
THE BROTHERS RULE

CAROLYN FAULKNER



Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

©2020
All rights reserved.

No part of the book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The trademark Blushing Books is pending in the US Patent and Trademark Office.

Carolyn Faulkner
The Brothers Rule

eBook ISBN: 978-1-64563-646-5

Print ISBN: 978-1-64563-647-2

Audio ISBN: 978-1-64563-648-9

v2

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's
advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Chapter 1

"She's mine."

The two men who sat with him recognized their eldest brother's excruciatingly familiar 'that's my final word on the subject' tone.

But they had their own versions of the same things. And none of them were likely to back down.

"I started dating her first," Adam, the next in line, put forth, as if that ended the argument.

"Yes, but I've been on more dates with her."

Adam glared at his next youngest brother. "Yeah, but all that means is that you need to get a real job," he needled.

Ryan grinned unrepentantly. "Can I help it iffirefighting is scheduled in twenty-four hour shifts, which gives me lots of lovely free time to devote to her? And speaking of that, when does your reserve unit rotate back to Afghanistan again? Can't be soon enough for me. Then I'll only have Jace for competition, and he's so stodgy, I won't have any problem convincing Laurie to choose me."

That earned him a punch on the shoulder from Adam as he still managed to take a couple of gulps of beer without spilling a

drop. The skills one learns while living in a house full of men could sometimes be helpful when they ventured out, too.

But Jace wasn't having any of what his brothers were saying. "Have the decency to not wish your brother into a war zone, please, doofus. Even if he does end up back there, you're certainly not going to win Laurie away from me under any circumstances. I'm older, I'm better set up than either of you are, not to mention *much* more handsome. I own my own house—"

"*We* own your own house," his brothers corrected him in unison, then they automatically claimed to each other, "You owe me a beer."

"Fine. I own the land on which *our* house and the ranch I run sit."

Everyone agreed on that.

Thanks to their parents' will, all five brothers owned the house collectively. Originally, they had all owned the ranch, too, but Jace had wasted no time after he graduated college in taking it over—which they all knew he was going to do—then buying them all out of it.

But the house—in which he and the younger brothers still lived and which remained the center of their family life—was still co-owned among them. Adam and Ryan had moved out and had their own apartments, but they still spent a significant amount of time there, because their brothers were their best friends.

"Still," Jace added with another glare at his brothers, "I'm older, I'm more settled—"

"Right. You're so old that you're already repeating yourself, Grandpa. The truth is that it just means you're boring," Adam supplied.

"Stodgy," Ryan added.

"Stuffy," Adam offered helpfully.

"Vanilla."

His two older brothers cocked their heads at that. "How

would you know whether or not I'm vanilla, Bing?" Jace asked, eyes narrowed in a warning that his brother blithely ignored.

As he glared, himself, Ryan answered, "Stop calling me that! I'm not a virgin anymore—haven't been for a while!"

His brothers just grinned at being able to get under his skin. "Congratulations, man."

"Bout time, I'd say."

"Shut up, the two of youse. And I don't know that you're vanilla, in the sexual sense."

Ryan could feel his uptight oldest brother tensing already at that.

"I was just extrapolating—"

"Wow—that's a ten-dollar word!" Adam teased.

"Yeah, well, if you'd read a book every once in a while, you might learn a few, yourself."

His shoulder was beginning to hurt from being hit so many times—not that he would ever admit it—but Ryan soldiered on. "I said that because you're always such an uptight friggin' stick in the mud. 'Stay in school', 'don't smoke', 'don't do drugs'. You're the poster child for boring. If you look up boring in a dictionary, there's a little picture of you there, frowning out at the world, telling them to 'save your money'. 'Buy, don't rent'. 'Work hard'. What woman is going to want that? Where's the fun? Where's the spontaneity?"

"I can be both of those—but that's because I've put my time in, done the work, and I have the money in the bank to do things like that—go on a weekend vacation or take her out to a nice dinner and a show or get her a piece of real jewelry. All without going into debt, I might add."

His brothers snorted outright at that then laughed for much longer than his comments warranted. "Please. When was the last time you took a day off?" Adam asked.

"Hell, when was the last time you left the house *after* six in the morning and came home *before* seven at night, *not* covered in mud

and muck? What woman's gonna wanna run into your arms when you smell like a herd of cattle?"

Jace actually blushed at that, because they were annoyingly right. "Well, adjustments can and will be made, and I might add that showers will be taken, for the right woman. A woman who would appreciate all of that hard work, and that woman is Laurie Taggart."

That prompted a very uncomfortable flashback situation—reminding them all about what it had been like when he'd said her full name for the first time around the two of them just days before.

They were at the house, having spent the day together helping Jace with some of the chores around the place that required another pair of hands or two and then spending the evening grilling and talking and drinking. They were all seated around one of the tables on the big deck, the remnants of an excellent meal being picked at as they spoke.

And then Jace had said her name. They'd quickly forgotten the context around it and all either of them heard was her name.

Laurie Taggart.

For some reason, he watched his brothers sit back in their chairs at that, both of them white as sheets and looking shocked to their cores.

"What? What'd I say?" He wasn't as much of a jokester as his brothers were, and he wondered if he'd said something that had been inadvertently offensive.

Adam spoke first, in a rare tense tone. "S-say the name again."

"What name?"

"*Her* name," Ryan supplied, his tone stunned.

"You mean Laurie Taggart?" Jace asked, confused.

"Yes. That's the name of the woman you're dating?"

Both Adam and Ryan seemed to be hanging on his answer for some reason.

"Yes. Laurie Taggart. She works in finance—"

"For a bank," Adam interrupted accurately.

Ryan swallowed hard, saying, before he could get anything else out, "In Cash Management."

Jace followed his brothers, leaning back—practically with a thud—against his chair. He sounded disbelieving as he said anyway, "She hates her job."

"Because she got passed over for a big promotion," Adam contributed softly, almost against his will.

And Ryan chimed in reluctantly, "It went to someone she'd trained, even though she'd done all the work."

"Fuck me," Jace growled under his breath, and his brothers looked at him askance because he almost never swore.

"Same here."

"Triple that."

Now, a couple of days later—after they'd all had some time to come to grips with what they'd discovered—they were talking about it again, but this time in a public place.

Despite what he'd just said to them, Jace looked quietly amazed. "How the hell did we end up dating the same damned woman?"

"Well, I don't know about how you are when you're with a woman," Adam began, while motioning the waitress over to them, "but I don't spend all of my time talking about my idiot brothers, especially since we're not all living together anymore."

"Yeah," Ryan added, "and how many Lauries are there in the city—quite a few, I would imagine. I know I hadn't heard either of you mention her before then," he grimaced, "and I don't much like hearing it from you now, either."

When the pretty girl appeared at his elbow, Adam asked, "Can we have a round of whiskey shots, please?" He looked to his brothers for their approval, and even Jace curtly nodded his agreement.

Since the little restaurant they were in wasn't all that busy, the

liquor appeared moments later. They all thanked the waitress, then each of them held up a shot.

"May the best brother win?" Adam suggested then scooted in under his breath, "Which is, of course, me. Cheers!"

But his brothers knew him too well, and neither of them drank to that.

Instead, Jace intoned seriously, "May the real best brother win." They clinked the small glasses then downed the shots.

Everyone was quiet for a moment—which was unusual for them—then Ryan came up with, "Do you think... do you think she knows that she's dating three brothers?"

"Good question."

Jace didn't give many compliments, so Ryan was pleased when he said that.

Adam shrugged. "Do you think that it would matter to her?"

"Why would it?"

The younger men both looked at Jace, surprised.

"Well? Why would it?" he argued. "There's nothing kinky in the least about dating brothers."

Ryan snorted at that.

"What?" Jace gave him an accusing look from under a furrowed brow.

"I just never in my life thought I'd hear you say the word 'kinky'. It's just weird. And uncomfortable."

"As is this entire conversation."

They both nodded at Adam.

It was Ryan again, who cleared his throat and hemmed and hawed a bit, then finally came out with it. "So, I've slept with her. Once. Have either of you?"

"Once," they both said.

"And this just keeps getting awkwarder and awkwarder."

Jace was looking pensive, as usual. "Are either of the two brats likely to be home, do you think?" Jace leaned his chair back on two legs and drew a deep breath. The three older brothers

were closer in age to each other. There was a gap of three years before Nick was born, and he was closer in age—and thus closer to—Tanner, who was only about a year and a half younger.

But they were all still very tight with each other—and they were a cohesive unit.

If you had trouble with one Rule brother, you had trouble with all of them.

"I dunno. Lemme text them." Unlike his older brothers, Ryan's phone was always out.

"Why do you want to know?" Adam asked.

Their oldest brother leaned forward again, rubbing his hand over the back of his neck, a sure sign that he was thinking hard. "Well, I'm kind of thinking that this conversation makes me want to have another shot. Am I alone in that?"

"No!" they chorused eagerly.

"I think we all drove here, so I want to make sure there is someone who could come get us."

"Smart move," Adam complimented graciously, and Jace just grinned at him.

"Stodgy. Staid. Smaht," he teased, in a reasonable—if much lower registered—imitation of their mom's thick Boston accent.

"Well, I don't know about that."

After they'd essentially told the brother who was at home to be ready to come in and get them when they called, they downed the next round and called for another.

Ryan continued his annoying streak of thorny questions. "So, who's going to find out if she knows, and if she doesn't, who's going to tell her?"

Adam chuckled. "Well, I think it should be Mr. 'I've dated her more often than the rest of you', myself."

Ryan didn't look all that happy at that suggestion.

"No, I'll do it."

His brothers regarded him a bit suspiciously, each of them with a raised eyebrow. "Why?" Adam asked outright.

"I just think that—as the oldest—it should come from me if she doesn't already know."

Adam looked at Ryan for confirmation, then they both nodded at the older man. Neither of them really wanted to do it. "Agreed."

"Jesus," Ryan sighed after there was a moment of heavy silence.

"Yeah," his brothers echoed.

"I believe this round is on me, gentlemen."

When it appeared, Jace stopped the others from just bolting it down.

"Since none of us is willing to give her up, I think we need to establish some ground rules here."

The other two rolled their eyes at him, but they kept silent, too.

"No badmouthing each other to her."

"Agreed."

"We are to be gentlemanly to her and to each other—during and after—she decides who she wants to be with, which, I would remind you, might not even be any of us."

The other two slumped. "Oh. I hadn't thought of that. Does anyone know if she's dating anyone else?" Ryan asked, sounding very bummed out.

Adam frowned and cuffed his brother upside the back of his head. "Think, idjit. If we didn't even know she was dating our own other brothers, how would we know about other men?"

Ryan frowned back at him. "Well, I don't know. Maybe she mentioned someone else who isn't one of us to one of you. I was just asking."

"Well, don't ask stupid questions."

Before this got any worse, Jace jumped in again, "We didn't hear about each other, and we haven't heard about anyone else because she doesn't kiss and tell, which I like, despite that it's caused us this bit of awkwardness. That's not her fault." He

pinned them with his gaze. "And, just for the record, I don't want to hear you two fighting over her or anything like that."

"Agreed," from both of them.

"But there's nothing wrong with badmouthing other guys, if we find out there are any?"

Jace answered him as he held yet another shot up, "I believe that, Ryan, is what is called 'leveling the playing field'."

One of the things Laurie liked the best about the guys she was currently dating was their manners. She had never been with men who were so consistently impeccable in that way. They were, for men, what she knew some of her friends would consider old fashioned, but she liked a certain amount of that. She wasn't interested in the type who wanted to keep women from achieving everything they could in life and, instead, keep them barefoot and pregnant and in the kitchen, preferably.

But she had to admit that she liked it when a guy opened her car door for her, held out her chair, and even stood by to let her enter a room first.

And the three men she was dating even stood up when she came into a room! It was unreal to be treated that way nowadays —with a certain unspoken respect that they all seemed to have, simply because she was a woman.

Jace—Jason, but he'd told her that everyone called him Jace —was probably the most overtly old fashioned, but again, it wasn't in the least stifling, and she'd never gotten the idea from him that he thought of women as lesser beings in any way.

He'd said his last name, too, but it was a crowded room and she hadn't really gotten it and didn't much care. She thought it was something like Rule but couldn't be absolutely sure.

He had surprised her, though, in that he had quite forthrightly asked her out at a party one of her friends was throwing.

She'd thought he might be gay, because he had been garnering a lot of attention from the women who were there—some of whom she knew—and yet he had steadfastly turned all of them down.

And she was already dating two guys, which was, well, frankly, two more than she was used to dating. Adding a third—especially an extremely potent man, such as Jace—was going to be dicey, but she figured she ought to try juggling multiple men once in her life. It wasn't likely to happen again that so many men at one time found her attractive.

And, although she got the idea—while they were talking during their dinner together a few nights later at a very good steakhouse—he was somewhat unbending in his beliefs, they weren't dissimilar from the core of her own.

He was just annoyingly better at sticking to them, she realized.

Because of that impression, she'd been very surprised when he'd asked to take her to bed once they got back to his car, in which he had kissed her into a state of desire she had rarely attained before—at least, not that quickly, and not with a man she didn't know reasonably well. But his undeniable kissing skills had made her much more susceptible to that suggestion.

Laurie leaned back a bit, within arms that seemed very reluctant to allow her to get very far away from him, especially now that he'd posed that very powerful question.

"Well," she said, tucking her hair behind her ear in a nervous gesture that at least he wouldn't recognize as such, "I, frankly, I don't usually do that on a first date."

"It might surprise you to know that I don't usually, either. But I'm very attracted to you, and I had to ask."

He was smart and could be very persuasive when he wanted to be, she'd seen already in their conversation, and that confession, which she didn't doubt in the least, was quite persuasive in itself. To say nothing of the fact that he was a big

guy. He could have done a lot of different things to try to change her mind, as most men probably would have. But he didn't.

Instead, he had hugged her tightly, kissed her gently, right behind her ear—making her shiver violently—then he withdrew, saying, "I understand completely." Then he asked, "Would you like to go out tomorrow night? There's a concert in the park in Daviston that's always good. We could bring a picnic—"

He never got to finish that sentence because she kissed him then, pressing herself up against him.

When she drew back, Laurie whispered a little tentatively, "Would you like to be the exception?"

He didn't smile triumphantly or anything like that, as she'd somehow known he wouldn't. He didn't seem like the type of man to crow about his successes. He took them quietly in stride.

Instead, he pulled her even more tightly to him, saying, "I don't want to be the exception. I want to be the rule, but—for the moment—I'll take what I can get."

The play on his last name had made her want to smile, but he was busy making her want to groan, so that won out. It also overwhelmed her fleeting thought about the familiarity of his last name, but that was gone almost instantaneously, too—never to be heard from again—as he buried his fingers in her hair and slanted his mouth over hers.

But now, he was calling her to set up their third date, and it had been a bit of a surprise. He seemed to be very eager that they get together soon.

She was seeing other men, but she didn't have anything planned for this Friday, which was only two days away, so she suggested that. It came to mind that she hadn't heard from the other guys she was dating, which was kind of unusual, but she didn't allow that to prompt her to contact them, not wanting to seem clingy.

"Excellent. How about if I bring you out to my ranch?"

"Oh, I'd love that! I've always wanted to see a working ranch!"

"Great!"

"I love San Antonio and the city life, but I'm a country girl at heart."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I think I mentioned that I grew up in Vermont. Not a lot of enormous ranches—it's all dairy cows, and the farms aren't on any kind of scale like your ranch probably is—not enough land for that. But there were tons of mountains and rolling green hills, lots of time spent outside, running and swimming and biking."

His deep chuckle could be registered as a lethal weapon. "Sounds idyllic."

"It really was. I grew up in such a tiny town that no one locked their doors, everyone knew everyone else; it was just incredibly safe."

"But now you live in the city."

"Yeah, my aunt lived in San Antonio when I was younger and I'd come down and stay with her sometimes. I loved it immediately—all of the history and culture and food and excitement! It was so different from what I was used to."

"It seems to me that easterners either like the desert or can't stand it."

She laughed, and he became instantly hard at the sound. "Yes! I loved it; my parents detested it! No accounting for taste!"

He picked her up at her door—no parking and honking for him. She'd had a feeling he'd be like that, so she'd made sure that her sometimes wreck of an apartment was clean for a change. Even though she was ready, she asked him in, saying she just wanted to use the bathroom before they left. He'd mentioned that it was a bit of a drive to his place, and she didn't want him to have to stop.

Jace nodded. Hell, she was ready when he got there! Considering his experiences with other women making him wait—literally hours after he'd arrived—that was reason enough to marry her, as far as he was concerned!

While he waited, he looked around her small place, noting all of the flowered upholstery, the pictures of her friends and family, some of which showed her as an adorable little girl, and the occasional framed movie posters on the walls, as well as the fact that all of her plants appeared to be fake.

She reappeared quickly—another reason to marry her—grabbing a small box that looked like it came from a bakery as well as her purse before turning to him and saying, "Ready!" with a smile that caused his heart to hammer in his chest.

"Not quite yet, you aren't," he murmured, kissing her with carefully controlled passion, letting her know that he wanted her but still keeping the kiss very romantic, somehow.

When he pulled back, her eyes were closed and she looked a bit overwhelmed.

"Wow," Laurie breathed slowly, eyes still closed, and he was nearly a goner, groaning deeply at just the sight of her like that.

She was already breathing heavily. If he didn't get them out of here now, they were never going to leave, so he got them out the door.

"What's in the box?" he asked, really just as a distraction for himself, so that he didn't corral her back into her apartment and have her on the living room floor.

"Well, you said you'd make dinner for us—which is terrific—but you didn't mention dessert."

His eyes lit up. "Did you bake us something?" He said it with very nearly the same passionate tone he had when they made love, and she had to chuckle.

Jace was remembering that she had mentioned she had a

hobby of baking for her friends that had evolved into a small side business.

"I did."

"What is it?" He was almost more eager than she had ever seen him. Almost.

"You'll see," she smiled at him slyly.

"Minx," he teased, patting her bottom as if in a promise of retaliation.

That had been something they had been amazed to discover they were both into—spanking. It had—surprisingly—been one of the topics during their first dinner together and was probably largely responsible for them ending up in bed with each other that night.

They listened to music on the way to the ranch, which he let her pick, and she ended up playing a playlist that was a mix of pop and rock that was so good that one or the other of them—usually both—knew every song.

Her voice was good but not spectacular, which he liked because his was the same way. But they harmonized nicely on some of the slower songs that came up, and the time went by quickly and very pleasantly as he held her hand on his thigh.

It was further out than she had realized—really quite isolated—but she found the stark desert to be beautiful.

Once he pulled his blue, '57 Chevy convertible—which she had sealed the deal for him by drooling over the first time she'd seen it—into a slot in front of the expansive house, he got out and came around to open her door.

Laurie had learned quickly not to get out by herself, which she had done the first time they'd gone out, and had drawn a slight growl from him, as he'd said—warned, really—softly, "Allow me to do that for you from now on, please."

When he'd helped her out, he kept possession of her hand and brought her into his house.

"Wow—this is a big place just for you!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, it is. But I'm not the only one who lives here."

"Oh? Do you live with your parents?" she asked as he gave her a tour of the place, with its small but beautiful foyer, good-sized formal living and enormous family rooms, the big, beautiful eat-in kitchen with a pass through to the deck and large grilling setup next to the pool that was practically a second kitchen.

"No, Mom and Dad are gone."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that." She touched his arm gently.

"Thank you."

"So, who all lives here with you, if not them?"

Jace brought her back into the kitchen through another door, showed her the nice-sized formal dining room that necessarily sat about twenty, then he brought her down the wings where everyone's bedrooms were.

"My two youngest brothers live with me."

She paused suddenly, as if she was thinking about something. "Oh? That's nice of you. Are they still in school?"

"No, they're both out of college now, but the youngest only by a couple years or so. He's got a degree in business, and he's not quite sure what he wants to do."

"Correction," came a voice that wasn't all that dissimilar from Jace's really—perhaps a tad bit higher, but not by much—and the owner of the voice appeared. "You know I want to help with the ranch. You just don't want me to do it," he said firmly, then he smiled at his brother's companion. "I'm Tanner." He held out his hand to her before Jace got a chance to introduce them.

"Laurie. Taggart," she offered, shaking his hand.

"All right, you've accomplished your mission and met her when you didn't really need to. Run along now, junior." Jace made a shooing motion with his hand.

Unruffled by his older brother's blatant attempts to get rid of

him, Tanner continued to smile at her. "It was wonderful to meet you, Ms. Taggart. I hope I'll see you again soon." He left, and a few seconds later, they heard, "I'm heading to Luke's house."

"When will you be home?" Jace asked in a tone that sounded very fatherly.

"Oh, probably when I get home, Dad," they heard, just before the sound of the door closing.

He sighed like the put upon parent his brother had just teased him about being, but Laurie just laughed.

"He's the youngest, and he was pretty young when my Mom and Dad died, so I've been even more of a pseudo parent to him." He gave her a bit of a sheepish look. "It's a pretty hard habit to shake, even though he's in his mid-twenties now."

"Yes, but it's a wonderful habit to have," she complimented, basking in the light of his broad smile.

The dinner he made was incredibly good. He remembered that she liked her steak medium rare and served it out on the patio, along with foot sized baked potatoes, as well as asparagus cooked with shallots and garlic, and hot rolls with honey butter.

Laurie leaned back after having practically licked her plate clean. "Oh my God! That was incredible! I don't think I can move!"

He looked absolutely stricken. "But—but you have to move—what about dessert?"

She laughed. "You actually have room for dessert?"

He nodded, looking forlorn, which wasn't easy for someone of his size, she had to give him that.

"All right. Gimme a minute and I'll be right out with it."

"Wonderful! Thank you!"

She brought him back her own creation—a pecan turtle brownie that she'd warmed up a bit in the microwave, just enough to make the caramel a bit runny and melt the scoop of vanilla ice cream she'd then topped it with.

It was probably four inches square and at least an inch thick,

just slightly underdone and incredibly moist and dense, and he ate every single crumb of it.

When he'd finished the glass of milk he'd asked her for—unabashedly, she'd noted—he asked, "Do you sell these?"

She smiled. "No. I've never made it before, but I remember you mentioning something about loving the homemade turtle candy your mom used to make, so I thought a brownie might be a nice showcase for that."

"Well, my dear, you should. You'd make a fortune."

"Thank you, kind sir." She nodded her head to him formally.

He wiped his mouth and put his napkin on the table then sat there for a moment, looking pensive.

"What are you thinking about?"

Jace brought his eyes to hers. "That I wish I didn't have to do what I have to do right now."

Laurie's eyes grew round, and she tilted her head a bit. "Okay, way to sound ominous."

He cleared his throat, and stood, putting his hand out to her. "I think I want to have this conversation somewhere else."

Even more ominous, she thought, hoping more than she wanted to admit to herself that he wasn't going to break up with her.

He brought her to his study, which was what she would have called a "neat mess." It was scattered with papers and books and electronic equipment of varying sorts—some she recognized, some she didn't—but she would bet that he could produce anything she asked him for in a second, because he knew where he'd put every item in the room, whether or not it had landed there neatly.

There was a couch, to which he led her, taking a seat a bit away from her, which she wasn't sure was at all a good thing.

"So, what is it that you need to talk to me about?" she asked immediately, not wanting it to drag on if it was bad news.

Jace took a deep breath, for the first time, questioning

whether he should have volunteered for this job. He didn't think it was going to be as easy as he'd thought, and the very last thing he wanted to do was to hurt her—in any way, at all, ever.

"Well, I think the best thing to do is to just say what I've discovered recently, and then we can talk about it."

Her "Oooookkkkaaaaaay" couldn't have been more tentative.

"You just met Tanner. The next oldest brother is Nick, but he's out fighting for Truth, Justice and the American Way, according to him anyway."

She raised an eyebrow at him and waited for an explanation.

"He's a lawyer."

Laurie had to laugh. "Not how most people would characterize lawyers, but good for him for maintaining a positive attitude in the face of adversity!"

"Yeah, he's a bit starry eyed, and although we all tease him mercilessly with lawyer jokes, I try to keep the guys from piling on him too hard. He wants to help people, and that's a very admirable pursuit."

"Especially for a lawyer," she couldn't resist saying, and Jake grinned.

"Yeah." He sighed again then forged ahead. "I don't think, though, that you realize you've already met my other brothers."

"Jeez, how many of you are there?"

"Five. I'm the eldest, in case you hadn't gathered that already."

She was grinning this time. "Boy, are you an eldest!"

He smiled. "I'll take that as a compliment, whether or not it was intended that way, missy."

Laurie did her best to look innocent. "All I did was agree with you!"

"Uh huh." He sounded unconvinced. But despite the levity, there was an uncomfortable pause before he continued. "So, as I said, you've met my other brothers—the ones between Nick and me."

"Can I stop you?" she asked.

He sounded surprised. "Sure."

"I just really want to know before I have a heart attack or faint or something—are you breaking up with me?"

Jace didn't give her an immediate "no." Instead, his lips formed a thin line and he cocked his head a bit. Then he gave her the answer she wanted—sort of. "No, I'm not. In fact, when I tell you what I need to tell you, the shoe is very firmly going to be on the other foot."

"That wasn't a lot of help."

He rubbed his neck a bit nervously. "I know, so I'm just going to spit it out. You're dating me and two of my other brothers."

Her head jerked back at an odd angle. "I'm what?"

"You're seeing two other men—at least. Adam and Ryan?"

"Holy crap!" Laurie put her hand to her mouth. "I am! They're related to you?"

"Myself, Adam, Ryan, Nick, and Tanner, in that order. We're the Rule brothers."

She looked shocked and a bit horrified for a long moment.

Then she laughed, but he wasn't sure whether or not that was a good thing.

"This is bizarre! My father was always after me to learn everyone's last name—which I so do not care about—so that he could make a connection and see if he knew the parents of any of the kids I was hanging around with. I never pay any attention to last names whatsoever—I'm always very happy if I can come up with someone's first name!"

She didn't seem to be angry about the situation, which was good, but that didn't really tell Jace anything about what she was going to do about it.

"Of course, you're brothers! I can see the resemblance now that I'm looking for it! How could I not have noticed? This is just so strange!"

"I'm—we're—right there with you, believe me."

"When did you realize?"

"Last weekend. We were grilling on Sunday and watching football. We're very close, and my brothers have always been my best friends. Then all of us started talking about this wonderful woman we'd met."

She blushed brightly. "Aw, that's so sweet!" How often did a woman hear that multiple men were talking her up to other men, rather than running her down?

"Yeah, sweet."

He sounded endearingly unhappy with the situation.

"Well, I guess I definitely have a type!"

"Lovely."

She couldn't help but smile, but he looked too pained for her to keep it up and she became serious. "So, where do we go from here? Any of us?" she corrected.

Jace's head came up. "That's what I meant about the shoe being on the other foot about breaking up. It's entirely up to you. You say the word, and any or all of us will back off."

"Oh."

"Do you mind if I ask you a question—that you are, of course, not obligated in any way to answer?"

"You sound like *you're* the lawyer in the family."

He smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes, which was unusual for him. "No, I just don't want you to feel pushed or pressured in any way about this. We have all agreed not to contact you until your decision is made, so as not to influence you."

Laurie shrugged. She didn't have anything to hide at all. "Ask away."

"Are you seeing anyone besides the three of us?"

Her answer allowed him to relax—a little.

And it was very vehement. "No." She laughed a bit nervously. "I've never dated three men at the same time in my life, frankly.

I...it's just not my style. I don't judge anyone else, but I know me, and I have never been comfortable doing that.

She met his eyes while she answered. "But I met three men in a relatively short space of time, and I found them all so attractive—in many different ways—that it was impossible, obviously, not to want to date all of them."

Jace took her hand. "I want to reassure you that there's no judgment about this on our end, either. And that we are all *very* interested in you."

"The feeling is very mutual," she admitted without hesitation.

"Then you have a decision to make."

"I do, but would the three of you be against me continuing to date all of you?"

He looked a bit taken aback at that. "I think I'd have to ask them about that. It wasn't something we discussed, because we figured you'd want to pick one of us and not continue with the others."

Laurie bit her lip then shrugged. "Well, it's what's been going on without you knowing about it. Or does the knowledge make it unacceptable—which I perfectly understand—to you? To any of you?"

"I don't know," he answered truthfully.

Laurie sat up. "Well, I'd like to know the answer to that question before I give you my answer."

"I'll talk to the guys and get it to you as soon as I can."

Laurie turned toward him. "So, I don't suppose you're allowed to influence me, either, huh?"

She looked so disappointed that he had to smile. "No, I don't think that would be good form."

"Damn. You didn't influence me on our last date, either."

That got him to laugh, which she loved, because she sensed that he was generally a more serious person than either of his... any of his brothers.

Boy, that was going to be a hard concept to get her head around!

"Let me take you home, darlin'," he said, standing then helping her up and into his arms, where he hugged her tightly.

It was then that Laurie realized they all had the same hug! For guys who were all very manly men—thoroughly enlightened but distinctly and unapologetically male at the same time—they gave heart-stopping hugs, full bodied, as well as full hearted, and none of them had ever tried to take advantage at all. She had felt immediately comfortable hugging all of them, and that wasn't the usual for her with most men, either, unfortunately.

It was later on that night, which she had originally anticipated spending with Jace, that she got a text from Adam.

Hey, Laur!

He was the only one who shortened her name, so she knew without looking who it was.

Hi!

Jace had to go out and help with something on the ranch suddenly, so I said I'd text you with the answer to your question.

Okay.

I don't mind telling you that it caused a bit of a debate amongst us.

. . .

The Brothers Rule

Oh, dear. I expressly do not want to be the cause of any kind of bad feelings among you. I'm sorry.

Don't be at all. We're all just very fond of you, and none of us wants to lose you.

She wasn't really sure how to respond to that. She was alone, and yet it made her blush hotly.

I'm very honored by that. Thank you.

You're welcome. Well, we decided that, although we'd each like to be the one, we don't care who you date—us, other guys, other girls—whatever. As long as none of us has to give you up.

Thank you. That information helps a lot.

Welcome. I'm going to go away now before I say something that will sway your vote, but I think you're a gorgeous, funny, wonderful, fantastic woman!

LOLOLOL. I think that's cheating, but then, Jace hugged and kissed me and fed me a great meal, so thank you. Please let the other guys know that I won't take too long. I don't want to string you all along.

Take as long as you need, hon. We'll all be here.

You're all pretty fantastic, too.

She put three hearts at the end of that sentence.

And he—generously—sent three back.

For a long moment, Laurie just lay there on her couch, wondering what the fuck she was going to do now.

She was much more comfortable with famine than feast.