drew jumped in as Rob clambered to the motor and started the craft. “Still, it might be best though to have a back up plan.” He frowned then. “Maybe you should come along. I mean it doesn’t look like anyone is around, but—”

But—he meant—a woman was missing.

Lauren shook her head. “I’ll be fine. It’s broad daylight, I’m paying attention, and besides, you can’t live that way, Drew.”

“Don’t talk to strangers.” Rob gave her a rueful smile. “Sorry, all I could think of to say.”

Lauren laughed. “Bye. Go. See you later.”

She watched them pull away and decided to go back up to the cabin—if one could call four thousand square feet a cabin at any time—and take a long bath. She was sticky with sunscreen and a little solitude might help her with some interesting decisions.

Well, one anyway.

A big one.

After an hour soaking in warm water in the oversized tub smack dab middle of the afternoon, and a failed attempt to concentrate on her third romance novel of the week, she decided to make a phone call. Carolyn was a teacher, so in the summer she was actually around, and she answered the phone on the third ring. “Hey, sis.”

“Hey.” Lauren smiled at the sound of her voice. So normal, in a time when her own life seemed anything *but* normal.

“How’s the vacation going?”

What a question. “It’s...interesting, let’s say that.”

“Hmm. Where are you again?”

“Picture Smoky Mountains, fabulous lake, gorgeous house. I just had a glass of wine on the deck.”

There was a snort. “Thanks. I’ve weeded the garden, did dishes, and balanced my checkbook this morning. Not good there, by the way, but it never is,” her sister said dryly. “I take it you and Drew are having a good time.”

“Yes.” She hesitated and then said neutrally, “Rob’s girlfriend didn’t come so it’s just the three of us.”

“Well that’s too bad, but you like him, right? I met him once at that barbeque. Tall, dark, got the brooding gorgeous poet look going? He seemed like a nice guy. He and Greg started talking computer speak, though. That always makes me wander off as fast as possible.”

Did she like Rob? No. Nothing so simple. She had a feeling she was as in love with him as she was with Drew.

“I think Rob is a great person in every way.” It was the truth. “That’s kind of the reason I’m calling. I need some advice. Or an opinion, anyway.”

“That’s what big sisters are for.” Carolyn sounded amused. “Not that you ask very often but go ahead and shoot.”

Lauren sat down on one of the barstools by the kitchen counter and took a quick breath. “Rob wants to buy a house and has asked Drew if he wants to invest and move in. A very nice house. Big, swimming pool, that sort of thing. Drew told me he has been thinking about asking me to live with him anyway, so...well, I might move in, too. What do you think?”

There was a brief pause. “Well, you *do* hate living in an apartment.”

“I know.”

“And you and Drew seem to be doing well, or at least it seems like it to me.”

Oh, Carolyn had no idea. Apparently, their relationship was solid enough to withstand her having sex with another man. Actually, she couldn't think of Rob that way. He wasn't “another man” he was another...love? Lover? Friend?

All of the above. The night before had been pretty fantastic. They were still discovering each other she knew, but the chemistry had always been there, which had brought on this whole situation. Drew was intense, teasing, and inventive in bed. Rob was not at all the same, but it didn't matter, just thought of either of them made her a bit weak-kneed.

She managed to say in an even tone, “We get along great. Actually, all *three* of us seem to get along just fine. As you know, Rob and Drew have been friends for years. I don't see how we couldn't get along as roommates. So you don't think it would be a bad idea?”

“Mom and Dad might freak a little at first at the idea of you living with your boyfriend, but that's inevitable. I am sure they tell themselves you and Drew have separate bedrooms on this trip.”

If they only knew...except God forbid, Lauren thought with an inner sigh. “They can't be that naïve.”

A chuckle came across. “Probably could be, but I can't say for sure since we'd never talk about sex. Anyway, if you and Drew are at the place where you're thinking about living together, I say go for it.”

After she ended the call by asking after the kids, Carolyn's husband, Greg, and some other small talk, she snapped the phone shut thoughtfully. If her sister didn't think it was too odd she was considering a communal living arrangement, then maybe it could work. Everyone would think she and Drew were together as they had all along, and there would be no questions.

Until everyone realized Drew was gone three weeks out of every month and it was she and Rob there alone together seventy-five percent of the time.

She wandered over to the French doors and gazed outside, only abstractly seeing the trees and water.

* * * *

The bass was a nice size, at least four pounds, and Drew took a quick picture of it with his phone, forwarding it to his father who he knew would get a kick out of it. Then he gently removed the lure from its mouth and settled it back into the water, shaking the droplets from his fingers and watching as it recovered and disappeared in the water with a quick swish of its tail. “I can’t keep a beauty like that.”

Rob didn’t disagree, one dark brow cocked upward. “Hey, I like burgers, anyway, and this way we don’t have to clean it. If you have a picture and a witness, Lauren can’t say we were just wasting our time.”

“No, we aren’t wasting our time.” Drew gave him a meaningful glance. “Not fishing, which I like to do whether we catch anything or not, and not with her either. Did she say anything last night while I was zoned on the couch?”

“About the house? We talked a little bit.”

“I’m sure not too much,” Drew said dryly. When he’d woken up to total disorientating darkness and managed to finally figure out where he was and that the power was out, he’d fumbled out of the family room. Somehow he’d found his way to the kitchen with only one stubbed toe, which was actually impressive in a strange house. Rob had pointed out where the flashlight was kept when they arrived, and Drew used it to make his way upstairs. He wasn’t all that surprised to find Lauren and Rob naked and asleep, Rob’s arm draped over her stomach, his cheek resting on her outspread hair.

“Not too much,” Rob admitted, his hazel eyes holding just a slight wary look. “It was the first time we were alone. I wasn’t sure how you’d feel.”

Drew rubbed his jaw, the discovery of them together sparking an interesting—albeit unconventional—reaction. He’d have felt guilty for falling asleep on the couch and leaving Lauren upstairs alone during a storm that caused a blackout. She could take care of herself, but it was the idea of it. Rob had been there instead and it was a good thing.

“I’m fine with it, remember? If she’s happy, I’m all good. As far as I am concerned, the new status quo is a damn sight better than all the tension. I’ve never had a better vacation, so relax. Part of the reason I think all of us living together would be a great thing is she’d have you when I’m gone. I don’t like the idea of her being alone for weeks at a time. I’ve worried all along she might get tired of it; might meet someone else because she’s lonely or bored.”

“Maybe. I don’t see her ever dumping you for someone else, but the lifestyle would be a little difficult.” Rob adjusted the trolling motor and turned back, his expression serious. “I’m pretty pumped about the idea of going ahead with the house deal and I hope she’ll agree, but I can’t but think I’m getting the best end of it. I’ll be there—with her—all the time, Drew. Have you thought about that part enough for us to go ahead with it?”

He had. It was a perfect solution in so many ways. “I’m never going to be that *guy*, you know?” he said slowly. “Turning on the sprinklers, repairing the shed, picking up kids from school...I’m not knocking it...it just isn’t me. I can’t get up in the morning, battle traffic, eat lunch at my desk, and go home to just do the same thing the next day. I’d lose my mind.”

“I can’t see you doing it either.”

After all, Rob knew him pretty well.

“You see? It’s a little selfish, but this way, I get the best of both worlds. My condo is okay, but right now I come back to just a place.

If we all do this, I'd come back to a home. All the stuff I hate to do would be your responsibility, plus during my time off, I'd want some alone one on one with Lauren. I'm not particularly talking about sex either. Out to dinner or a movie maybe, a walk in the park, whatever. Are *you* going to be okay with that?"

"Am I going to get possessive?" Rob reeled in his line, his profile distant for a moment. "I don't think so if I don't feel that way now. I should be. *You* should be. Why aren't we? There isn't a set of rules for this apparently, or if there are, I don't know them. Normally, would I? Hell yes. But it's you, and it's Lauren, and somehow it's me, too."

"That's a pretty good way of putting it." Drew looked out over the lake in thoughtful contemplation. "I guess when I thought about what life would be like I always wondered what kind of woman would ever settle for just what I have to offer. No standard structure, at least not in a traditional sense. It isn't fair in a lot of ways to ask what I do from Lauren."

The boat drifted and the afternoon sun was warm on his back. A fish jumped with an impressive splash nearby but neither of them made a move to cast. Rob's brows gathered just slightly in a mannerism Drew had seen a hundred times. Finally he said, "We need to make sure we always talk. That she talks to us, too."

"We've never had a problem with that."

"No, but that was before."

Before they loved the same woman. Drew agreed, but then again, to a certain extent he felt more comfortable than ever in a relationship finally that he wasn't itching to leave. "I trust you. Obviously a lot. I'm not going to compete with you for what Lauren has to give. One person can love a lot of people. I love my parents, my grandparents...you get what I'm saying. It isn't an exclusive club with only so many members admitted, Rob."

"She said close to the same thing last night."

"So you *did* talk." He grinned.

Rob lightened up, his mouth curving. "Like I said, a little bit."

"She's incredible, isn't she?"

"*More* than a little bit," Rob agreed.

"I say tonight we rock her world." Drew raised a brow, reaching for the cooler.

"How so?" Rob's eyes flickered with interest.

"I have something in mind."

"Yeah, you usually seem to." It was a wry observation. "Clue me in."

Before he could answer, Drew felt his phone vibrate. He was supposed to be on vacation so he didn't have it on ring, but he was so used to carrying it. If there was an emergency, he needed to be available. He pulled it out of his pocket, glanced at the screen, and flipped it open. "It's Lauren," he told Rob briefly, feeling a flicker of alarm as he answered. "Babe?"

"Hi...umm, sorry to bother you guys but I thought Rob might want to know...well, Karen could make it after all. She just got here."

Oh shit, that's awkward. Really, really awkward. He'd heard the same echo in her voice as she delivered the news.

"Okay." Drew took in a breath. "I'll tell Rob. We'll come right on in."

"Thanks."

He closed the phone. "I guess Karen's here."

Rob friend looked paralyzed for a moment. Then he took a sip of beer and said in a grim tone, "That is a complication I didn't expect. I don't think I even gave her directions to get here. She called me early last week to cancel."

"I've always told you I thought she has an agenda."

"Lawyers normally do." Rob twisted the motor handle and the boat began to move back in the direction they'd come.

"That's my line," Drew said neutrally. It wasn't like he had any illusions about how Rob really felt about Karen anyway, but he was sympathetic to this new twist. For all of them, actually, because he

wasn't Karen's biggest fan and now especially her presence would make them uncomfortable.

"What are you going to tell her?" He noted the unhappy set of Rob's mouth.

"She's asked me before if there is someone else. I would never say to her it's Lauren, but I think I owe her the truth. Not that we have ever been serious, but because I did ask her to come on this vacation and I am pretty sure she had certain expectations of what that meant."

"Being shown to a separate guest bedroom is probably going to raise a few questions in her mind. At least that's what I'm assuming you're going to do."

Rob made a derisive sound. "I didn't sleep with her before because of Lauren when I thought it was a hopeless infatuation. Do you think I would now? It wouldn't have been fair to Karen because it would have just been sex, and wouldn't be fair to either of them now."

"I agree, but I don't envy you the explanation. What are you going to say? Sorry, babe, I'm not interested in a casual fuck no matter how much you want to give me one? Besides, you don't turn me on, someone else does. But hey, if you want to stay for the rest of the week, feel free."

A sour smile curved Rob's lips. "I think I can be a little more diplomatic than that, Fletcher."

"I wish you luck. Karen has never struck me as the type to back off if she wants something. That go-after-it mentality may serve her well as a lawyer, but it might be damned uncomfortable for you."

"I'm not looking forward to it," Rob muttered as they swung out of the cove and the dock came into sight.

Drew was pretty sure that was the understatement of the year, but he said nothing, his attention caught by something that glinted high up the trees to their left.

Only the top story of the Heaton place was visible because of the slope of the hill where it was located, the railed deck probably giving

a spectacular view of the lake. The flash of light came again as they moved and Drew saw someone standing up there. As he narrowed his eyes and stared, startled by the idea maybe the guy was watching them, the figure moved out of sight, disappearing into the house.

Since there was no one else on the lake, it seemed logical they were the object of interest.

A bit unsettling to think so, but logical.

Heaton—if it was him—should have better things to do with his time if his wife was missing.

“The girls are on the porch.” Rob nodded toward the house, distracting him. As they got closer, Drew saw he was right, through the path cut through the trees, he could see Karen and Lauren in chairs, obviously waiting.

“This is going to be a fun evening,” he murmured, his mouth quirking.

“Yeah, I bet it is,” Rob agreed sardonically.

Chapter Nine

The lake by a rising moon should be romantic, but the effect was spoiled if Rob's intent was to sever a would-be love affair. The pale light reflected on the still water, the trees were silent except for the keening insects, and as they walked out onto the dock, Rob felt a certain sense of fatalistic amusement over his plight.

Karen could argue with the best of them as a top notch trial attorney. Her sharp intellect was one of the things he did admire about her, not just that she was also a very attractive woman physically. There was no question she didn't have the same impact on him as Lauren, but then again, no one ever had. He knew Drew, with his casual good humor and lax attitudes toward the rules except when it came to flying an aircraft, didn't care for Karen, but they were just two really different people. Personally, Rob liked her, but from the beginning there had been a subtle battle over who controlled their relationship he didn't realize at first was even happening. When he did figure out she always managed to be the one who picked the restaurant, the movie, even the time of any date, he didn't feel emasculated, but did experience an escalated sense of caution. Even if he hadn't found himself so fascinated with another woman, he was pretty sure Karen was all wrong for him in a lot ways.

"This is really gorgeous in a gothic, spooky kind of way." At five-eleven, she was only a few inches shorter than he was, and she could look him right in the eyes. "You know, throw in some background organ music and a monster or two rising out of the lake and you'd have a horror movie."

“That angle never occurred to me.” Hands in his pockets, he glanced out over the dead quiet water. “Maybe I don’t have the right kind of imagination.”

“Maybe. Let me ask you this, Rob. What do you imagine for tonight?”

The light thrown by the brilliant moon was a disadvantage after all. She could probably read his expression of resignation pretty easily. “Sleep.”

There was a pause. She said eventually, “Ah, I see. We’re not talking together. Or even afterwards, are we? Different rooms, different beds, nothing beforehand. I guess I’m not surprised.”

“You could have called me to say you were coming. My cell isn’t on, but I check my messages.”

“And in other words saved myself the trip?” There was a slight bitter edge to her voice and her hair looked very pale in the silvered light. “Can you tell me why the hell you invited me in the first place? Give me that much.”

“At the time I was still thinking this could work out.”

“But that’s changed?” Her features were slashed to bone and angle.

“Yes.”

“You sound pretty positive, Rob.”

“I’m sorry.” He was, but only in the sense he hadn’t ever set out to hurt her.

“At dinner it was obvious Lauren and Drew knew about this. In fact, Lauren looked so startled when I pulled in I half expected you’d brought someone else from the look on her face.”

“No.” At least the denial was accurate.

“But ‘someone else’ exists. I’ve been sure of that for weeks, maybe even the last two months.”

She was perceptive, but that was half her job, at a guess. That meant there was really no use defending himself—and they needed to

have this conversation—but he wasn't enjoying it. Very quietly, he said, "She exists. It's just...complicated."

"Are you in love with her?"

It wasn't her business. Well, maybe it was at this particular moment. He admitted, "Yes."

"Isn't that fucking perfect." Karen looked away, her profile sharp. Then she took in an audible breath and looked back. "Okay. What's the hang up then? Is she married?"

"Don't cross examine me, please, Karen. Suffice it to say I'm sorry about how this turned out for us. I take the responsibility, too. It wasn't my intention to be an asshole, but I still feel a little like one."

"A little, Rob? Thanks for that nod anyway." She turned and started to walk back up to the house. "I'm leaving. I really couldn't afford to take the time off right now, anyway. We're buried at the office."

"Now?" He glanced at his watch. It was after ten. "It's late. Don't be stupid. You drove hours to get here and drank alcohol with dinner. Stay and we'll talk about this tomorrow."

She stopped on the path and swung around. "Will it change anything?"

Well, fuck.

"No," he admitted.

"Yeah, well, there you go. I'd rather leave. If I get tired driving back, I'll get a motel room somewhere."

This was worse than he imagined. "I'd feel better if you stayed."

"That's kind of funny, you know. I have a feeling you can't wait to get rid of me."

He'd known this wouldn't be fun, but *shit*. "Look, Karen, it isn't like I don't feel anything at all for you, so yes, you flouncing off in the middle of the night would worry me. Give me enough credit for that. Just stay. Your things are unpacked and these roads are really confusing, even in broad daylight, until you get to the state highway

anyway. I can't see any reason we have to act like teenagers over this. It didn't work out for us. It happens."

Her mouth twisted, making her face a macabre mask in the silvered light and shadows. "You know, that's really our problem. You are so damned oblivious to how I feel. For me, I thought it could work out. You're just what I'm looking for, Rob. Smart, good looking, successful...pretty much what I had in mind for the future. I even like your sense of humor. I like everything about you except you're apparently into someone else."

What was he supposed to say? Thanks? He opted to stay silent.

She blew out a breath and shook her head, the swing of her hair brushing her chin. "I knew better than to just drive down here. But when I called your mother and asked for directions, I decided to go ahead because I had this feeling if I came this would be my chance to figure out where I stood with you. The signals you've sent ever since we met are so confusing I can never remember being so out of the loop on what a guy was feeling. I guess I was dead on with my hunch this trip would clue me in."

He felt bad, but neither was he willing to absorb all the responsibility. The little list she'd just given him was a measure of her idea of commitment, and even without Lauren in the picture, it was not at all his idea of a true romance. Smart and good-looking probably would be listed after successful if he asked Karen to put the important points in line, and her materialistic edge had always put him off.

Not to mention that what he did and what he looked like were not a measure of who he was. Rob asked abruptly, "How many times a day do you think about me?"

"What?" She still stood on the moonlit path, arms at her sides, her blink indicative of surprise both at the abrupt question and his tone.

"A dozen?" He raised his brows. "More? Less? When you get up in the morning? When you go to bed at night? At lunch? During a meeting? When you're at the grocery store?"

Her eyes narrowed. “I worked my ass off to clear up a case to get here, Rob. Besides, I get that you’re trying to make a point, but as I’ve noted, you don’t seem to be clued in to what *I’m* feeling. Every person is different in how they get involved with someone.”

She hadn’t answered his question and they both knew it.

Dryly, he said, “On that point we agree more than you know. Just the same, even though I’m flattered you like me and why you think things between us could work out, you might want to ask yourself if you don’t want a little bit more, Karen. I may not be as perceptive as you want me to be, but I think I might have noticed if you had fallen in love with me. I can only speak from personal experience, but the real thing seems to control a great deal of your waking time.”

There was a ripple on the lake. Just a faint splash but in the ensuing pause, it sounded very loud. Karen turned and looked away, giving him her profile for a moment. Then she said with a hint of humor, “You don’t pull any punches now do you? Nice summation, Rob. You just neatly outlined my lack of depth and your level of involvement with this other woman in one succinct paragraph.”

“I never said you lacked depth.”

“You don’t need to, it was implied.” She sighed and ran a hand through her hair. “Look, I admit I’m tired. I’ll take off in the morning. I could be back in the office by afternoon and still get some things done. And, no, I’m not going to give you a no hard feelings speech right now, so don’t expect it, but at least things are settled.”

It was a relief to not have to break it off when they got back to Indiana, but this hadn’t been very pleasant, either. “I suppose that is one way to look at it. Let’s walk back up to the house.”

* * * *

Drew emerged from the bathroom, hair still damp, nude, toweling off his torso. It wasn’t a bad sight at all, and Lauren turned from where she stood by the window and felt a twinge of appreciation

despite the fact she was distracted by wondering what was happening at that moment between Rob and Karen.

“He’s a big boy.” Drew picked up a pair of clean boxers and slid them on. He shot her a searching glance. “You know he’s not going to say anything about you, Lauren.”

There was just the slightest hint of reproof in his voice. It was reassuring to know he would defend Rob, even to her. It was evidence of that bewildering three way thing again. Her and Drew, her and Rob, and the two of them also. She said, “I know. This particular situation brings home—I suspect not for the first time—how difficult things are going to be.”

“It depends on how you define difficult.”

“I define it as having to hide a pretty important of your life,” she retorted.

“Hmm. Nice to know we’re important.” Drew smiled and came over to slide his arms around her. He dropped a very light kiss on her mouth. “It’s my opinion you worry too much. And your opinion I don’t worry enough, I know. Look at the bright side. Our situation has some advantages, babe, we’ve always got Rob as a third opinion.”

She ran a hand over the muscled curve of his shoulder. “I’m outnumbered.”

“I get the impression you kind of like that.” The teasing light in his eyes was familiar and part of what made him so attractive. “Did you know?”

“Did I know what?” Lauren traced the impressive bulge of a bicep with her fingertips. He worked out and it showed. Drew had the kind of trim, hard body that turned female heads, no doubt about it. Throw in the pilot thing and no wonder she was hooked.

“How much you’d like it. Was it a fantasy? Two guys, both turned on as hell, wanting you at the same time.”

“No, not that I know of.” She shook her head, but she felt a slight flush rise in her neck to touch her face. Had it been? If so, not a

conscious one because she still had difficulty not rejecting the idea on principle.

“Oh, come on.” Drew’s voice dropped a little into a persuasive whisper and his hands caressed the small of her back. “Everyone has fantasies. It’s healthy and normal, not a dirty secret. Tell me one of yours.”

She laughed, but it was a little breathless. “I don’t think so, Andrew Fletcher. You can be dangerous when given information. Besides, I hate to disappoint you, but I really don’t spend all my time sitting around thinking about sex, believe it or not.”

“That’s a damn pity.” He leaned down and nipped at the curve of her neck, just the slightest pressure of his teeth along the tender skin. “I think about it pretty often, especially since the minute I met you. It’s so clear. Like a picture in my mind. That day had sucked...I hate shopping, much less Christmas shopping with all the damn crowds, and then I looked over and saw you there in the store and I was just blown away. When you left your purse on the counter, I swear I just dumped the stuff I was buying on the floor.”

It had been an unusual way to meet, but he was right, it had been the same for her. Flustered and harried from trying to get the last minute gifts she needed taken care of, she’d paid for her purchases at a big downtown department store. In the process of trying to figure out how to carry all her bags and boxes out to the parking garage where she’d left her car, she’d just walked away from her purse. The busy clerk hadn’t noticed, but apparently Drew, standing in line to checkout, had seen her abandoned purse, and he’d grabbed it and chased out of the store after her. When he’d caught up her he’d insisted on helping her carry—which meant he carried all of them—her packages to her car, and then invited her for coffee. She’d almost refused because she really didn’t have the time, but those gorgeous blue eyes had a very predictable effect.

“I think my nose was running since I had a cold, and I know my hair was mess because it was snowing and blowing like crazy.” She

leaned into him, smelling the clean scent of soap and male. “I’m still surprised you asked me out.”

“You looked gorgeous.”

“Yeah, right.” He’d been the gorgeous one, tanned from a trip to Egypt, with his sun-streaked blond hair and sexy smile.

“I’m serious, red nose and all.” His hands cupped her ass and adjusted her closer, so she could feel the rigid length of his erection through the thin material of his shorts. His breath was warm against her ear. “I knew as we sat there and you sipped your cappuccino I was going to fall in love with you.” The romantic sentiment was punctuated in true irreverent teasing Drew fashion as he added, “I also knew I really wanted to fuck you. I’m not sure which revelation came first. Who gets a hard on over a first cup of coffee? Obviously you had an impact. Like now.”

The window was open to the pleasant night and Lauren could feel the slow breeze brush her heated skin. Her breasts tightened and she didn’t even bother to say anything about the vulgar word she didn’t particularly care for. She knew Drew said it to tease her on purpose. “Should we?”

“Make love?” Drew gave an inelegant snort. “Hell yes, we should, babe. Do you think Rob expects us to abstain because he can’t be here? I don’t expect you two to not sleep together when I’m gone.”

She still felt a little guilty because she knew whatever Rob and Karen were discussing it probably wasn’t a very comfortable conversation. But all thoughts of any man except the one with her were banished as Drew suddenly dropped to his knees in front of her. He unfastened her shorts and pulled them down, fingering her panties for a moment, brushing her labia underneath the silky material with a practiced touch.

“Have I mentioned how much I like the fact you wear sexy underwear? But, as much as I love them, they’ve got to go. I need access.” He kissed her thigh where the elastic followed the line where

leg met torso, his tongue tracing the inner curve as his hand hooked the top of her panties and eased them down.

Not off. Just enough to expose her pussy. Mid-thigh at best, so she really couldn't spread her legs. Standing there, looking down at his supplicant pose as he leaned in and nuzzled her pubic hair, Lauren felt herself sway and the rush of moisture between her legs.

Oh, God.

His tongue invaded in a delicate parting of the sensitive folds, finding her clit, touching it in a slow rasping movement. Her neck arched back and her hands flew to his shoulders as she made an inarticulate sound in response.

"I love the way you taste," he murmured, his hands spanning her hips. That firm grip strengthened as he pressed closer, finding her vaginal opening and slipping his tongue inside in a tantalizing imitation of intercourse. The wet, heated slippery motion of the intimate invasion made her give a low moan and his fingers flexed against her ass in response to the noise. Lauren closed her eyes, pleasure washing over her in erotic waves.

Maybe she did have a fantasy or two. This certainly felt like one, with Drew's talented mouth buried between her legs and his tongue eagerly working her to orgasm. She braced her weight on his wide shoulders and felt the delectable shudders start, the soft sound of him tasting the fluids of her enjoyment audible even through her own frantic pants.

She didn't intend to scream. Maybe she always did, it was difficult to know when the force of erotic release bore down like a whirlwind and enveloped her. She shuddered at the exquisite rush, barely able to keep standing, not even objecting as he stood up in one fluid motion with her trembling body face down over his shoulder, bare ass in the air, her underwear still half on.

He carried her to the bed, bent to drop her sated body down on her back, and grinned as he jerked off her panties. "I take it you liked that, babe. I think most of the surrounding countryside knows you did."

Well, damn, the door was closed, but he was right, the window was wide open.

“There’s no one around,” she managed to say as he shoved down his shorts and stepped free. His erection was blatant and she could see the glisten of semen seeping from the tip already. That was one thing about Drew, he was as turned on by giving oral sex as she was at being on the receiving end, which in her opinion worked out very well.

For a moment, a frown crossed his face. “Don’t sell our neighbor short. He was watching me and Rob today with a telescope from the upper deck of his house when we were out in the boat.”

That was a bit startling. “Really?” Lauren lifted to her elbows, staring at him. “Why would he do that?”

“How the hell do I know? And for the record, right now I don’t give a damn.” He stepped closer, so he was right next to the edge of the bed. “Care to reciprocate? Watching you with Rob the other night was good...I was surprised how much I got off on it. But getting the real thing yourself is even better.”

She rolled to her knees, gave him a provocative smile, and felt an inner glimmer of wonder at her own audacity. Nothing she’d done this vacation was in character. She was still wearing her blouse—only her blouse—and she unbuttoned it and slid it off her shoulders. “I assume you want me naked,” she asked in a soft voice.

“You can probably count on that every second of every day.” He sounded amused, but the husky note in his voice betrayed his excitement also as he stared at her breasts. “You have the most perfect tits, babe, I’m telling you.”

“I admit I haven’t seen a lot of them, but this seems nice, too.” She shimmied on her knees so she knelt at the edge of the bed right in front on him and reached out a finger to skim his erection. Base to tip, testing every inch of velvet skin.

His eyes closed briefly. “It’s all yours.”

“That’s promising.”

“Hmm.”

“How would you like me to do this?”

“Oh, believe me, you can’t go wrong. Mouth on dick. Or is it dick in mouth? It’s kind of hard to think right now with no blood left in my brain. But anyway, there you go. It’s that simple.”

“What about these?” She cupped his testicles, holding them lightly in her palm. They felt full and tight.

“Jesus, Lauren.”

She lowered her head, her hair falling in a veil around her face as she licked the crest of his rigid penis and then took him in her mouth.

Drew, predictably, was not as restrained as Rob. He cupped her head and thrust lightly as she began to suck and lick, his harsh breathing an indication of his enjoyment. One hand wound into her loose hair and held her in place as he took over the rhythm, not quite gagging her but close, moving his erection in and out as his staccato gasps became more and more audible.

Like Rob, he was the one who pulled away, but unlike her other lover, he didn’t ask permission but instead pushed her down to her back with urgent hands and was between her legs before she could do more than give a breathless laugh, his cock driving deep.

All the way in, so they were fused for that crucial moment, need taking on a whole new meaning. Drew seemed half-frantic as he began to thrust, and she wasn’t any better, fingernails digging in, her body taut and needy, their lovemaking turning into something both fierce and a little bit primal.

The pinnacle came and she poised there, teetering, her aroused body tense. The burst as she climaxed took the breath right out of her body and a moment later Drew followed, eyes shut, a low groan punctuating the rush of his ejaculation.

They were half on and half off the bed, Lauren gradually realized, muffling a small laugh. Drew still had his feet on the floor, partially lying on top of her, and her legs were around his waist. She touched

the softness of his hair, making him lift his head. “We might want to move to a more comfortable position.”

“I can say with a great deal of conviction that if my cock is inside you, I’m comfortable.” A lazy grin accompanied that speech, but he did withdraw and lifted her up with an ease that was impressive, settling her in a more traditional way on the big bed. He didn’t join her but walked over to the window for a moment, one arm braced against the frame, his face toward the screen. “That breeze feels good. I think I might have worked up a little sweat there.”

“All in a good cause.” Lauren felt a languorous sense of physical contentment. “I should get up and take a shower myself. Care for a second one?”

“With you? Hell yes. The day I turn down that invitation, have them check me for a pulse, will you?”

“You can hold me upright.”

“I have just the right prop, babe, but you’ll have to give me a minute.”

If there was one thing she could say about him, he had the ability to make her laugh at almost any time. “Not everything I say is a sexual invitation, Drew.”

“More’s the pity about that.” He stood there, unselfconsciously nude, and asked in an off-hand voice, “Having you been thinking about the house? Rob said the two of you discussed it a little bit last night.”

“We did. Some.”

“Yeah, I gathered not too much.”

She hesitated but then asked simply, “Does it bother you he and I slept together while you were downstairs?”

“He asked me the same thing earlier.”

“And?”

“No.”

“Just like that?”

He turned around, brows lifted. “Just like that.”

Well, that was Drew. She could tell he meant it and to him, it *was* that easy.

“As for moving in...I made a list. The pros pretty much do outweigh the cons. I called Carolyn, too, and she thought the idea was okay.” After the call to her sister she’d sat down and tried to logically dissect the controversial idea. Putting it on paper helped to clarify it in her mind. She just worked that way.

Predictably, Drew laughed at her and shook his head. “You made a *list*? That’s my girl. I’m not surprised, I guess. Okay, tell me, I’m dying to know. What was the number one reason for moving in with us?”

Number one. That was easy. She’d written fantastic sex right at the top, but it had been more tongue in cheek than anything. Yes, the sex was great, but real life was filled with a lot more than what happened in bed. The number one reason was the idea of making a home with both of them.

Lauren looked him in the eye and lied, her mouth twitching. “Two guys to take out the trash. What else?”

Chapter Ten

He couldn't sleep. Ben paced the floor and gave the clock on the mantle an irritated glance. Three in the fucking morning. By now he was too tired to work, his laptop and scattered notes sitting on the coffee table, untouched since just after midnight. Even scotch didn't help when he got this way. Writing always wound him up, made him restless, and tonight was worse than ever.

Regina's disappearance had made national news.

Right there on goddamned CNN, the echo of the brief report on the local news on both broadcasts. That her purse was found in Georgia and the authorities there had taken dogs out to look for her were mentioned, and then it had been over, just one brief view of the park and several uniformed officers with canines and it was gone.

The sheriff had stopped by. No suspicious prints in her car, none on the opener for the boat house, either. There was no cash in her purse—anyone could have taken that—but her credit cards all there.

Quite the dead end, the man had said apologetically, looking uncomfortable immediately at his choice of words. They'd keep looking and since the investigation had moved across state lines, he'd turned over information to federal authorities, also.

The easiest way to deal with all this was to write. If Ben worked on his new book, he didn't have to worry over anything because his mind was occupied.

The Beautiful Triad right now had him perplexed. He'd christened them that because it fit. They were all good looking—from their cars, speech, and demeanor, also well-educated and successful—and presented a nice variety. Blond surfer boy with his slightly irreverent

air and overt masculinity. Tall, dark and more serious second guy, who could be a Hollywood stand in for any handsome male lead, and of course, the main attraction, Lauren Hanes with her perfect body and striking feminine beauty...

The arrival of the second woman bothered him. He was so sure he was right, that there was something going on between the three of them and then a fourth party—of the correct sex to balance it all out—had appeared on the scene.

It threw him off.

He plopped down on the couch and stared at the computer screen.

Socially acceptable male and female relationships are governed by a variety of motivations: physical attraction, procreation, companionship (especially important among the elderly) and all too often, monetary considerations.

The last point didn't sound impartial. Maybe he should delete it.

Actually, he thought with cynical amusement, maybe he should instead devote an entire chapter to it. *Married for their Money: Is it Prostitution?*

That idea had merit, he decided. He knew about half a dozen men—and a few women, too—who could give him excellent testimonials on the subject. He'd been to the country club and seen those old men with the young luscious girls on their arms, and known there was only one reason those pretty little things would spread their firm thighs for a withered pecker and that was money.

Bitches. If there was one thing that struck him wrong it was a venal woman.

He doubted Lauren Hanes fell into that category. He'd guess her two lovers both made a good living but he also knew she did, as well. Two discreet phone calls and he knew she worked as an actuary for a top company in Indianapolis and despite how young she was, he had a fair idea of her salary.

If they really both were her lovers. The idea he was wrong depressed him, made him lose perspective and focus. If the assumed scenario was true, who was the tall blonde? He'd watched the house all day—tomorrow he needed to use sunscreen because his nose and forehead were burned from staying on the deck for so long—but he really hadn't seen much except for the two young men out fishing and then the BMW pulling in mid-afternoon. They'd eaten dinner at seven on the deck, but it was casual, burgers and potato salad and a few beers. The dark-haired one—Hanson—had taken the blonde for a walk later on but they hadn't even as much as touched each other and it seemed like they were arguing. In the damned dark it was hard to tell.

Yes, the blonde was a loose thread he didn't like.

* * * *

Heltonville wasn't exactly brimming over with industry, but it did have a decent grocery store, and at midday on a Wednesday the place was pretty quiet. Drew pushed the cart down the aisle, scanning shelves and trying to figure something inventive to make, since it was his turn to come up with a plan for dinner.

His cooking skills were underdeveloped to say the least, but he'd cheated the last time and taken them all out. Lauren had cooked at least part of every meal each night but the first one, so he was determined to somehow pull an entire menu together on his own.

At least Karen had left that morning. Bright and early. He'd been awake, Lauren's very tempting warm body next to him, an early morning erection making a persuasive case for him to wake her in a very satisfactory way. The sound of the car starting surprised him, but then again, maybe it shouldn't have. Even though he wasn't present didn't mean he didn't have a pretty good idea how the conversation between Rob and his now very definite ex-girlfriend went. With or without Lauren, the woman wasn't right for him anyway, in Drew's

opinion, so the fact things worked as they did was just fate as far as he was concerned.

He stopped at the meat case, the selection not exactly staggering, and debated boneless chicken breasts versus salmon steaks. Surely he could grill either one and not screw it up too bad...

"Hello...Fletcher, right?"

Drew glanced up. He saw a man in his mid-fifties, medium height, fair hair thinning hair brushed back, expensive khaki slacks and casual light blue shirt, fashionable glasses without rims perched on his nose.

"Hello, Dr. Heaton." He automatically put out his hand, not sure of the protocol when running into a man he'd last seen inquiring about his missing wife. No to mention that Drew was pretty sure the professor had been the one on the deck with the telescope. The guy had been pretty far away but he'd been blond.

Heaton took it and the shake was little more than a brief pressure. "You have the same blank look I do, I think, when trying to decide on something that might eventually involve cooking. Gino's is a pretty good alternative. Have you tried it?"

"The Italian place? Yes, just a few nights ago." Drew grimaced. "I'm supposed to actually make something tonight. My turn."

Behind the clear lenses on his glasses, something flickered in Heaton's eyes. "Is it?"

Why was it the question sounded a little like a sly innuendo? Drew smiled pleasantly. "I'm not exactly a crack chef, but I can suck it up once in a while and manage something edible."

Under the circumstances, small talk felt a bit wrong, but what the hell else could he do? Should he ask about Regina Heaton? No, he decided, because if she'd been found, he doubted the professor would be wandering around the grocery store and chatting up strangers. Usually Drew watched the news on a pretty religious basis because he went out of the country often enough it was nice to be clued in on what was going on around the world. Right now he was on vacation,

though, and other than watching a movie or two and the baseball game that had put him right to sleep, he hadn't switched on the set or bought a paper.

"At least you aren't cooking just for one. For whatever reason, that seems to be the most difficult thing of all." The older man gestured at his still empty cart. "It's a bit hard to find inspiration. I'd go back to Louisville, but I'm...well...waiting, I guess."

It would be a bitch, Drew acknowledged with an inward wince, trying to imagine how difficult it would be to sit around, unable to do anything to find your missing spouse. The telescope thing aside—and he couldn't be sure Heaton was actually watching them—the guy seemed nice enough and he was Rob's uncle's neighbor.

Heaton said without inflection, "It's lonely."

Well, shit, it probably would be, Drew thought. "If you'd like to join us for dinner, you'd be welcome, Dr. Heaton. Keep in mind you are taking a risk because I'm the one cooking, so I make no promises, but—"

"I wasn't fishing for an invitation, but actually, I'd be delighted."

He did look pleased, almost pathetically so, and maybe Drew didn't blame him for he wasn't sure what could be quite so awful as being in the helpless position of just *not* knowing what had happened to someone you love.

"Since you're going to be there, chicken or salmon?" he asked, giving the case a dubious look, a little surprised he'd issued the invitation to a virtual stranger, but what the hell. He had.

"Salmon," Heaton said in succinct decision. "I'll bring the wine."

Drew had to admire the guy's ability to make up his mind. Though it wasn't usually his problem either, grocery shopping was definitely not his forte. "That sounds like a plan. Say...uhm, seven?"

"I'm looking forward to it. I'll see you then."

The professor pushed his empty cart away, the wheels rattling on the linoleum floor.

Drew ordered the fish, then moved on down to produce and picked out some asparagus at an exorbitant price, and some new potatoes. Grill the veggies, boil the potatoes and add butter and parsley, yeah, he could do that. For dessert, ice cream and hot fudge sauce was about as easy as it could be. Besides, he thought with a grin as he checked out, maybe Lauren would reward him for slaving away in the kitchen.

Well, not the kitchen. On the deck maybe over the grill, beer in hand. It was the thought that counted, right?

The inner smile faded. He hoped she wasn't going to be uncomfortable with Heaton coming over. She was sensitive, sometimes to a fault, and he knew the possibility of foul play in the man's wife's disappearance bothered her. For his part, he was a little surprised the police hadn't started some kind of process to drag the lake. If that happened, he was going to be the first one to suggest they cut short their stay and go back to Indianapolis. She didn't need to witness that drama and they had only a few days left anyway. Grisly crime scene investigations were better left to prime time television. Pure fiction was not as terrible as the real thing sometimes.

If there was even a crime, he thought as he loaded groceries in the impractical trunk of his sports car. Heaton's demeanor struck him as a little strange, but then again he'd only been around the man twice, very briefly at that, and how did a man act under those particular circumstances anyway?

If it were Lauren suddenly missing, he'd be frantic.

Jesus, he didn't even want to think about it. The very idea of it made him break out in a sweat and he was glad Rob was with her once the thought crossed his mind.

He got in the car and slammed the door, starting the vehicle and backing it up slowly as he cranked up the air-conditioning. They were supposed to have storms again. It was always a possibility when it was this hot and muggy and it just *felt* like rain though the sky was currently clear as a bell.

It took him forty minutes to go twenty miles, but they were winding miles, part of it through state forest, and when Drew did pull into the long drive, he felt a sense of coming home. Not the house—it wasn't that, but when Lauren set aside her book and came down the steps off the deck with a welcoming smile on her face—now *that* was home.

* * * *

The bottles had quite the fancy French labels. Rob had opened the first one and let it breathe, and he picked it up from the granite countertop. Heaton sat on the leather couch, one leg causally crossed over the other, looking impressively relaxed under the circumstances. Oh, the man was a little wired. It wasn't overt, but instead subtle in the way his hands twitched a little and the sometimes intense focus of his gaze, usually when he looked at Lauren.

Drugs?

He didn't seem the type, but then again, people could fool you.

Rob knew nothing about Regina Heaton but he wondered a little if she might be a beautiful brunette with midnight blue eyes and a stunning figure. Or maybe the guy was just like the rest of them and thought Lauren was a gorgeous girl, hence the fascination.

God knew Rob did.

"So how did you meet?" Heaton asked her the question with a bland smile as Rob came into the room, wine bottle and glasses in hand.

Lauren seemed a little nonplussed. "Uhm...Drew and I?"

Professor Heaton lifted a brow. "I'm not trying to be personal. Forgive me. I get used to asking people direct questions in the course of my research."

She evaded answering. "It must be an interesting way to make a living. Being an author, I mean."

He chuckled. "So is being a gambler. It's sort of the same thing, really. You take the time, write the book, and then just pray. No one, not even your agent or publisher, can predict true success. There's a certain level of expectation, but the public is whimsical sometimes about what they want to read."

"Isn't sex a surefire hot topic?" Drew took a drink of beer from the bottle in his hand and lowered it. "That's what your books are about, aren't they?"

"The last one," Heaton conceded. "And the one I'm working on now."

The professor was definitely urbane, that polished sort of older man with a distinguished air. Rob could see undergrads falling for Heaton maybe, if not for the string of letters after his name and the money, maybe the author mystique. He said, "Do you still teach?"

"Yes. A class or two each semester, usually graduate courses. In the summers I come here to work on my latest book. That's what I'm doing...well, as much as I can. It distracts me. I don't know if you've heard this but they found Regina's purse in Georgia. It was discarded in a state park. The police aren't sure what to make of that, and quite frankly, I am puzzled myself."

"What about the man Lauren saw?"

Heaton frowned at his glass of wine. "The one who supposedly took out the boat? I haven't a clue and the police couldn't find anything. They took the opener and tested it for fingerprints, but there weren't any."

In a quiet firm voice, Lauren said, "He didn't supposedly take it out, Dr. Heaton. He did. Drew didn't see him, but he heard the boat, too."

The older man looked instantly contrite. "I didn't mean to imply you were mistaken, Lauren. Not at all. Forgive me if it sounded that way. All I meant is they can't find any evidence. They looked at the boat, too, and it was empty and there was no sign of anything suspicious. I obviously don't always remember how much gas is in

either boat, so I couldn't help them determine how far it was taken, and you said you didn't see him come back."

"No," she admitted. The spectacular sunset outside sent in jeweled light through the tall living room windows, giving her hair a reddish tint over the golden brown. "We went swimming and then came up here. He was gone at least an hour."

"I wish I could guess who he might be, but I haven't any idea. Neither do the police."

That might be true, but still it was damned odd, Rob thought, in the wake of a woman's disappearance and her car being found at the house. They knew there'd been a trespasser and no one had a clue who the guy might be. What was also odd, in a completely different way, was how the three of them interacted with Professor Heaton. From the moment he arrived he settled easily into using their first names, but they stayed formal and addressed him with not nearly so much familiarity, mostly because he didn't invite it. It wasn't that the guy wasn't personable and friendly, it was something else. Rob couldn't put his finger on it and maybe it was just that college wasn't really that long ago for any of them—just two years for Lauren—and old habits die hard.

"I'm going to put the salmon and asparagus on the grill." Drew stood up. He looked a little uncertain, and Rob wanted to burst out laughing. Usually his friend was smooth and confident in every way but throw the word cooking into a conversation, and he froze up like a frightened deer in front of a speeding car.

"I'll help you," Rob offered.

"The blind leading the blind?" Drew made a derisive noise. "Hell, fine, I'm not proud. I'll even take advice from you, Hanson."

Lauren looked at their guest, an amused look on her face. "The bright side is we can always just drink wine."

Heaton smiled. "If the meal is mangled, it will still be better than sitting home alone."

Rob had to give the guy snaps for being able to be light about it, but once again he felt an odd quiver of unease. It wasn't like he was an expert on how a person should react to this situation, but though Heaton seemed edgy, it wasn't edgy in the right way in his opinion.

Of course, how *did* a person act in this situation? It was hard to tell what was right and wrong. He'd heard people tell jokes at funerals before, so maybe this was the man's way of dealing with it.

Maybe, he thought dubiously.

* * * *

"Would you mind an interview?"

Lauren looked up, surprised. "I'm sorry, what?"

"An interview for the book. We could schedule a time, if you'd like. I tape the sessions usually, so I make sure I don't misquote anyone or get anything wrong because I did it from memory or notes. It's partially for legal purposes, but then again, I won't use your name."

Benjamin Heaton sat there, one leg crossed negligently over the other, his expression benign. The man practically reeked of money, she decided, from his Gucci loafers to his expensive glasses, but he also seemed intelligent to an almost unsettling degree.

"Interview me about what?" The question was cautious and she took a quick sip of her wine. It was very good, smooth and rich, the flavor lingering on her tongue.

"Sex." A faint smile curved his mouth. "It's the topic of the book. You are exactly the right age for the chapter I'm working on now. I need to get a perspective from a sexually active woman in her twenties, not just a college girl, but someone like you who is a young, unmarried professional."

Since at the moment her sex life was not at all the norm, she was *not* a good candidate to discuss the subject, and besides, she wasn't about to give anyone details even if things had just been still between

her and Drew. Lauren gave their guest a small apologetic smile. “I don’t think I could.”

“You might be surprised. It isn’t as hard as it sounds. I just ask the questions I need answered, and if you’ll give me a few honest opinions, it would be really helpful.”

“It would be really embarrassing, you mean.” She essayed an uncomfortable laugh. “I don’t even talk about that subject with my mother.”

“Really? That’s exactly the type of thing I want to know. Don’t worry, this isn’t about the mechanics—we all know how that works—but more a psychological take on something that affects all of us. Let’s face it, Lauren, it’s how we all got here. Our parents had to have intercourse to have us, and as a result we exist, and how do we all feel about that? It’s fascinating, or I think so.”

He might have a point, but she was still pretty sure she wasn’t going to tell a stranger intimate details. Much less have them distributed in a very public and probably—if his house and clothing were any indication—successful book.

“I won’t say it isn’t an interesting topic, but I still doubt I could discuss it.” She did her best to look composed and neutral. Out on the deck, she could hear Rob and Drew talking, plus the whisper of a rising breeze through the trees.

Professor Heaton was obviously amused at her reluctance, lounging on the leather couch, wine in hand. “And they say *your* generation is the enlightened one.”

“In some ways, maybe. The sexual revolution is just something we’ve heard about because it happened before we were born, but also, our parents and their morality have a profound effect on how we think.”

“You see, you *can* talk about it.”

“On an intellectual level, maybe.”

“We could keep it that way, if you wished. Like I said, it isn’t so much about the actual act of sexual consummation as the social and

mental impacts of having a relationship on that level. What inspires the trust for a woman—usually smaller and more vulnerable than her male partner—to agree to something that would put her at physical risk? There has to be an elemental way a male reacts to a female that sends a signal that he will be a tender, caring lover, not an abusive one.”

It was an interesting question, she supposed, but one she wasn’t sure she could answer. “I think you just...know.”

Heaton leaned forward then, elbows on knees, his face intent. His half-empty wine glass dangled from his fingers. “Exactly. But how? That’s what I want to know. Those are the insights I need. What makes you trust him?”

He pointed to the deck, two tall figures visible out the open doors through the screens. Both Drew and Rob stood there, debating in their usual competitive, laughing way over how to cook the salmon.

Which one of them did he think he was asking about? He’d probably be astonished to know both qualified. That would be an interesting addition to his book. Talk about controversial...

Lauren said faintly, “I’m not sure I can answer that.”

“Would you be willing to think about it? Not just the question but the interview. I think you’d be perfect, and quite frankly, you are right here, and so am I. How long are the three of you staying?”

“A few more days.” She still felt less than enthusiastic about the whole thing, but if he was telling the truth and didn’t just want the juicy details of what actually happened, maybe it wouldn’t be a big deal. It was a little flattering, actually, to be asked.

“What about tomorrow?”

He certainly seemed determined, and she wasn’t sure how to refuse. Perhaps he was right, maybe concentrating on something else took his mind off his missing wife. Lord knew she’d be frantic if she was in his position and it seemed almost cruel to turn him down. “I suppose that would be okay.”

“Excellent. Let’s say, ten o’clock?”

Lauren gave a small nod.

Ben Heaton gave her a very charming, compelling smile. “You have no idea how much this will help me in my work.”

Chapter Eleven

The sandwich tasted like sawdust, but then again eating it wasn't so much about the culinary merits of fast food as it was getting something in his stomach. Ken Marzetti looked at the last bite, decided against it, and gathered up the wrapper and stale bread and bunched it together in his fist.

"I take you're heading off to Tennessee?"

He glanced up at the doorway of his office. "Hello to you too, Gonzales."

The woman who leaned there merely inched her dark brows upward in open question, her arms crossed over her chest. "I caught that piece yesterday on the news. Thought of you right away."

He made a decent toss at the trash can by his desk and the wrapper earned him two points. "Heaton's wife is missing. Do you think I wouldn't look into it?"

"This smacks of a personal vendetta, Ken."

"All in the interest of justice, Carla." He plastered a bland smile on his face and his chair creaked back as he shifted his weight.

"You couldn't prove anything last time." Gonzales pointed it out with equanimity, still propped up against the doorjamb. She wore a black suit that made her look boxy, but the unflattering choice was typical. Clunky shoes, pantyhose in an improbable shade of brown, and a bad haircut finished off the look, but underneath there was a keen mind, even if she needed a fashion citation on a daily basis. "Maybe it isn't Heaton. I won't deny he's part of this in some way, but I've said all along it's possible the connection is *about* him but maybe he's not the killer."

“The guy’s poison.” Ken looked down at the notes scattered over his desk. “He interviews a state senator’s bulimic daughter and the girl vanishes two months later.”

“She was a rebellious obviously fucked-up kid. Her disappearance could easily have nothing to do with Dr. Heaton.”

“What about Virginia Marcum?”

“I admit the connection makes him a suspect.”

It sure as hell did. Had the senator’s daughter not disappeared, Ken would never have even thought of some college professor who assumed he could enlighten the world about the way human beings ate, slept, or had sex. However, the day Brittany Lind’s body had been found in the bottom of a streambed, her bones washed clean by the running water— those sad fragments all that was left of a sixteen year old girl—he’d known there was something special about the case. Not sure what it was, just certain in his gut more trouble lay ahead. It had taken him a year and another body to realize Heaton might be a common denominator in some way. The break had been pure chance, one of those stupid things where a remark by one of Marcum’s relatives had sent bells ringing all over the place.

That had been one fateful day, and maybe not just for him.

He picked up a piece of paper and looked it over for about thirtieth time. It described the finding of the second body, this one in a completely different location; a reservoir in southern Kentucky. The corpse had gotten lodged under the spillway and probably would have stayed there indefinitely, unnoticed, except some hapless fisherman actually made the bad cast of the century and hooked it. He had no idea what pound test line the poor guy was using, but it had at least dislodged the half-decomposed remains enough they came up to the surface.

The unlucky man’s lunch had come up, too, when he saw what he’d snagged. He apologized for it four times during their interview, as if puking in a lake thirty miles long would contaminate evidence.

There were entirely too many crime shows on television.

“Virginia Marcum talked to him about her insomnia. She sure as hell doesn’t have that problem any more. Sleeping like the dead.”

“Very funny, Ken.”

“I wasn’t even trying to be funny, believe it or not.”

“So two people he knows are dead. It happens.” Gonzales lifted a badly plucked brow.

“Two people he knows were *murdered*. After talking to him about their problems. And now his wife is conveniently missing.”

“Is it convenient? For all you know he’s madly in love with the woman and heartbroken. He’s the one that reported the disappearance.”

“They’ve been married for fifteen years. Get real.”

“You know that off the top of your head?”

“I know a lot about Heaton off the top of my head.”

“Fifteen years. Oh, I suppose that means he *can’t* be madly in love with her?” Gonzales was a newlywed, her chubby affable husband a very nice guy, and she looked outraged at his cynicism.

He always wondered why she wasn’t more jaded.

“I’m going to go talk to him and find out.” Ken stood, collecting the photos, evidence reports, and making neat piles of his scribbled notes. “I’m going to guess he thinks he’s just dealing with the local yahoos on this deal. I made a few calls this morning and apparently she vanished in a pretty rural area of southern Tennessee. They have a summer house there or something. He’s supposedly got an alibi on this one, but I’m not getting the impression the police down there have run around checking it out.”

“You have it in for him, Ken, I’m telling you.”

“I have a bad feeling, Gonzales, it’s different.”

“If you say so.” She didn’t look convinced.

* * * *

The interior of the house was decorated in an eclectic mixture of elegant and sophisticated furnishings and art, but none of it suited the pine walls and intended rustic feel in her opinion. Lauren sat down in a claw-footed chair upholstered in a plaid of pale pink and lemon yellow and didn't comment.

"Coffee?"

She shook her head.

"Pardon the working mess." Ben Heaton indicated the open laptop and scattered books and papers on the coffee table with a careless wave of his hand. "It doesn't look organized but I promise you it is in my own way."

She kept her own desk tidy and scrupulously neat, but simply said, "Whatever works for you."

He sat down, frowned at the screen and punched a few keys. This morning he wore jeans, pressed to a razor pleat, a red shirt with an insignia tastefully tucked on one corner below the collar, and alligator loafers with no socks. His blond hair was neatly brushed and his glasses a slightly different style than the night before, this pair rimless also, and the gold screws matched the heavy watch on his wrist. Polished was the word that came to mind, urbane probably would be next. Not handsome precisely, but nice looking in a bland sort of way under the expensive clothes and Rolex. Lauren thought that even though the professor seemed absurdly normal under the circumstances, the tension was there, just under the surface. Nothing visible, but she sensed it.

He picked up a small device not much bigger than a credit card and pushed a button. "I'm going to record this if you agree. Like I said last night, it helps me immensely to make sure everything I cite is accurate. I don't use names, but it is still important to me to have records of how each subject responds to my specific questions. Writing it all down is impossible, and this way you don't really have to wait for me to take long notes, but we can just talk to each other and I can lift what I want from the interview later."

That sounded reasonable enough, she supposed, though she still wasn't sure wanted to discuss her personal life. "That's fine, I guess."

"I'll have you sign a release form afterwards. That way if you want to exclude something, you can note it."

"Okay."

Heaton smiled. "You look nervous, but don't be. I'd like you to answer every question but if you can't or don't want to, just say pass. Ready to start?"

"I suppose." Lauren clasped her knees and felt self-conscious.

"Age?"

"Twenty-four."

"College education?"

He'd already said he knew she was a professional, but she said, "Yes, Bachelor's degree in Actuarial Science."

"Number of sexual partners to date."

Well, after all, he was writing a book on sex and that question was an obvious one she expected. "Three."

"Any of them female?"

"No."

"Ever think about having a sexual encounter with a woman?"

"No," she said honestly. "I have never been attracted to one in that way."

Heaton typed something on the computer. He glanced back up. "Do you currently have a steady sexual relationship?"

This was another one she expected. "Yes."

"How often would say in the course of the average week you have intercourse?"

Average? Well, that was hard to say. This past week had been a bit over the top, but she wasn't willing to explain why. Lauren shifted a little and explained, "Drew is a pilot. He's gone quite a bit. I don't think I fit the norm there."

"It doesn't matter if you fit the norm, Lauren, don't worry about that, let me figure out what fits and doesn't. Besides, none of us are

normal. There is no such standard. It's an expression, not a truth. Just answer as best you can. If he's home, how often?"

"Well...quite often."

Heaton slightly lifted his brows. "Every night?"

For the first time, she blushed. She was surprised it had taken that long. "Yes, sometimes."

"Can you come to orgasm through regular intercourse or does he stimulate you in other ways?"

Whoa, not five minutes in and she wanted to drop through the floor. "Pass."

"I have a PhD in psychology, but physiology isn't a deep dark secret to me. Human sexuality is what it is. Men and women have sex and women are as interested in climax as males, it just isn't as easy for them usually." He looked a little amused at her discomfort. "It is part of who and what we are. Of what drives us in many complicated ways. It affects our economy, our politics, the way we process information, in other words, our whole world. Most women do not find sexual release from just ordinary intercourse unless they are already high aroused. The thrust of my question is does he take the care to make sure you do?"

He was right, but it was acutely personal. And did he have to use the word thrust? "Yes," she said faintly.

"In other words, you feel you have a considerate lover."

"Correct."

"What about the other two in the past?"

She thought about Rob, and how different he was, but then again, how well he qualified also in the considerate category. "One wasn't," she admitted, remembering her first foray into an actual sexual relationship. "However, we were both really young."

"You still are." Heaton didn't smile but had an enigmatic expression on his face. "But, yes, experience makes a difference." He stared down at the computer again, his fingers on the keyboard. "All

right, let's tackle some of the more interesting topics. Have you ever had a one night stand?"

"No."

"Sex in a public place?"

"God, no."

"Masturbated in a place you could be caught?"

"No." Well, shit, she was blushing again.

"Do you watch pornography of any kind?"

"I've seen a few mild things, I suppose, but do I watch it? No. I read romance novels, but that's entirely different. They certainly aren't porn."

"I'm not implying in any way disagreement with that, but tell me why *you* think so please."

She thought for a moment. "They're sexy and you get to use your imagination. I think they're actually very moral in a lot of ways, besides being entertaining. The heroine doesn't sleep with hero if she isn't in love with him, or if she does, she falls in love with him at some point, and almost always they end up together by the time the story is done. They are love stories."

"You like the romantic ideal."

"Yes, I do."

"Tell me about your most unusual sexual encounter."

It was the first question that was truly probing and couldn't be answered briefly, and she declined. "Pass."

"Does that mean you've had an encounter that would be considered out of the normal range of accepted sexuality in a woman your age?"

She wasn't sure if age had a damn thing to do with it but that was a whopping yes. She looked him in the eye. "Do people usually answer a question like that?"

Heaton leaned back a little. "You'd be surprised. Some can't wait to tell me. Some are like you, and embarrassed. No need to be, since no one will ever know what you said."

He would know. Admitting to a multiple partner relationship was hard enough, face to face with someone who studied human sexuality was just out of the question.

"I beg to differ. Aren't you going to put it in a book you hope will sell a lot of copies?"

"Yes, but no one will know you're the one who said it."

"Can I make another point? Didn't you just say there is no such thing as normal?"

He gave a small chuckle, but she had the feeling it didn't have anything to do with actual mirth. "Yes, I did, and that's what I get for interviewing someone who isn't just beautiful, but smart. Okay, I surrender on that one and we'll move on."

The compliment was a little unexpected and Lauren chose to not address it. Getting through the interview was her main focus. "Let's do. I'm sorry if I'm not being helpful, but I'm afraid I'm actually kind of boring."

"Neither Andrew Fletcher or Rob Hanson think so. How does that all work?"

Her palms were suddenly damp and her face warm. She stared at the man sitting across from her and tried to act completely nonchalant. "I don't get what you mean. Drew and I have been dating for six months. Rob has been his friend for years."

"You don't think Rob is attracted to you? I do. This is exactly the type of social sexual behavior that fascinates me."

That was *exactly* the type of question she didn't want to answer. "Fascinates you in what way?"

"Never mind, we can go on. What about birth control?"

She was beyond keeping that a secret, just grateful he'd passed on pushing the Rob issue. "The Pill. At first condoms, but we talked it over. We're sometimes spur of the moment and it works better."

Heaton didn't look over but just entered her answer on his computer. He murmured, "I see."

She had a sinking feeling he saw a bit too much.

* * * *

Ben carefully closed the laptop and went into the pantry off the big, shining, and virtually unused kitchen. He poured two fingers of a very expensive single malt, single barrel scotch into a crystal glass, added bottled water and ice, and took a long sip. And then another.

This interview had been, well...interesting. Enjoyable, really. Lauren Hanes had an expressive face, fine-boned, delicate, with those incredible blue eyes...

She'd had both of them. Hanson and Fletcher, both of them. The Beautiful Triad was a reality. He knew it. What's more, she'd figured out easily enough he knew just what was going on at the house next door.

Did she know he'd been watching? Maybe. He had a pretty good idea Drew Fletcher caught him the other day on the lake, but there was one advantage to having a missing wife. People felt sorry for him, extended dinner invitations anyway, just to be polite, especially if he ran into them in the grocery store accidentally-on-purpose.

Ben wandered out into the living room and propped a shoulder against the glass of the sliding door out onto the deck. In the background the air-conditioning clicked on with a low, well-tuned hum.

How would Lauren feel if she knew he'd seen Hanson kiss her just the day before? He'd been waiting for it, sure he was right about what was going on—positive, but still not able to confirm anything, hovering over that damned telescope all day...and then it happened. She'd walked outside and Rob had been on his way in. A smile in the doorway, a laugh, and he'd caught her waist and pulled her in for it. A fucking doozy, too—on the mouth, lips and tongue, his hands on her ass, her fingers in his hair. A serious kiss that probably gave him a hard on. Fletcher had been there, too, sitting on the deck, beer in hand, and he hadn't blinked an eye. Having the Beautiful Triad next

door was like being given a gift he probably didn't deserve, but Ben wasn't going to argue it. He didn't have to have even a modicum of knowledge of psychology to figure out Lauren didn't want anyone to know. She wasn't comfortable yet with the concept of spreading those pretty legs for two guys, but she was doing it, anyway, and he hadn't lied, he was fascinated.

At least the blonde was out of the picture.

What her role was in the relationship he wasn't sure and didn't really care. Some chick who had the hots for Hanson apparently, because he'd been the one out with her the day she arrived and they'd had that argument by the lake. Ex-wife? He'd wondered at the time, but he'd managed to bring up the subject at dinner the night before and they'd all confirmed none of them had been married.

Girlfriend, then. Pissed girlfriend—if that lakeside conversation was any indication—plus her very early departure the next morning. She'd had Indiana plates, so the drive wasn't short, and no one made a trip that long to stay less than twenty-four hours. Had they told her about their three-way?

Nope, he doubted that. Lauren wasn't ready. In his clinical opinion, Hanson was a little too conservative for that as well.

Shit, this was sucking him in. He could feel it, feel the energy of a growing obsession. It was great for creativity, like high octane fuel for his muse.

He drank the rest of his scotch, set the glass down without a coaster on the expensive mahogany side library table Regina had spent some ridiculous amount on in England when she'd dragged him to Europe two years ago, and opened the deck doors. He winced at the muggy air that closed around him like a clenched fist.

The deck was private enough, surrounded by trees, but he could see the lake.

The water gleamed a deep sapphire, the day a little hazy due to the humidity.

The water.

He couldn't help but think about it more and more.

* * * *

Lazy Thursday afternoons were his favorite, Drew decided. Wait, lazy, Thursday summer afternoons on vacation were the best; the ones when there was nothing to do but swim, read or take a nap...

He leaned over and traced a line along the edge of Lauren's bikini top. The warm curve of her breast under his fingertip was tantalizing, making his cock swell predictably.

"Wanna fool around?"

"You're so original, Drew." She reached up and removed his hand by grasping his wrist and setting it on his own lap.

"Hey, that was an honest to God suggestion."

"With you it always is, but we're currently in a public place." She stretched on her towel on the dock, and those tempting breasts gave a small very delicious jiggle. "No fondling outside. New rule."

Undeterred, he reached back and this time lightly circled her navel. The muscles in her stomach tightened a fraction. "Can I do this? There isn't anyone around, babe."

She peered at him from under the fringe of her lashes. "You're the one who told me you thought Ben Heaton was watching you with a telescope. Let's not give him a show, please. This morning was bad enough."

He lifted his hand. Sitting cross-legged next to her, he glanced up at the outline of the roof of the Heaton cabin. "I'm kind of surprised you agreed to talk to him."

"I am too. Believe me, I'm not—"

She broke off and half sat up, a frown creasing her brow. Drew glanced up to see Rob walk out on the dock to join them, the can of soda he'd gone up to the house to get nowhere in sight, instead his cell in his hand. It was clear from his expression something was up and he actually looked a little pale under his tan.

Rob held out the phone like exhibit A. “I got a message from one of the partners in Karen’s firm so I called the guy back. Apparently there’s some sort of emergency with that case she thought was wrapped up and they can’t get a hold of her. He managed to get my number because one of her colleagues knows where I work and he convinced my office this was important enough to bother me. She isn’t at home, and she isn’t answering her cell phone, either.”

The warmth of the sun didn’t faze the sudden chill Drew felt and Lauren made a small inarticulate sound of dismay. She murmured, “She left early...she should have been back in Indy by mid-afternoon yesterday at the latest.”

Rob said grimly, “I know.”

“Look, let’s not jump to any bad conclusions here.” Drew tried to sound reasonable. “She thought she was going on vacation and she was not a happy camper with how it turned out, either. Who’s to say she didn’t decide not to go back home. Maybe she’s in Nashville, staying at a nice hotel, thinking about things. Maybe she decided to go visit a friend instead of running back to work. Her cell might not have a signal. There can be a lot of things to explain why they can’t get a hold of her from work.”

“Her mother can’t, either. After the office called and left dozens of messages, they contacted her. Besides, please tell me you remember how she never turned that damned phone off and seriously lived and breathed her job. We’d go out to dinner and she’d answer it a dozen times.” Rob raked his fingers through his dark hair. “She also has a beeper. She had it clipped to the pocket of her shorts night before last, so I know she brought that, too.”

Lauren scrambled to her feet and wrapped her arms around her chest as if she was cold, which was impossible since it was almost ninety degrees. “How soon before you report a person missing? I mean, if she hasn’t shown up; it’s been a day and a half.”

“I don’t know.” Rob shook his head, looking tense and indecisive. “It’s possible Drew is right, in which case Karen—who isn’t my

biggest fan right now—wouldn't appreciate me causing a big stir. On the other hand, I do think it is out of character for her to not return phone calls and there is another woman missing from right here. We're talking right next door."

Lauren shivered and her eyes looked dark. "I think we should call the sheriff. If Karen did change her plans and is mad when they track her down, well that would be just too bad. How could she blame you for caring enough to be concerned?"

"She said she was going back to work, now that I think about it," Rob said in a taut voice. "Shit. She said she thought she could get in some hours yesterday afternoon once she got back. She just never went in."

"It's still possible she changed her mind."

"Come on...none of us think so."

Drew had to agree there. "Okay, I concede that one. Look, maybe you should call, Rob."

"I have that deputy's card up at the house," Lauren said.

"Okay." Rob looked somber. "Jesus, I feel guilty and I have no idea why, other than she drove down here to see me."

"We don't know anything bad has happened." Drew hated the stricken expression on Lauren's face also, and suspected had some pretty interesting emotions because Rob had essentially severed the relationship because of her. He added, "Look, we'll go up and report her as a possible missing person and let the police handle this, okay? No one needs to feel guilty about anything yet. Karen is probably having a massage somewhere and a pedicure scheduled for later."

"I hope you're right, Drew." Rob gave him a somber look.

He sure as hell hoped so too. One thing was for certain, he decided, Lauren wasn't going to be left alone for a minute. Maybe they should even pack up and go on home. Drew got to his feet and offered Lauren his hand.

They walked up to the house and Lauren went to change out of her suit, the sense of contentment obviously gone from the warm

afternoon for all three of them. Drew listened as Rob explained the situation to the deputy's voice mail and rung off.

"Regina Heaton's purse was found in Georgia," he remarked, thinking out loud. Heaton had told them the latest on the case, which wasn't much, but her purse had apparently been found sans cash but with credit cards in some state park.

"Quite a commute if some local wacko is responsible." Rob paced across the room, went to the refrigerator and opened it, staring inside as if he had no idea why he'd done it, and then shut it without taking out a thing. "Abduct someone here and take her to Georgia? Besides, they haven't found her or anything."

"And would the guy come back to get someone else? You're right, nope. It doesn't fit. Karen is probably fine, Rob."

"I sure as hell hope so."

Rob's cell rang and he flipped it open, looked at the number, and put it to his ear. "Deputy Kendall?"

Chapter Twelve

The delayed flight from D.C. to Tennessee and then fooling around with a rental car had been all irritating, but this made it worth while. Very.

Ken Marzetti actually been there, getting what little details the county sheriff's office had over Regina Heaton's disappearance, when the call had come in. Not reported to the office, but straight to one of the deputies' cell phones.

Like hitting a vein of gold.

Well, not quite. Maybe more like knowing the gold is there, if you just dug around in the right place to find it.

"Fletcher and Hanson said they thought they heard a scream the night Mrs. Heaton allegedly disappeared and now they've reported someone else missing. Should we check them out? Kendall says they seem like just a couple of young yuppies from Indiana and one of them has a girlfriend there, too. She didn't claim to hear the supposed scream but she's the one who saw the guy take out the boat. I'm going to guess she can alibi them."

Ken took a sip of tepid coffee, ignored the bitter taste, and then set the cup aside. "I think we should check everyone out, but I doubt they're involved. So all we have in the Regina Heaton case is her car—no obvious signs of a struggle there, luggage intact—her purse in Georgia somewhere, and Dr. Heaton's word for it he didn't arrive until two days later?"

The sheriff, who looked exactly like a caricature of a country law enforcement officer in Ken's mind, stroked the patch of gray hair on his chin. "Miss Hanes says she saw someone take out the boat. No

evidence it even happened, but I can't think of a reason she'd make it up, and she gave us a pretty good description. Whoever he was, it wasn't Heaton, that's for sure, and the person Lauren Hanes saw could have had permission to use it from Mrs. Heaton for all we know. He had to have had access to the house somehow to get the opener for the boathouse."

Ken wrote down in his notebook: *Boat. Blond man, big nose. Purse taken and left in Georgia. Suitcase in car. House locked when he got there according to Heaton. No signs of a struggle.*

Underneath he added: *possible missing second woman.* "Did you check out Heaton's story for the night his wife left Louisville and the day that followed?"

The other man nodded. "The day they found her purse I made a few calls and his claim he went to dinner with a friend is easy enough to substantiate. It's there in the report, some graduate student at the university. Says he then went home, and the next day worked on his new book in the morning, and then had a meeting with a contractor for some work he wants done on the house in the afternoon. I called the contractor and the student and they both say it's true."

"But there *is* an unaccounted for block of time in the morning."

"Says he was at home, writing."

"Kind of hard to back up unless someone saw him take in the newspaper or something." Ken rubbed his chin and stared at a set of very dusty Venetian blinds, closed to block the late afternoon sun from making the room a sauna. It wasn't working all that well. The air conditioning seemed to be out of order and he was sweating under his suit jacket.

Barker looked oblivious or maybe he was just so used to the heat he didn't care anymore. "I suppose so, but by all claims, including her mother's, Regina Heaton left for their summer place down here late Friday afternoon. She called a friend from her cell when she was on the road, so we know she did. It's a four hour drive from Louisville. Heaton couldn't have followed her down and then driven back in time

for dinner. That's eight to nine hours round trip. If he'd come later or the next morning, why didn't she take in her suitcase? Besides, she'd already stopped answering her phone. Seems to me the most likely scenario—unless the lady is AWOL on purpose—is that whoever abducted her was either waited and nabbed her the minute she stepped out of the car, or followed her right up the driveway.”

Both were plausible, but Ken could feel the conviction he had over Heaton being involved like it was a physical touch. Maybe Gonzales had a point, he had it in for the professor in some ways. He didn't like Heaton. He despised and distrusted the facile alibis for the first two murders...if they were even his first two. The guy was in his fifties. Serial killers usually started younger and tapered off later in life if they didn't get caught, but anything was possible when dealing with a wacko who decided killing for sport to be an engaging hobby.

He always puts them in the water.

All right. Well, that was an assumption, but it was also a common denominator to the case of the senator's daughter and poor sleepless Virginia Marcum. They both talked to Heaton for research for his books. They both ended up dead. In the water.

But, still, no physical evidence at all.

“I realize your jurisdiction usurps mine, and that's fine.” Barker gave him a keen look from beneath bushy brows. “I've never worked with the FBI, and I admit all the protocol is going to be your domain, Agent Marzetti. If we can help, let us know. However, we're short-staffed because this is a rural area and there still is no evidence of a clear crime. Dr. Heaton is apparently a suspect in your mind, but you aren't exactly being forthcoming about why either.”

“It involves two other cases,” Ken admitted in a bland tone. “Obviously, we couldn't nail him on those or he wouldn't still be walking around. Let's see if we can get him on this one. I'll go have a conversation with the eyewitness and then I'm off to talk to the sister, the one that apparently is more than willing to tell why she thinks he's an asshole capable of making his wife drop off the face of the earth.

What I'd like you to do is start looking for this new missing person, Karen McKenzie. Find her dead anywhere around here with Heaton right next door to the place she was last seen, and suddenly, I have a chance to nail this bastard. I've been waiting for something like this."

"I'm hoping to find Ms. McKenzie very much alive somewhere else," Barker said, the slightest hint of disapproval in his tone.

Ken clicked his pen shut and tucked it into his pocket. He muttered, "Good luck."

* * * *

Rob wasn't sure he was surprised the FBI had come calling, but he wasn't thrilled about it either. For one thing, it meant they took Karen's unexpected absence very seriously, or else the Heaton case was finally getting a bunch of attention after a week. Either way, it was ominous and Lauren clearly shaken.

Agent Marzetti was built like a featherweight boxer, wiry and short, with sleek dark hair and a classic Roman nose. Something about his dark eyes indicated a razor sharp intelligence, and his smile upon introducing himself was perfunctory at best. He'd asked right away why Karen arrived one day and then left so early the next morning after she'd told friends, colleagues and family she'd be gone through the weekend.

No getting around that one.

Rob said, "We didn't precisely argue. We broke it off, but even though she wanted to leave right away, I talked her into staying until the next morning. She'd had wine with dinner and it was late."

Marzetti sat perched on the edge of one of the plush leather chairs as if he was making no more than a temporary stop. "You broke off your relationship with Ms. McKenzie yet you didn't argue?"

"She wasn't all that happy about it, but really, it wasn't that deep of a relationship to begin with, so not such a big deal. We casually

dated, that's all. I'd invited her to come along, but she had a case and said she couldn't. She suddenly showed up without even a call."

"Apparently not a welcome arrival." Those piercing eyes looked at him in direct question.

Rob shrugged, not really sure how to answer but with the truth. "I was relieved when she backed out, and yes, a little dismayed when she came after all. She didn't even call or I would have been honest with her then and there about her driving down."

Good God, he sure as hell hoped no one thought *he* had anything to do with Karen's disappearance. That angle had never occurred to him and he felt a quiver of disquiet twist in the pit of his stomach.

"What changed?"

Rob blinked, off balance with the whole thing. This stuff happened in movies, not to people he knew, much less him. "What do you mean?"

With audible patience, Marzetti explained, "What changed with you and Karen McKenzie between the time you invited her on vacation and the last time you saw her, which you say was when she went up to bed after you broke it off with her."

You say? Jesus.

Once again, the truth seemed the only option. He wasn't a good liar and besides, he truly had nothing to hide.

Whoa, except he didn't want to embarrass Lauren, and he had to actually keep himself from looking over at where she sat, still as a stone, on a chair by the coffee table. "There's someone else," he said slowly. "I think maybe she wondered if I might have invited this other woman instead and thought she might catch me in the act, so to speak."

"But you didn't."

"Invite the other woman, no." Now it truly took effort to not look at Lauren, but at least he was still being honest. In a technical sense, Drew had invited her.

To his relief, Marzetti nodded. He turned to Lauren. “I want to know about the man you saw take out the boat from the property next door.”

Composed, but still a little colorless for someone who’d spent most of the week in the sun, she cleared her throat. “I was on the bank, reading a book, and he came out on the dock. I barely paid attention really at first, but the lake has been pretty deserted this week and for whatever reason, he acted sort of like he was looking around. Then he opened the boathouse, started the boat and pulled it up to the dock, put something heavy in it, and drove off.”

The agent looked startled. “He put something in the boat? That wasn’t in the report.”

“I didn’t remember it until later,” she confessed.

The agent’s eyes narrowed a little. “How heavy? I take it since you said ‘something’ you didn’t get a clear look.”

Lauren shrugged, the uneasy look on her face speaking volumes. “Like I told Dr. Heaton, all I know is whatever it might have been made the boat rock as he dropped it in.”

“Heaton knows? You’ve talked to him?”

She nodded. “He’s been here twice.”

Rob couldn’t help but notice at the mention of their next-door-neighbor’s name, Marzetti seemed to change his demeanor a little bit. It was subtle, but there. “What kind of questions did he ask you?”

Lauren and Drew caught the nuance too, for they exchanged a quick glance. It was Drew who said, “Pretty much the same ones you have. Why?”

Marzetti stood and neglected to answer. “Thanks for your help.”

All three of them nodded and sat silent as he went and got into a plain, no frills sedan and pulled away.

* * * *

“At least he didn’t tell me not leave the state or anything.” The attempt at a lighthearted joke fell flat because Rob looked strained, and when he wandered over to gaze out the screen toward the lake, his shoulders were visibly tense under his tee-shirt.

“You were the last person to see her and the one who reported it,” Lauren said, just as unsettled. “They have to talk to you. It’s routine, I’m sure.”

“Just the same, I never imagined myself talking to *any* law enforcement officers, much less so many in a week. Jesus, I hope Karen turns up soon.”

“She will.” Lauren couldn’t get the right amount of conviction in her voice.

“I hope so.”

“Maybe we should cut this vacation a little short.” Drew restively rubbed his jaw, his expression lacking the usual light-hearted charm. “I think we’re all getting a bit spooked and that’s not a big surprise considering what’s been going on around here.”

The idea of leaving came with a mixed bag of feelings. What had started out as a week Lauren dreaded had turned first idyllic and now morphed into a nightmare. However, when they returned home, the three of them were going to have to deal with an entirely new set of problems and she wasn’t anxious for that, either. She glanced at where the slanting rays of the afternoon sun laid a pattern against the deck and the serene lake beyond. “We could go tomorrow. By the time we clean everything up, pack, and could be actually ready to leave, it would be too late today.”

“She’s right.” Rob turned back and attempted a smile. “But I have to admit, I’m losing the peaceful hanging out in the woods feeling myself. The sheriff has numbers to reach us. I don’t see why we can’t go in the morning.”

“That sounds good to me.” Drew looked at each of them. “Did both of you get the impression Special Agent Marzetti wasn’t Heaton’s biggest fan?”

“Don’t they always suspect the husband first off?” Rob’s mouth tightened. “Or maybe the ex-boyfriend apparently in Karen’s case. When he said ‘you *say* was the last time you saw her’ I couldn’t believe it. If Heaton’s a suspect for some reason, I feel sorry as hell for him. The guy’s wife is missing.”

Rob was right...unless, of course, the professor had something to do with Regina’s disappearance. Lauren had left his house that morning with a feeling of distaste, as if he’d been playing with her a little during their interview. “I think he’s a bit odd,” she admitted. “He seems like a nice man, very pleasant and intelligent, but he’s...I don’t know, intense in some weird way. Some of the questions he asked me were pretty graphic.”

“He’s writing a book about sex, babe.” Drew arched a brow. “What did you expect?”

It was hard to argue that point, so she didn’t try. “Yes, I know. I expected it would be really personal and he told me I didn’t have to answer anything that made me uncomfortable, but...still.” Lauren paused and then gave a small mirthless laugh. “He liked it too much.”

“Talking to a beautiful woman about sex? That’s not a convincing argument for making him a weird guy. Makes him a normal guy. If I decide to ever give up flying, I think I’m going to lock onto his gig. Doesn’t sound bad to me.”

“He mentioned both you and Rob.” She rested her hand on her knee and tried to look indifferent. “Like he knew. And, you’re the one who said he’s been spying on us, Drew.”

Both of them were quiet for a moment. Then Rob said in a noncommittal tone, “Why didn’t he tell the police about what Lauren saw? Now that I think about it—and I really as hell wish I didn’t have to—why didn’t Heaton immediately call the police and tell them Lauren had forgotten the man she saw put something in the boat. I’ve wondered when they were going search the damn lake for Regina Heaton’s body.”

They'd all been thinking it and at least someone had now said it out loud. "Me, too," Lauren admitted. "God, that's so gruesome to imagine, but Rob is right. I've wondered the same thing. I wish now I had called the deputy myself. I assumed Dr. Heaton would tell them right away."

"That's a pretty natural assumption, babe." Drew paced restlessly over to the fireplace. "This investigation isn't our responsibility, and besides, now Marzetti knows. He strikes me as a guy who can handle this."

"I say we pack as much as we can tonight, and get the hell out of here tomorrow morning." Rob ran long fingers through his hair. "I'm going to go up now and strip the beds in the rooms Karen and I used and get those sheets washed."

Lauren stood. "I'll help. I need something to do."

"And I say we go out for dinner tonight." Drew walked toward the kitchen. "I'll check the phone book for anything that looks decent in the form of restaurants in the area. I'd just suggest Gino's again because the food was fabulous, but Heaton eats there pretty often, or at least I got that impression. I'm not real anxious to run into him."

Lauren agreed one hundred percent, remembering some of his questions.

Rob Hanson and Andrew Fletcher. How does that all work?

The man had definitely been baiting her and with everything else going on, she fought a shiver over the idea she'd even been alone with him for that uncomfortable hour.

Rob politely waited for her to precede him up the stairs and he followed, his hand warm at the small of her back. Working together, they took off the sheets, replaced them with spare linens from the closet in the hallways, and neatly made up the beds. Lauren had just finished smoothing the coverlet when Rob's phone beeped. The way he snatched it out of his pocket and flipped it open spoke volumes about the tension in the air.

He said shortly, "Hanson."

Lauren had stopped moving, standing stock still, her heart sinking as she saw him put a hand up to his forehead and close his eyes as he listened to the person on the other end of the call, the phone pressed to his ear. He said one word in a hoarse voice. “Where?”

Chapter Thirteen

Anal sex?

Ben sat, hands hovering over his keyboard, thinking about his neighbors. They might venture into it...but not yet. If the Beautiful Triad did double penetration at this stage, he'd be surprised. Maybe one of them fucked her from behind while she gave a blow job to the other one, but his feeling was their relationship hadn't developed quite far enough for anything really kinky. For one thing, Hanson seemed far too boy-next-door to even ask for anal, but Fletcher was a risk-taker, there was no doubt about it.

The blond pilot, if Ben had to guess—and it was an educated one—had initiated this three-way love affair in the first place.

And that—the love part—was the most interesting aspect about it. Very rarely did a threesome happen because the partners were emotionally involved on an equal basis. Usually it was a lark, a fling, a fantasy indulged by two of them, the third one being a prop, easily discarded.

Lauren Hanes fascinated him as much as she did her two lovers. It had him high-strung, excited in a way he hadn't been in some time.

The knock on the door made him glance up sharply. It was the tone of it—sharp, decisive, demanding.

Jesus, what time was it? A glance at the clock said it was after eleven.

Go to hell.

Whoever it was knocked again.

Well, shit.

He hated interruptions when the writing was going well. With a profane mutter, he got up and walked across the room. In the foyer, he tried to peer through the stained glass panel of the ostentatious front door Regina had chosen when they built the house. Like most of the things she'd decided on, it was impractical and he couldn't see a thing even with the front porch light switched on.

"FBI, Dr. Heaton."

The cool voice sounded familiar. Jesus, what was the guy's name...Manzetti...no, Marzetti...crap. Ben took in a breath and calmly unlocked the door, opening it a crack. Yes, the very one: dark hair, short, Italian written all over him even without the name. The conservative suit, even in this heat, the impassive expression...the man's clothes were rumpled, he noted, and he looked grim.

Not a promising sign. Ben and Marzetti had crossed paths before. Which one was it? Virginia Marcum...that's right. The insomniac that was fished out of the reservoir.

Ben opened the door wide and smiled. "Agent Marzetti."

"You remember me."

"How could I forget? I'd heard, now that my wife's purse was found in another state, the locals had called in federal investigators." Ben glanced at his watch pointedly. "But isn't it a little late for a chitchat? I'm surprised the sheriff didn't tell you he has all the information I have to give them."

"I was headed over here earlier, but got a call to a crime scene. Can I come in?"

Crime scene. Wordlessly, Ben stepped back and let him through the door. Marzetti glanced around and said succinctly, "Nice. Where can we talk?"

"In here." Ben stepped past him and led the way...not where he'd been working, but toward the formal dining room—yes, how stupid was it to have a formal dining room in a vacation house? It had a nice collection of booze on the sideboard, though, and he motioned his

visitor to take a chair while he casually moved to where the crystal decanters sat next to a collection of glasses. "Can I get you a drink?"

"No, thanks."

He had his usual, the scotch smoky and sharp.

"Aren't you curious about the crime scene, Dr. Heaton?" Marzetti had settled into one of the carved chairs and looked at him with an inscrutable expression.

Ben fought the urge to clear his throat. "I assume if you were talking about my wife, you would have started this conversation out differently. Any other crime scene doesn't interest me."

"Did you know a Ms. Karen McKenzie?"

"No." Honest answer. No problem there.

"Her car was found about twenty miles from here at an interstate rest stop. The attendants reported it when it hadn't moved for a few days. No sign of her."

How could the look on Marzetti's face be described? Gloating? Ben wasn't sure, but that did seem an appropriate word. "Am I supposed to understand what you are talking about? I just said I didn't know her."

"Didn't?"

"*Don't* know her. For God's sake, you said her car was abandoned at a rest stop and you used the term 'crime scene'. Do you mind telling me why you showed up here at this hour? I assumed you had news that concerned Regina."

"Karen McKenzie was a mistake, Doctor."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm saying you finally fucked up."

Son of a bitch. "How so?"

"No doubt about it, I'm going to link you to Miss McKenzie's disappearance. The crime scene unit is going over that car so carefully that if whoever abducted her left a thread from his designer jeans or part of the imprint from the sole of his expensive Italian shoes, we'll find it."

Ben felt a slick sweat break out in a ripple all over his body. The expression on Marzetti's face would make anyone, innocent or guilty, shit their pants. Implacable seemed the best word to describe it. Ben took a compulsive swallow of his drink and stifled a cough as it went down too quickly. "I think you'd better clarify the purpose of your visit, Agent Marzetti. If you just stopped by to use inappropriate language and attempt to intimidate me, I feel convinced that isn't proper FBI protocol."

"We're also bringing a dive team out to start searching this lake for your wife's body, and though it might take a while, they'll find it." Marzetti's voice was even and pleasant. "Her sister claims your wife was about to divorce you. True?"

Dead in the water...

"Like I told Sheriff Parker, my sister-in-law is a virulent bitch who hates my guts. I am sure you checked public records already and have found Regina hadn't filed for as much as a legal separation."

"Is it true about the divorce?" Marzetti asked again as if Ben hadn't just spoken, his dark eyes intent.

"No."

First lie of the interview.

But not the last, he had a feeling.

He couldn't let this interfere. Things were going so well. The book was flowing from him in that way that just didn't happen often. He knew the signs, felt the power, and he just couldn't stop. Not now. It was going to be damned good.

"Your graduate student, Matthew Bonham, did confirm you had dinner with him the night your wife disappeared."

"Thank you for reminding me my alibi is solid." Ben gave him an ironic smile.

"Not perhaps as solid as you think," Marzetti said matter-of-factly. "Your sister-in-law informed us your wife suspected you have a relationship of a sexual nature with this young man so his weight as a witness is compromised if that's true. You know, Dr. Heaton, the

internet is quite a convenient tool for law enforcement in this day and age. I pulled him up on one of those sites so many people use to display information and pictures. Quite frankly, I won't know until I show the picture to Lauren Hanes, but he seems to fit the description of the man she saw take out your boat. Short blond hair, prominent nose...I wonder if he drove down here from Louisville recently. It would be easy enough to go on to Georgia, maybe plant evidence to throw us off. After all, if Miss Hanes hadn't seen him in your boat, we'd be looking for your wife in another state."

A sick sensation twisted in his stomach. Ben poured another scotch. A double this time with the amber liquid halfway up the glass. "I wouldn't know if he'd gone anywhere. My relationship with Matthew is strictly professional and Regina never mentioned any such suspicion to me."

Second lie.

"I'm heterosexual, for your information," he added. Not *quite* a lie. He was, mostly. His love/hate relationship with women is what gave him the idea of the book in the first place. Not exactly "physician heal thyself"—more like psychologist *understand* thyself.

"Bonham isn't. It was there on his page for all to see. Sexual orientation: gay. And you know what? He likes to dress real nice according the pictures he has posted there. Like the kind of guy who wears a shirt and tie."

"His clothes, his sexual orientation...all entirely his business." *God damn Matthew, dressing like a GQ cover all the time.* "Any more questions, Agent Marzetti? I think you'll find I have cooperated fully with law enforcement in every way, but unless you have some reason to arrest me, I'd appreciate it if you would be on your way. It's late and I have work to do."

"Oh, I've have *reason* to arrest you, but just not enough proof as of yet. But we're working on it, rest assured." Marzetti stood, but didn't turn toward the door. "I heard you interviewed Lauren Hanes."

Ben lifted his brows and hoped his visitor didn't see his hand shaking as he held his glass.

"For your new book?"

"For my new book," he confirmed.

Without another word, Agent Marzetti turned on his heel and left the room. A moment later, the front door clicked shut.

In the resulting silence, Ben found he was sweating profusely, his armpits soaked. The crash of exploding glass jolted him and he stared at the wall, seeing the amber liquid run down the imported paneling. His hand was empty, he realized.

He must have thrown his glass of scotch, but didn't remember doing it.

* * * *

"I can't sleep. Guess you're in the same boat."

Rob looked up at the sound of her voice. "Yeah," he said quietly, "I'm pretty wound up over this. Want a glass of milk?"

He stood in the kitchen, wearing only a pair of jeans, and if the situation was different, Lauren would have appreciated the view of his nicely-muscled bare chest, but she was too upset. She shook her head. "No thanks."

"Drew asleep?"

"He seems to have fine-tuned the ability to be able to drift off, no matter what is going on, if he needs the rest." She leaned against the counter and rubbed her forehead. "It's probably some pilot thing. I, on the other hand, can worry myself into insomnia with the best of them. I wish we knew something."

"You and me both," Rob agreed with feeling, his hazel eyes somber.

"Stop feeling so responsible." She said it quietly.

"Karen came down here because of me. I think that makes it at least partly my fault."

“She left because of *me*.” Lauren brushed her disheveled hair back. “Indirectly, I suppose, but you haven’t cornered the market on guilt, Rob.”

“I suppose not, though I wish if we can’t sleep, and feel so bad about this, it would help the situation.”

One of the things she loved about him was he was a sensitive person through and through. Rob Hanson was a nice guy. A nice *sexy* guy, which was even better. She couldn’t blame Karen for being upset it hadn’t worked out. Her smile wobbled but at least she made the effort. “I don’t think a lack of sleep ever helped anyone but Lindberg on that first flight across the Atlantic.”

He laughed. It wasn’t much, but at least she lightened the mood.

The sharp sound of someone knocking on the French door to the front deck made them both start. Considering it was past one in the morning, they both swung around and stared.

Heaton stood there, his figure dark against the illumination from the room, but his face recognizable. The gleam of the lenses of his glasses caught the light.

“Seriously?” Rob muttered, catching her arm as she started for the door. “I’ll go. What the hell does he want at this time of night?”

“I don’t know...oh my God.” As Lauren stared, their neighbor pressed a bloodstained hand against the glass. “Rob...look.”

“I see.”

As she watched he went to the door, flipped the lock, and slid it open. “Professor Heaton? What’s—?”

The shot was loud, startling, like in every movie she’d ever seen, and when Rob staggered backwards, Lauren didn’t at first understand what happened. Until she saw the blood, his hand pressed to the welling wound in his chest. He stumbled into the back of a nearby chair and rasped out one word. “Run.”

What?

“Don’t try it,” Heaton stepped inside, the gun in his hand now pointed right at her. In frozen shock, Lauren didn’t even look at him

but stared at where Rob now grasped the chair for support, blood streaming through his fingers.

“Oh, God.” Her muscles finally unlocked and she did run, past Heaton toward Rob, only to find herself stopped before she could even get there by a brutal grip that twisted into her long hair and the cool feel of something round and metal pressed against her temple.

“No screaming,” Heaton hissed in her ear. “Where’s Fletcher?”

The hold on her hair hurt but she didn’t care. *Rob is shot. Rob is shot.*

The refrain went through her mind like a chant and she heard someone sobbing, realizing only vaguely she was the one making those inarticulate sounds of grief.

“Where is he, Lauren?” Heaton gave her a little shake.

“Upstairs. Sleeping,” she managed to say, to her horror seeing Rob give up the fight to stay on his feet and slide to the floor, his eyes shut. There was a froth of red on his lips and by this time—what felt like a lifetime but was probably only a minute or two—his shirt was soaked in blood. His tall body, so athletic and strong, looked vulnerable sprawled on the polished floor.

“Come on.” Heaton dragged her literally out the door onto the shrouded deck because her legs wouldn’t work properly. She stumbled, and he mercilessly kept her upright with his cruel hold the entire way down the steps. The night was dark, drifting clouds obscuring the moon at intervals and the crowding trees hung thick black shadows as he forced her down the path toward the lake.

Is this happening?

“If you fight me, you will regret it.” The words were a low promise in the dark as he forced her to walk onto the dock. “Understand? Now, get in the boat.”

A second boat was moored next to the one owned by Rob’s uncle she saw, the shape of it dark and sleek in the uncertain light. “What do you want?” she managed to ask in a shamefully thin, shaking voice.

“Just to continue our interview, Lauren. Now, get in the boat.”

Chapter Fourteen

Drew blinked, sat up, and registered the time displayed on the alarm clock next to the bed. A little after one in the morning and he was alone in the big bed, no sign of Rob or Lauren.

Had that woken him? He wasn't sure.

Did the two of them decide to go for a middle of the night boat ride? That didn't make much sense to him because while under different circumstances he supposed it could be construed as romantic, the mood of the evening was somber at best. He couldn't see them wanting to cruise the dark lake, especially since they were all planning to leave in the morning.

Awareness prickled along his skin like a physical touch. Something was wrong. Decisively, he tossed aside the sheet and grabbed his shorts, yanking them on. He never distrusted his instincts.

Halfway down the stairs, he felt the breeze from the wide open door to the deck, the screen not even closed. Lights on, milk jug on the counter...

"Jesus Christ!" The words exploded and the sensation in his stomach resembled being sucker-punched as he realized Rob was sprawled in a pool of blood, half-hidden by one of the leather chairs.

He didn't remember going down the rest of the stairs, but he must have because a second later he was kneeling by his best friend. Every training class he'd ever had kicked in because he found a thready pulse to his relief and sprinted into the kitchen to yank several clean towels from the drawer to help staunch the bleeding. Rob was semi-conscious, he found when he got back, his lashes fluttering.

“Heaton.” He croaked the name on a gurgle of blood, and then chillingly added another, barely audible. “Lauren.”

Not too far away, a boat engine started.

Heaton had abducted Lauren and shot Rob. Drew didn’t need to be FBI to figure that one out, but he was furious that if they suspected the damned guy, why the fucking hell hadn’t they arrested the crazy son of a bitch...

Luckily, from habit, he’d picked up his cell phone and shoved it in his pocket. He took it out and punched 911—something he’d hoped to never have to do in his life—and told emergency services in a staccato voice what was going on. For the life of him, he couldn’t remember the address of the house and Rob was in no shape to recall it, either, so he gave them Rob’s uncle’s name, plus pointed out Heaton lived next door.

Two seconds later, he called back. “Fuck the ambulance,” he said tersely, so torn over what to do next he felt like being physically sick. Lauren was out there with someone who might kill her—but Rob was dying right in front of him. The chilling practicality was he didn’t know if he could help her, but he did know he could try and help Rob. “These roads are hard to navigate back here, especially the dark. They aren’t going to get here fast enough. Tell me the nearest location where the ambulance can meet me and I’ll bring him there. I’m not a doctor but I think he has a collapsed lung. He can’t wait.”

“Sir, if you move him—”

“He can’t wait!”

In the end, after another life-threatening minute of arguing, she suggested, of all places, the rest stop where Karen’s car had been found, only about twenty miles away. Drew agreed and hung up, grabbed his car keys from the counter, and then somehow managed to hoist someone about his own weight over his shoulder. Staggering outside, he navigated the steps with the help of the railing and wrestled with the seat on the passenger side, lowering it so he could deposit Rob’s now completely limp body on the seat.

His face was wet Drew realized, wiping at his cheeks with bloodstained hands that shook as he started the car and fishtailed dangerously on the gravel when he backed up. He hadn't even realized he was crying.

Whoa, Fletcher, calm down. An accident now...

Don't think about Lauren, God damn it. You can't afford to think about it.

Panic was the enemy. Drew inhaled deeply, let out the breath, and took the driveway to county highway at a speed that wasn't precisely safe but was about half of how fast he wanted to go.

Needed to go.

"Hold on, buddy," he said, not sure if he was talking to Rob or himself. The headlights caught the line of trees and he barely missed taking out the mailbox as he gained the highway in a squeal of tires.

* * * *

He'd made two grave errors.

The first was underestimating Dr. Benjamin Heaton's obsession. It wasn't like he didn't realize the correlation between the interviews and subsequent disappearances of the subjects; it was what clued him into Heaton in the first place—but what Ken Marzetti had learned about psychology he'd discovered the hard way, by working cases involving nutbags.

In this case, a very rich, very intellectual, nutbag who apparently had decided to run as the net closed in.

That wasn't really the problem. The FBI had anticipated he might try to run. His passport was currently flagged at every international airport in the country. His financial holdings also were monitored, his credit cards watched for every charge...in short, Heaton was screwed if he wanted to take the low road and escape before an indictment could be brought against him.

What Ken hadn't figured on was Lauren Hanes' kidnapping. What kind of a maniac did something like that two hours after an FBI agent after his ass told him he was being investigated? Since they'd never been able to pin anything on him before, Ken had figured Heaton would be just as cocky about this investigation.

"He's out of control," the profiler on the other end of the line told him in a regretful voice. "Before, he'd carefully killed two women...or maybe even more—we might never know if there are other victims—a year apart, hidden the bodies, and moved on. But now, we have two killings in just a few weeks and another abduction. Most of these perpetrators in some way want the fight, the challenge of how they might get caught. You told him something that made him believe he *was* caught. I'm going to guess you'll be able to tie his graduate student into all of this."

It was hard not to be defensive because Ken felt guilty. "I wanted him to stay *away* from Lauren Hanes until I could pin something on him."

"I understand, but the trouble is, you and he don't think alike. Andrew Fletcher is probably lucky Heaton didn't take the time to go up and shoot him in his sleep."

Unfortunately, Ken would bet Drew Fletcher wasn't feeling all that lucky right now. Last he'd heard, Rob Hanson was in surgery and unfortunately, Lauren Hanes was with Heaton unless he'd killed her already.

Best friend with a less than fifty-fifty chance of making it and girlfriend with a serial murderer. Nope, not much luck there except of the bad kind.

"We'd asked for a warrant and were just waiting to hear back. But still, unless I can get my hands on something more, we don't have any real evidence except he knew all the victims. For that matter, other than being next door during her brief visit, he never met Karen McKenzie."

"Agent Marzetti, you don't have to explain to me."

Why *was* he explaining? Oh yeah, because he felt like shit the way all this had gone down. At least the sun would be up in an hour or two. “What will he do next?” he asked reluctantly, sitting in his rental car in the dark, the lake silent and calm. “Give it your best shot.”

“Kill Lauren Hanes. He has to complete the pattern. Then he might try to disappear, but keep in mind he chose to forfeit his status, job, possessions, all of it, when he shot her friend and kidnapped her. This part of it is important to him. So important he couldn’t imagine not following through with it. When the threat of being arrested loomed, he had to act right away. You need to find her and fast. Good luck, Agent Marzetti.”

Not the answer he wanted. “Thank you.”

He flipped the phone shut and stared grimly at the windshield. It was still, pitch dark, and the lake was a good several hundred acres with all the surrounding area wooded. In the middle of the night, the best he could do was state police and sheriff’s deputies, and Heaton was a criminal, but he was not stupid.

What did the sadistic bastard have in mind?

* * * *

Her hands were taped uncomfortably together behind her back, but she was so numb from head to toe she didn’t even care.

At some point, shouldn’t self-preservation kick in? A part of her knew abstractly she was afraid, but the image of Rob bleeding all over the floor of the cabin kept everything else at bay. Lauren was still stuck in that moment when he collapsed on the floor.

It was dark in the cove where Heaton guided the boat, his face a pale gleam as he killed the motor and pressed a button to release the anchor. The splash sounded loud. “I suppose,” he said in an unemotional voice, “in retrospect killing Regina was a mistake, but I still really don’t regret it. The human psyche is interesting, isn’t it?

That single act is going to ruin me, end my life, and I'm not sorry. I wonder why."

Trees, black shadows, the creak of the frogs, the ripple of the water around the hull...

The murderer sitting across from her. Lauren just stared at him in disbelief, because never in her life did she anticipate anyone could so matter-of-factly admit to murder.

Please, God, let me wake up now from this terrifying dream.

"I find sociopathic tendencies fascinating, but that would be entirely another book." He turned his head and looked over the lake briefly, and then his attention was once again riveted on her face. "What do you think, Lauren?"

Stay calm. Maybe Rob will be okay, maybe this maniac will let me go.

No. Who was she kidding? Heaton just confessed to murder. He wasn't going to let her go.

The icy feeling of separation seemed to snap, as if she suddenly woke from a deep sleep. This was now, here, immediate, and if she didn't do something, he would kill her as casually as he'd shot Rob.

Get a grip.

"I think," she said in a voice that only cracked a little, "that anyone who deliberately takes a life crosses a line that separates him from the rest of us forever. The term human no longer applies. Animal is more accurate."

He chuckled in the early morning darkness. "This is a favorite debate I've had with my students. What about provocation?"

Was this really happening? Did he really want an intellectual discussion about ethics *now*?

"Self-defense is different," she said. And she meant it. If she could get her hands free and a weapon...

But she couldn't. The minute she'd climbed in the boat he'd forced her face down over the seat with the gun to her head and used

electrical tape to secure her wrists. Her fingers had lost all sensation some time ago.

“It’s still taking a life,” he argued, leaning casually back in the seat, his arms crossed over his chest. It was so shrouded in the sheltered area she could really barely see, but it looked like he was wearing his usual expensive slacks and tailored shirt, the manner of dress incongruous to the situation except the clothing was dark. “Isn’t killing someone killing someone, no matter the circumstances? A life extinguished by your hand. Explain to me the difference.”

“I’m not one of your students.” She did her best to look stoic when her pulse was racing along at five hundred miles an hour. Maybe, if she could keep him talking, help would arrive, but she was leagues beyond some pointless debate with a lunatic. Surely, since the FBI had an obvious interest in Heaton, when Drew woke in the morning and found Rob...

Rob. Despair tightened her throat.

“What would you do, if your hands were free and you had this gun?” He causally lifted the weapon so it gleamed in the faint illumination. “Shoot me?”

Yes, she would. “Free me, give me the gun, and find out.”

A low laugh rang out. “Sorry. The question was purely hypothetical, Miss Hanes.”

“Is that what you did to your wife? To Karen?”

“Regina, I strangled.” His tone was the same as if he’d been placing an order at the drive-through in a fast food restaurant. “It was my pleasure. Her body is here, right in this very part of the lake. The blonde—Karen McKenzie they tell is her name—I knocked her unconscious first and then took her out to this scenic spot I know, and well...the stream did the rest.”

Lauren could barely speak. She felt sick, feverish, shivering in what an analytical part of her brain informed her was probably shock. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because now your story belongs to me.”

Her confusion wasn't an act.

"When you die, you can't tell it to anyone else," he explained patiently, as if she was a child. "Now then...I've wandered off course. Tell me, what happened? Or more aptly, how did it happen that someone like you, normally conservative as far as I can tell, decided to take two lovers. Fletcher and Hanson don't seem like the sharing types, either, but the dynamic of the relationship seems—"

"No," she interrupted, shaking, an infuriating tear running down her face. She whispered, "I'm not going to tell you anything."

"You can't swim for long, Lauren, with your hands incapacitated. And I always put them in the water."

The reminder was gentle, but the look on his face was terrifying. *Them?*

At that moment, the sound of a motor came across the water, low and distant, but definitely there.

Help. Her heart surged but at the same time Ben Heaton jumped up, rocking the boat as he moved, caught her under the arms so she was lifted to her feet, and then he pushed her overboard.

The black water was cool as it closed over her.

And he was right, she discovered as she broke surface, gasping, only to sink again. It was very difficult to swim without the use of her hands.

Chapter Fifteen

It was something he'd dissected, picked through, analyzed. He'd even agonized over it, wondering, trying to understand. Ben often wondered if being suicidal was part of the profile of a serial killer, because a good percentage got caught, and when they did...

Society was unforgiving.

So was deliberately killing someone else an act of suicide?

Fascinating.

He just couldn't decide.

The splash as he'd pushed Lauren from the boat had been satisfying, though it always gave him a deep sadness, also. They went into the water and became his, but he would never see them again. Television pictures weren't the same as the intimate discussions; the ones where they told him things they would never tell anyone else.

That was it. He liked owning that part of them and he had never been good—even as a child—at sharing. The divorce was the reason Regina had to die. He wasn't interested in sharing his possessions with the greedy bitch.

A gasp. A gurgle...a small cry, given too late because the police had cruised past already. Water splashed, and he could see the vague outline of her head as Lauren Hanes came up for air.

Anchored in the shadows, his boat was probably invisible, though it wouldn't stay that way for long as the sun was due to come up...Ben glanced at his watch, reluctant to leave the cove. Virginia Marcum and Karen McKenzie had been unconscious when he dumped them in, so it had taken very little time. The first one...for whatever reason he always had to search his memory her

name...anyway, he'd killed her first and then dumped the body in the stream, but he found he'd liked the idea of the water taking them. It was clean, washing away everything but his forever claim to them.

When he knew Lauren was gone, then he could go, too.

The loaded pistol sat next to him on the seat.

* * * *

The shore was too far. Even if she could see as she tried to tread water, there was no orientation of where anything might be because it was so dark, and Dr. Heaton had stopped the boat right in the middle of a good-sized cove.

Don't panic, she instructed her body, but the pumping adrenaline refused to obey. Lauren sank down, used her feet to push back up and tried to ignore the streaming wet hair covering her eyes.

The clouds parted and she caught a glimpse of moonlight dazzling on the rippling surface and off to her left, the pitch darkness of crowding the crowding forest.

That way.

It *was* possible to swim, she discovered, but not very well. If she could relax, maybe she could float, but honestly, being dumped in a lake with bound hands by a confessed murderer precluded that sort of calm.

To make matters worse—if they could be worse—something bit her on the ankle. The jab of pain was incidental, a trifle, part of the general misery. She was going to drown, Lauren thought as she sank under again, so this was just another element of the night mare.

And then long fingers grabbed her, scratching, clawing...

Not fingers, she realized as her foot hit something solid. A tree. A submerged tree.

The wet rotting bark was slippery but as she fought for purchase, she did find she could keep her head above water.

“Lauren?” It was an eerie call, quiet as it drifted across the water.
“Don’t fight so hard.”

Go to hell.

She stopped moving, the water lapping at her mouth. He still had the gun and she was still probably a visible target...

The boat came around the corner silently, the sudden glare of the bright light the only clue anyone might be nearby. A voice called, “Dr. Heaton, sir, this is the Terra county sheriff’s department.”

The light was the worst possible addition to a situation that had taken on new hope. The first zing past her ear made Lauren submerge, the blinding effect of the spotlight rendering her confused for a moment.

The embrace of the water was comforting, the world shut away.

But she had to breathe.

Feet braced on the trunk of the fallen tree, she forced herself upward.

And the minute she broke the surface, the sound of gunfire followed her shuddering gasp for air.

* * * *

“This,” Drew said with weary conviction, “goes down in the annals of worst days ever. It even beats out the time I had engine trouble flying from Singapore to New Zealand and had to make an emergency landing on some island airstrip that wasn’t more than a glorified goat track.”

“Since you are here all in one piece that adventure obviously turned out okay.” Agent Marzetti handed him a cup of coffee, his face somber. “This one hasn’t turned out too badly either yet.”

As long as Rob makes it.

The sentiment didn’t have to be voiced out loud.

The coffee was luckily from somewhere else than the hospital cafeteria, so that was a boon. The grim events of the past hours still

had Drew in a state of disbelief. “Well, at least Heaton did one decent thing and saved the taxpayers a lot of money when he shot himself.”

Marzetti sat down next to him in the waiting area outside intensive care. “We were going to get him on capital murder. He knew it. His big mistake was killing his wife, but be glad he made it, because otherwise Miss Hanes would have been the next victim and you would have never seen it coming. Federal agents in Louisville interviewed his graduate student, Matthew Bonham, this morning. According to him, he and Heaton were having a relationship and the professor’s wife had her suspicions and wanted a divorce. Heaton knew his wife was heading down here, swore all he wanted to do was talk to her, so he came down first and they had an argument that got out of hand. He called Bonham, half-hysterical on his way back to Kentucky, saying he’d killed her but it was an accident. Bonham calmed him down, gave him an alibi, and drove down himself to dispose of the body. Clever of Heaton to turn to him, because if Matthew Bonham disposed of the body, he would be much more likely to keep his mouth shut when Regina Heaton’s family started flinging accusations.”

“You think he planned it?”

“Oh, hell yes. My guess is Heaton didn’t want to part with his money. I also wonder if, as Regina became more and more discontented in her marriage, she didn’t reveal she suspected him of the murders of two of the women he’d interviewed for his books. Maybe she knew something and at that point, she had to go. She didn’t fit into his usual pattern according to the profilers, but still her death was no accident.”

“Her mistake, apparently, if she threatened him.” Drew rubbed his jaw and shut his eyes, the gritty scrape of his lids indicative of interrupted sleep and, yes, a few tears during the horrific drive to the rest area. He’d never felt so tired, not even after a transatlantic flight. “Why the hell did he kill Karen?”

"I'm not sure. I'd say it had something to do with Miss Hanes. She was his main focus. We have his computer and notes. In fact, the three of you...interested him."

At that, Drew's eyes opened and he shot Marzetti a look. The expression on the man's face was neutral. Drew said carefully, "He was a weird son of a bitch."

"No argument here. Lots of crazy ideas going around in his twisted head. Looking at the notes is really just procedure. Since he isn't around to go to trial, it won't be made public."

Drew relaxed a little. Lauren had been through enough already without the details of their private life trotted out on national news.

Just then, the subject of his thoughts came out the doors of the intensive care unit, looking impossibly beautiful despite her pallor, no makeup, and the tracks of tears on her face. When she'd been brought in to the hospital, she'd only been wearing her tee-shirt and the shorts that she slept in, both still damp from being in the lake, but someone had given her a set of scrubs that was a little too big for her slender figure. Drew set down his coffee and stood, and she came right into his arms.

"Good tears or bad tears?" he asked, holding her close, fear gnawing at his stomach. "Has something changed? They said he was doing okay." Rob had pulled through the surgery well, and though he'd lost a lot of blood, the prognosis was cautious but optimistic last he'd heard.

"Good tears." She rested her head on his shoulder. "They upgraded his condition to fair. He isn't awake yet, but the doctor said he should be in a few hours."

Drew kissed her temple. "That is wonderful news, babe."

"I don't ever remember being this tired in my whole life."

He heartily agreed. He looked at Marzetti in open question.

"There's a motel about a block away," the man said with a small smile. "I'll make a call and get you a room, courtesy of the FBI. Least

we can do. The hospital has your cell number and there's nothing you can do here. They'll call you when he regains consciousness."

He was as good as his word and Drew guided Lauren out to the car, drove the short distance, and checked them in. The room was absolutely ordinary, but that was fine with him. He collapsed on the bed while Lauren took a shower, idly flicking through the cable channels, his body still humming from all the tension.

When she came out, toweling her hair, he said without preamble, "It was the hardest decision I've ever had to make in my life, but I left you."

Lauren stopped drying her hair, her eyes luminous. "What are you talking about?"

"I knew Heaton had taken you. I heard the boat start. I would have followed..." He stopped, the recollection of that terrible moment overwhelming. "...but Rob was—"

"Andrew Fletcher, if you apologize for saving his life, I am going to strangle you." Her voice held the huskiness of tears. She dropped the towel she was using on her hair on the floor, looking adorably disheveled. "I'm serious."

"I—"

"Shut up," she snapped out, but he could see the violet shadow of fatigue under eyes.

Mildly, he said, "I was just going to say I love you."

"Oh. That I'll listen to." She came over and sank down on the bed, wet hair and all. "It was awful," she confessed as she snuggled in next to him and his arm came around her. "But I think the most awful part was thinking he'd killed Rob. I wasn't even scared at first. I was just...paralyzed."

In retrospect, Drew had to wonder if even though Rob had been shot and Lauren abducted, if he hadn't gotten the worst of the deal. "I know what you mean," he stroked her wet hair. "I love you. I love Rob, too, in a different way, but it still counts...I couldn't leave him, I

couldn't help you, Jesus, it was so damn awful. I'm not used to feeling helpless, but I was...you know, *helpless*."

"The nurses told me if you hadn't gotten him to help so quickly, he probably wouldn't have made it. That isn't helpless, Drew. You're a hero."

"You're the heroic one." He wanted to pull her tight, tight against him and never let her go. She'd survived Heaton's attempt at murder by managing to stay afloat long enough for law enforcement to find her in the dark lake, and Marzetti had said she'd been remarkably calm when they questioned her about what happened.

"Next time," he said with feeling, "we're going on vacation to Jamaica or something. Or a desert island. That's even better. No other people, just the three of us."

Just the three of us.

It wasn't usual, but it *felt* right.

When Lauren didn't answer, he peered at her face and saw she was fast asleep, spiky wet lashes against her pale cheeks.

Epilogue

“They don’t have a chance.”

“Please don’t tell me you think Minnesota does?”

“Better than Illinois.”

“Purdue *could* be good this year.”

“I wish I agreed, but I think you’re dreaming there, Hanson.”

“Come on now...they have that freshman who...”

Lauren listened to the byplay as she rinsed a dish and stifled a smile. The lasagna had been delicious if she did say so herself, the wine lovely, the music was soft in the background. The airy kitchen was perfect on this kind of evening, with the French doors open to the patio and pool area, and the scent of crisp fall air. Rob and Drew, still at the table, had their elbows propped on the tablecloth as they earnestly debated the college football season.

Drew had his usual exotic tan, just returned from Indonesia, which, he’d said as he kissed her hello at the airport, was someplace they needed to visit.

Maybe. But for now, she was just happy they were all together. The house they’d bought was coming along nicely, the kitchen everything Rob had promised, one bathroom already remodeled, and he’d done wonders with the yard. What was more, it was located on a quiet dead end street, and other than their immediate neighbors next door—there was no one to pay much attention to them.

Perfect.

And she knew exactly how to end the friendly argument.

“I’m going to bed,” she announced, feigning a yawn and tossing down the dish towel. “See you in the morning.”

The two of them exchanged a glance.

She'd thought they might react that way.

"I'm tired, too." Drew got up, that signature sexy smile on his mouth. "Long flight. Jet lag. You know."

"Yeah, I've got you. I had an early morning, too." Rob also stood, his hazel eyes holding open amusement but also a hint of heat. "Maybe we all should go to bed."

When they followed her, she was already unbuttoning her blouse. She laughed as she discarded it, and Drew caught the flying fabric in one hand.

The master bedroom was one of her favorite things about the house, spacious and open, with a tray ceiling, and of course, the most extravagant large bed Drew could find. Both Drew and Rob technically had their own rooms where they kept their clothes and personal items, decorated to their tastes, so this was considered her room, but she never slept alone.

She certainly wasn't alone now.

"Let me get this for you, babe." Drew unclasped her bra with a swift expert twist and as the straps slid down her arms, filled his hands with her bared breasts. His mouth feathered across her cheek and jaw. "Oh yeah, I missed these."

"I'll get the rest of it," Rob said, his voice holding a husky edge as he unfastened the button on her jeans and unzipped them. He took her panties as well, pulling both items of clothing down so she could step free.

Anticipation curled inside her and she could feel the moist heat between her legs. "It's kind of lonely being the only naked one," she pointed out, her eyes half-closed in enjoyment of the deft stroking of Drew's hands. Her nipples were taut, and when he gently squeezed, she took in a swift breath and quivered.

"Don't worry, we aren't about to leave you lonely. I thought about this every long mile home." Drew let her go, scooped her up, and deposited her on the bed.

Rob had already peeled off his shirt and jeans and he joined her first, his kiss gentle, persuasive, his hands roaming over her body. The livid scar from where he'd been shot always gave her a sense of how lucky they had both been that fateful evening. She kissed him back, her hands trailing down his muscular back.

He shifted, angling his body so he was spooned behind her. Drew watched them, propped on one elbow, his erection high and prominent. He said, "Damn I miss you when I'm gone."

Since she was sure he meant both of them, Lauren whispered back, "We miss you, too."

Irreverent as always, Drew winked. "Mind showing me how much? Just you, though Hanson can watch if he wants."

Rob's fingers sifted through her hair and he laughed. "I'm not going anywhere."

None of them were, Lauren thought, and though she never would have imagined it, she was more than happy in this unusual situation. She and Rob got along in perfect domestic accord—the kind that would drive restless Drew crazy. And he—he was like the breath of fresh air that blew through their lives, the free spirit that interjected excitement and adventure.

She proceeded to show him *exactly* how much she'd missed him, taking his rigid cock in her mouth, hearing each rasp of his breath with satisfaction, and when Rob positioned himself behind her and entered her in a swift, perfect thrust, she moaned in open enjoyment.

Some time later, damp, sated and sleepy, she snuggled between them and drifting toward sleep, she heard Drew say, "Have I mentioned I love coming home?"

Rob responded, "Have I mentioned I love *being* home?"

"Works out, doesn't it?"

Yes, it did Lauren thought in perfect contentment.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When she isn't writing romantic suspense, Kate dabbles in historical erotic fiction as Emma Wildes and maybe even a sexy futuristic or two as Annabel Wolfe. Visit her at www.katewatterson.com

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