

Loose Id

Jayha Leigh

THE
WILD, WILD MESS

Atlanta

THE WILD WILD MESS: ATLANTA

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This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable.

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Jayha Leigh

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Dedication

To Robert, the immortal in my life who inspires the lip-smacking hmm, hmm, hmms and who is the blueprint for every hero I create. What God has brought together let no man tear asunder.

To Jeanie, the daughter with which God gifted me in one of my darkest hours, the daughter that I will love, spoil and cherish.

To Andréa, the Riley to my Huey; to Rebecca, my best friend/evil twin and the 'Thug' in Hot Chick And Thug; to Lorie, who was the 'And', the conjunction that made our posse possible and the x-factor that made it an adventure.

To Samisoni and Mare. For Samisoni, who set the standard on how to love women, and for Mare for giving us mortal women hope. For you both for giving us the type of romance that women dream about, desire, and later reminisce and sigh over.

The Posse Canon

Always have each other's backs.

Bring it ... and bring a lot of it, and the it better be something good.

Cater to the best cook in the group.

Don't even think about doing anything on Super Bowl Sunday that will interfere with watching the game.

Exploit all loopholes and technicalities to your advantage.

For the sake of argument, pretend that other posses are equal to you ... never mind that's complete BS.

Go, have fun, and look better than everyone else doing it.

Have a contingency plan that is so kickass that it might be better than the actual plan.

In the event that you run out of cheesecake, it's okay to indulge in another dessert while foraging for more cheesecake.

Just so you know -- there is only one Carolina, and it's in Chapel Hill.

Know when the Hot Now sign is on at Krispy Kreme.

Laugh until you're on the verge of passing out, and then laugh some more.

Mock each other unmercifully, as it builds character.

Never be afraid to answer a question with "Hell no."

On any given day, calling in sick to work is a viable option.

Practice saying "We didn't do it" until it becomes such a natural response that you say it even when no one accuses you of anything.

Quell all thoughts of working overtime.

Remember, nothing says love like a whole bunch of money.

Stock your Posse with people who can be of use to you (e.g., forger, owner of a pro sports team, pastry chef, Supreme Court justice)

Throw down a drink in each other's names before it's for the last time.

Unless otherwise agreed upon, we will not be doing the following: chasing tornadoes on our off days, jumping into the Grand Canyon to escape justice, or ordering a damn thing from the healthy section of the menu.

Vengeance is a dish best served cold, but then again, so is pudding -- and it probably won't get you executed.

When, in the course of human events, there comes a time when you need to kick some ass, don't hesitate to do so.

Xenophobes will be rehabilitated.

You only live once, so try not to screw that one time up.

Zillionaire kind of has a nice ring to it, so try to amass that much money.

Chapter One: Appetizer

It took fourteen rings for Atlanta Jackson, to pick up the phone. Hell, it took her ten rings to even realize that the phone was ringing and another three rings to find where she had thrown it in a fit of anger. For good measure, she let it ring a fourteenth time.

“What?!” she screamed into the phone, pissed because A, it was ringing and B, she had just closed her eyes a scant two hours before since it was her turn to close Evil Twins, the sports bar that she co-owned with Aloha -- her best friend.

“It is I.”

In her sleep-induced haze, it took Atlanta a minute to realize that the voice on the other end belonged to none other than Ianikut Maksim Aleksandrovich, who was about to be cussed out if he didn’t have a damn good reason for calling ten minutes before the crack of dawn. Relatives and his close friends got the privilege of calling him Max while everyone else had to make do with calling him Mr. Aleksandrovich. But since Atlanta wasn’t everyone else, she called him Imax, just because she could.

“Imax, the sun’s just getting out of bed.”

“I’m beginning to suspect that there’s a vampire or two somewhere back in your bloodline, considering your penchant for sleeping the morning away.”

“Do you mean that literally or figuratively?”

He chuckled softly. “It’s a wonder that you made it through college.”

“Imax, besides being a Duke alum, you’re really damn annoying. I made it through college because I have off-the-chart intelligence, and my momma threatened to disembowel me should I waste her money.”

“And because you had me as a classmate. After all, you did use my notes since you slept through most of our morning classes.”

“Don’t get it twisted. Just because you took four classes at Carolina doesn’t mean that you’re entitled to claim that you’re one of us. And just for the record, I only slept through morning classes during football season. Now, what the hell do you want?”

“I need you.”

“Considering the fact that you have an office full of valedictorians, I don’t understand why you called me of all people.”

“Because even though your note-taking skills need work, you’re good at *these* things.”

“By ‘these things’ I’m assuming that you mean anything that involves being civil to people.”

Sighing, Max conceded the point. “That’s exactly what I mean. You’re good at getting inside of people’s heads without beating them into submission beforehand.”

“On Tuesday mornings, there are few things that I’m good at.”

“Bet you can run the table on sports trivia.”

“Which kicks ass if you’re on a game show,” she snapped.

“Few possess your skills at persuasion.”

“Which is beneficial if one is trying to incite a riot or hype up the crowd at a concert.”

“Every man that I know wants to be you when they grow up.”

“That’s just because back in the day I owned the hottest strip club in town, and now I own the hottest sports bar in Metro Atlanta area. Now that I think of it, *I* want to be me when I grow up.”

“I think Hugh Hefner also wants to be you when he grows up.”

“Yeah, but there’s a line and everything.” Atlanta sighed, tired of the banter. “And by the way, all of your buttering-up doesn’t change the fact that it’s morning.”

“Please.”

“Is it the product of my fatigue, or did you just use the term ‘please’? I didn’t even know that you knew such a word existed in the human lexicon. And then there’s the fact that you actually used it in a sentence correctly. It’s good to see that expensive graduate education wasn’t a complete waste of money.”

“You know, I didn’t want to have to bring this up, but I did let you use all of my textbooks so that you could spend your book money on sports memorabilia.”

“Dammit, Imax, you can’t throw that in my face whenever you want something. Everyone’s not a spoiled rich kid.”

Max emitted a sigh that bespoke of long suffering. “You’re right. Then again, not everyone is your second-best friend.”

“Shhh. I’m keeping our friendship in the closet.”

“Please.” He inserted a hint of pleading in his request. “There are a few men coming to meet with me about business. I know that they have stellar credentials, but I’d like to know what you think of them as people, not businessmen.”

“You must’ve been listening to some old-school R&B, because you’ve got a hint of begging in your voice.” Sighing, because she knew that her conscience wouldn’t let her get any more rest, she cursed once more just for the hell of it. “I’m on my way.”

* * * * *

Atlanta strolled in and locked on to the cretin who had interrupted her Tuesday morning hibernation. She had no problem spotting him. His impressive stature and visage set him apart, but also the look in his eyes seemed to welcome all challengers. Although she loved him, one part of her wanted to kick his ass. She refrained for three reasons: One, because she possessed no superpowers and therefore doubted her chances of success. Two, because he had stood by her when she went renegade and left her “good job.” And three, because he had chocolate, which he offered her as soon as she walked in.

For once, Imax wasn’t wearing the “what have I done to deserve this” look; he was too busy wearing his “prepare to have your empire toppled” look, which was directed at the group of people who wanted to do business with him. Taking a seat next to Imax, Atlanta took a few seconds to observe him in the process of taking the room over completely. He might suck at civility, but he was damn good at intimidation. Atlanta sat back and got a feel for the occupants of the room.

Atlanta knew that she was in a class by herself when it came to anything involving the peculiarities and desires of people; that is why Evil Twins was so successful. She might be a cretin when it came to fashion, small talk, and cooking, but underneath her “don’t give a damn” demeanor was book genius and street savvy. She could work a crowd like an emcee at an old-fashioned tent revival, give up conversation like a 1-900 operator, and sniff out bullshit like a bloodhound. She zeroed in on the little things to which few paid attention, making her dangerous to those not on the up-and-up, a worthy adversary in poker, and a successful businesswoman. Yep, her ego shouted, she had a talent for judging people, even in the morning.

She sat through two hours of corporate X’s and O’s before she left Imax to the running of his empire. Though it had only taken her a few minutes to get a decent feel for the businessmen, she’d opted to remain at Imax’s side. He was more than her friend; he was her unofficial other big brother, and she wanted to demonstrate her support in any way that she could.

They’d become friends quite by accident. A reserve bit of civility had slipped through his foundation of ruthlessness, and she fell in total and complete like with him. Atlanta frowned as she thought back on what had been one of those kinds of days, the ones that humble a person. She unconsciously shuddered at the memory.

People may have thought that she sailed through life, but there were days, hell, even weeks when nothing seemed to work. Though she could put up the façade of “nothing’s wrong,” Imax had seen right through it one day in class. He had taken one look at her, grabbed “their” book, and frog-marched her from the room. He took Atlanta to his dorm room, sat her on his lap, and gently pushed her head against his shoulder. She didn’t want to show weakness and attempted to pull away, but he held fast.

When Atlanta explained that she didn’t want him to see her cry, he’d cut off all of the lights and promised not to look. Imax never asked her what had made her cry, and she never volunteered the answer.

* * * * *

Steele Magnussen was wealthy, arrogant, and intelligent, but first and foremost, he was berserker. Unlike other paranormal beings that were ruled by sunlight, the moon, or other elements, berserkers were ruled only by passion. And though he was headed for a meeting, he was thinking about women. He needed a woman, but not just any woman. He needed a woman worthy to be called his.

Sometimes you should be careful what you ask for.

Chapter Two

Damn, the sun was bright at eleven o'clock in the morning. By all accounts, Atlanta should be sleeping; the Monday night game had run long, which meant that she'd closed Evil Twins later than normal. She would've had enough sleep if Imax didn't prescribe to the all-meetings-should-begin-as-early-as-humanly-possible theory of business. She would need to grab a long nap before she dragged herself to work tonight. Though she loved owning her own sports bar, she would be glad when it was far enough along that she didn't have to personally babysit it. Working nights sucked because it interfered with her sports viewing. Even if she could watch the game at work, it didn't feel the same as being home on the couch. Working nights didn't suck as much as paying taxes, but it still held a high spot on her abominations-of-nature list. It ranked somewhere between getting devoured by a fire-breathing dragon and getting blasted with raw sewage.

She definitely needed to sleep, but first she needed to eat, and if she hurried she could still make late breakfast at Dréa's, her favorite soul food restaurant. Atlanta wasn't prepared for the man who stepped in front of her as she opened the door; they both fell. Atlanta didn't have time to ponder anything other than trying to break her fall.

After what seemed to be a long time, Atlanta finally came to a halt against the ground. She and the giant who had stopped her forward progress lay in a tangle of arms and legs, and her hand lay crushed between the heavy glass of the door and its frame. She felt as if she had just hit the *entire* defense -- not the eleven-man squad that faced off against the offense in American football, but all five branches of the United States armed forces.

Atlanta discovered her face planted in a very hard chest. "I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

"I think so," the giant answered between gasps. "Luckily the soft marble floor broke my fall."

Blowing one of her errant braids from her face, Atlanta tried to sit up, and then realized that both her person and her hand were stuck. She slumped back down on the man's

chest, not wanting to bother with getting up anyway. Things like this freak accident tended to occur when she didn't get enough shuteye. *Damn Imax and the Bentley that he drove in on.*

"Try to move. Part of my clothing is stuck under you," Atlanta said, knowing that she should open her eyes but was too winded to bother.

The man shifted a bit just as a moan escaped Atlanta. "Ahhh."

"Are you okay?" he asked with concern.

Finally pulling herself to a sitting position, Atlanta opened her eyes and assessed the damage, heedless of the fact that she was straddling a stranger. "Yeah, but I think that this is going to need stitches." She appraised the damage to her left hand. "Dammit." She attempted to stop the bleeding by pulling down the sleeve of her suit jacket.

"I believe that you are correct," the man replied. "However, if you would be so kind as to refrain from bleeding on me, I would appreciate it."

Contrite, Atlanta was about to roll off of him when his firm hands stayed her hips.

Atlanta began to ask him what was wrong when she finally looked him in the face and almost forgot the name of the starting quarterback on her fantasy football team. *Damn, he is so hot. And damn, his hands feel so damn good.* It had been so long since she had felt a man's hands touching her intimately.

"Please consider where you are about to press your knee."

Atlanta realized that she was on the verge of doing some serious damage to his groin, using it as leverage to gain her feet. Changing position, she rolled to the side, holding her injured hand.

"I bled all over your jacket," she began. "Here, give it to me." She began stripping it from him. Her injured hand made the task difficult.

The man stopped her before gaining his feet with grace. Removing the jacket himself, he reached out to help her up.

"Is there any blood on you?" she asked. He handed her the ruined jacket, and Atlanta used it to stem the flow of blood.

"Probably, although my jacket seems to have contained the majority of it." The giant looked down at Atlanta appraisingly. "You need medical attention."

"Yeah," she agreed.

"Allow me to take you."

Yeah, baby, take me, take me all night long, she thought at the sound of his voice, which was seductive, due in part to his slight Scandinavian accent. She imagined that's how Vikings sounded. "No thanks. If you would leave me a contact number, I'll make arrangements for your jacket."

"Screw the jacket," he said. "It can be replaced. You need medical attention now."

"That's where I'm going -- just not with you."

“Why not? You don’t look to be in any condition to walk, much less drive anywhere.” His thickening accent alluded to his growing agitation.

Though she was shaky and still bleeding, her take-no-crap demeanor kicked in. “I. Am. Not. Going. Anywhere. With. You.”

The man did not seem accustomed to his demands being ignored; he looked to be at a loss. “Why not?”

“Dude, I don’t know you,” Atlanta said with growing impatience. “You could be an axe-murdering psychopath for all I know.”

“You are serious?” he asked, his face incredulous.

“Absolutely,” she replied while looking him in the eyes. There was something different about them, something piercingly eerie. *But damn, he was fine.* She could do a lot with what she guessed was six and half feet of solid man -- like select him for her fantasy football team. And ride him all day long. His tailored slacks and pressed shirt did nothing to hide the fact that he was probably 260 pounds of domineering man.

Telling her pussy to shut up, Atlanta concentrated on the situation at hand. She hurt, she needed food, and the sun was still up.

“What can I do to convince you otherwise?”

“Got anyone to vouch for you?” she asked.

“You truly are serious?”

“Dude, I don’t even know your name. Too many women make the mistake of going off with a handsome man never to be heard from again.”

Sighing with what sounded like impatience, the man introduced himself. “I am Steele Magnussen. And you are?”

“Nice to meet you, Steele. I’m Atlanta Jackson.”

“Normally I would shake your hand; however, you are bleeding.”

“Completely understandable. Besides, there’s no need for us to resort to something as mundane as handshaking when two minutes ago I was sprawled on top of you.”

“Now that we have been properly introduced, might we go?”

“It’s a start, but knowing your name doesn’t mean that you aren’t some kind of a freak.” Making a quick decision, she demanded to see his identification.

Steele pulled out his wallet and allowed her to peruse his identification.

Atlanta motioned for him to flip through the various IDs, credit cards, and club memberships, and Steele reluctantly did so in deference to her injured hand. She studied his license like she would a contract, comparing it to other cards in his wallet.

“You said your name’s Steele. None of these say that.”

“It is a shortened form of my middle name.”

Atlanta nodded thoughtfully before taking out her phone and making a call.

"This is Atlanta," she began. She gave the person on the other end his name, address, and vital statistics. He perked up at her description of him as a hot, blond Viking with hair down his back. Hanging up, she motioned that he could close his wallet before announcing that she was ready.

"Do you feel safe now?" he asked.

"As safe as I can be under the circumstances. I might be hurt, but I can fight with one hand if I have to." She paused and said a prayer for her kickboxing instructor. She spent two hours a week finding new and improved ways to call him a sadistic bastard as she burned off those desserts in which she loved to indulge. "Besides, if I go missing you can bet your ass that my friends will hunt you down and beat you to the brink of death. Then they will give you time to recover and repeat the process until you have the decency to die. They're cool like that."

"Nice friends you have, but you would still be dead," he pointed out.

"You're right, but then again, so would you -- eventually. Are you willing to take that risk?"

"Point taken. Your caveat was most impressive."

Atlanta, about to answer, noticed the beginnings of a smirk. She hated when guys underestimated her. "You might want to take some of that arrogance out of your voice and replace it with a little bit of wariness. Unlike you, I'm not just a pretty face or all talk."

"So you think that I'm handsome, huh?"

Atlanta blew out a breath. Trust him to only hear the bit about his looks. "Yeah, but I follow the maxim that warns not to bite the bait of pleasure until you know that there is no hook." Looking into devastating blue eyes that a woman could get lost in, she continued, "When a white man is unusually nice to me, I'm always looking for the hook."

Steele appeared to ponder her comment before gently steering her in the direction of a Mercedes Benz, evidently his car. "Should I be insulted by that?" he inquired as he stopped at the black sedan. Opening the door, he gently settled her in the passenger seat.

"Possibly, but mostly you should hear the caveat," she warned.

"And that would be?" he asked.

"I'm watching you even though right now I'm forced to rely on you."

Chapter Three

Steele almost scoffed at her words. Even if he were not a berserker from the oldest and finest bloodline, the woman would need to bring at least half a dozen men to the fight just to make it worth his while. He could have any woman he wanted, but he found himself admiring Atlanta's fortitude, regardless of the improbability of her words. He had tired of "anything you want" women. He fucked them for awhile and then sent them on their way. Three months had passed since he had had a woman, and now he felt like he wanted a challenge. A female who had a mind of her own, who not only had something to talk about, but something he was interested in hearing. He looked at Atlanta through the car window. She seemed like such a woman. And if she could fuck him into a stupor, that would be nice, but not necessary.

As he settled himself into the driver's seat, he started to inquire where he should take her, but suddenly realized that she looked somewhat worse for the wear. He dialed the number of his uncle, a well-respected orthopedic surgeon. As he dialed, he tried to maneuver through the traffic, finding the shortest route to the hospital.

Atlanta must have hurt like hell; she didn't speak to him as he drove. She just closed her eyes. When they reached the hospital, Steele haphazardly parked his car in front and came around to let her out. His parking, he knew, was as suspect as his driving, but he rushed to care for the woman. Taking her elbow, he didn't even bother locking his car before attempting to usher her inside.

"You need to lock your car," she stated.

"What?"

"You need to lock your car," she repeated as if talking with an imbecile.

Steele stood dumbstruck. Here she was on the verge of bleeding to death, and she lectured him.

"Lock your car. I would feel bad if someone jacked it while you were helping me. I already owe you a new jacket."

"For the last time, forget about the jacket," he spat. "I can get another one."

"I know that you can get another one," she stated, "and though it was an accident, that's not the point. It's the principle of the thing."

It appeared that Steele could not win this particular argument, so he hit the lock button on the key fob before escorting her in. As soon as they entered the office, a nurse showed them to a room.

Atlanta sat on the first piece of furniture, which happened to be the doctor's stool.

"You are supposed to sit on the examination table," Steele directed.

"Steele, leave me alone. I don't want to sit up there and then discover that they don't take my insurance here."

"It does not matter."

"Yeah, it does, because I'll have to pay out-of-network charges," she returned.

"You are so --" The door opened, cutting him off.

A distinguished older man walked in the room just as the argument was heating up.

"Hello, Steele," Dr. Randolph began before turning to the woman seated on his stool. Undeterred, he simply propped himself on the edge of the examination table and addressed the young lady. She appeared to be warming up for what promised to be a heated argument with his nephew. From the look on Steele's face, it wouldn't have been the first disagreement. As a man who had lost many arguments in the course of his marriage, Dr. Randolph knew that look, and he sympathized with his nephew. It must be a shock to the poor boy, accustomed to biddable women eager to please. Dr. Randolph could only hope that the woman didn't press his nephew into *berserker*gang, a frenzy in which he could do a lot of damage without suffering any himself.

"Good afternoon, I'm Dr. Randolph, Steele's uncle."

"You don't look like him," the woman protested.

Dr. Randolph raised his eyebrows and looked at his nephew. Steele shrugged helplessly.

"He is married to my aunt," Steele explained.

"I understand that you have suffered an injury," Dr. Randolph said, falling into his stride. "Might I see it?" He snapped on a pair of surgical gloves.

"Thank you for seeing me. However, I don't know if you take my insurance."

Sensing Steele about to interject, Dr. Randolph shook his head at his nephew, warning him to remain silent. "That should be the least of your worries, Miss ... ?"

"Atlanta. Shouldn't I complete some forms before you examine me?"

"Steele will fetch them while I examine your injury," he replied smoothly, indicating that Steele should run along.

Dr. Randolph carefully unwrapped the jacket from Atlanta's hand. It definitely required stitches, and if he guessed correctly, two of her fingers were broken, no doubt from trying to break her fall. He shared his suspicions with her and asked her a series of questions before telling her to switch places with him just as Steele came barging back into the room with a stack of papers.

"Steele, I can handle it from here," Dr. Randolph said, attempting to hint that Steele should leave.

"It's okay; he can stay. Besides, both Steele and I need to get blood tests since I bled all over him."

"Why do *I* need a test?" Steele asked, his tone showing his surprise.

"Because you don't know what *I* have."

Dr. Randolph interrupted once again before the full-scale argument could begin.

"We can take care of that. First, let me attend that injury," he stated in a no-nonsense voice.

Because Atlanta had an adverse reaction to many numbing agents, Dr. Randolph would have to stitch without anesthesia. Atlanta seemed to be okay with that, but the look of horror that crossed Steele's visage indicated that he did not feel the same. Dr. Randolph smiled at Steele's protectiveness.

"Can't you put her under?" Steele asked.

"No, he can't put me under," Atlanta interjected before launching into yet another squabble with Steele. "I have things to do today, and I'd like to stop bleeding as soon as possible,"

Dr. Randolph ignored their bickering and arranged her hand on the small tray so that he could clear her wounds of debris. He registered Atlanta's reactions while cleaning the wounds to decide if he would indeed be able to stitch without anesthesia. Though she clenched her fist tighter, she never paused in bickering with Steele so he decided to give it a go.

"Atlanta, if at any time you decide that you cannot bear the pain, you are to tell me," he advised before carefully placing the first stitch. Atlanta didn't jerk when the needle pricked her skin. In fact, she didn't move at all. He knew that she felt pain, though, because she had stopped talking.

Steele could stomach a lot of things, but watching a woman in pain was not one of them. His uncle worked adeptly, but for Steele it was not fast enough. As quick as his uncle was, he was not quick enough to stop the flicker of pain in Atlanta's eyes. Steele knew that she was in a great deal of pain when she allowed him to have the last word. He watched as

she took a deep breath and seemed to hold it. Though it appeared as if Dr. Randolph had been stitching for a long while, Steele knew that only a few minutes had lapsed.

"How many more do you have left?" he asked agitated when he saw Atlanta bite down into that luscious bottom lip. "Can you not go any faster?" He rumbled.

"Steele," his uncle warned.

"It's okay, Steele. I'm fine." She spoke in reassuring tones, but Steele witnessed her shudder when his uncle began stitching the most damaged areas.

"Stop, now," Steele ordered his uncle as he tilted Atlanta's chin up. "Atlanta, look at me, sweetheart. Can you go on?"

"Yes," she paused to let out a shaky breath. "I just want to get this over with as soon as possible."

Steele did not like this one bit, but he could understand her choice. He took her undamaged hand in his and stared into her eyes; they glistened with determination and unshed tears. "Then concentrate on me, not the pain."

"Okay," she whispered.

Steele silently gave his uncle permission to resume stitching, but his look contained a caveat: hurry the hell up. He caressed Atlanta's uninjured hand and watched sweat bead up on her forehead. He continued stroking her, but when she cried out, he began to lose it. His eyes flashed neon, and he might have entered *berserker* gang had his uncle not cleared his throat in an obvious warning. Steele attempted to calm himself. He took a deep breath before stepping closer into Atlanta's personal space.

"Atlanta?"

"I'm fine, Steele," she gasped.

"But I'm not," he said as he gently took her mouth in a kiss. He continued ravishing her mouth, which tasted of chocolate.

"Steele," she gasped. He guessed that she would try to stop him, but he interjected before she could finish.

"Atlanta, let me kiss this pain away," he begged. "Please, let me do this." He used his finesse to bring her to full arousal, and he used his strength to maintain a firm grip on the wrist of her injured hand so that his uncle could finish his work.

Atlanta prepared to raise hell about his handling of her person when a spasm of pain shot through her entire body.

"Stee-," she moaned. Steele's gentle kisses had taken her mind off of the pain, but now she needed more. Tangling her hand in his platinum locks, she kissed him with everything within her. She heard him growl and felt the vibrations shake his chest. Steele wrapped his entire body around her. He had one hand tangled in her braids, and he used the other to keep her injured hand still. Oh, damn, the man could kiss. She groaned in frustration when

the need for air finally forced them apart. Taking in deep breaths, she looked at him in utter amazement. For once in her life, she was totally speechless. Though cognizant of the pain in her hand, Atlanta was also completely aware of her arousal. She was on emotional and physical overload, so it came as no surprise when she passed out.

Atlanta shocked Steele when she became the aggressor in their kiss, but he submitted and enjoyed every second of it. He could almost forget where they were, but not quite. He could sense her pain in the erratic beating of her heart, in the urgency of her kiss, and in the death grip that she had on his hair. He cursed every god that made up the Aesir when she passed out then turned around and thanked them all when his uncle finally finished. Steele cradled Atlanta to his chest and took a seat. Placing a gentle kiss on the top of her head, he released the breath he had been holding. His uncle spoke, but Steele could not be bothered with listening to a damn thing the doctor said. Dr. Randolph had hurt this woman, even though it had been necessary in order to help her. Steele could feel *berserker* rising up again and looked meaningfully at his uncle. Steele watched Dr. Randolph hastily quit the room before resuming his vigil over Atlanta. She had heart, and he could respect that.

* * * * *

Atlanta sensed something awry as soon as she opened her eyes. She gasped and tried to sit up, but a firm hand on her hip stopped her.

"Be careful," a delicious voice advised.

Taking a moment to clear her head, she remembered where she was. "What happened?"

"You passed out."

"I'm so --" she began only to have Steele cut her off.

"Don't apologize. Just rest for a few more minutes. Your body has been through a lot."

"Yeah, but ..." she began again.

"Atlanta, please. I know that you are tough. That is the last thing that you will ever have to prove to me. Now rest."

"I can rest in that chair," she began.

"You could," he acknowledged. "But why would you want to sit there when you have the opportunity to lay your head against my rock hard chest?"

Atlanta smiled in spite of her pain. "Well, since you put it like that, I guess I'll close my eyes for another minute or two." She laughed. Despite the pain in her hand, she reveled in the comfort of Steele's arms. She lay in his arms for another twenty minutes before Dr. Randolph knocked and reentered the room.

Dr. Randolph checked Atlanta over. Though he broke virtually all land records for stitching, it hadn't been fast enough. Atlanta's face still bore signs of pain. Steele's face still bore signs of agitation and anger. Atlanta insisted on completing the paper work that Steele had brought her earlier.

Dr. Randolph knew that she felt better because she was back to arguing with Steele.

"Atlanta, that can wait until later," Steele informed her.

"I'm already here," she shot back. "Therefore, I'm doing it now, so be quiet."

The two of them were giving Dr. Randolph a headache, and by the look on Steele's face, he must have had one, too. Atlanta didn't appear to be a woman who allowed any man to bully her, and he knew from experience that Steele was a domineering man, accustomed to having his way. Atlanta looked on the verge of braining Steele if he didn't shut up. Dr. Randolph decided that he best interject before Atlanta turned around and brained his nephew. He'd already placed enough stitches for the morning.

"So where were you rushing off to when you ran into Steele?" Dr. Randolph inquired as he wrote out prescriptions for pain killers.

"Lunch."

"You were running as if the hounds of hell were after you only to get something to eat?" Steele asked incredulously.

"Yeah, I was," she threw back. "Where were you rushing to?"

"I was not rushing. I was calmly strolling to the building on my way to a meeting. You were the one running about like the menace you apparently are."

"Dude, you haven't known me long enough to jump to that conclusion."

"I do not have to know you long. I conclude that you are a menace to yourself based on two things. First, the fact that you almost killed yourself a couple of hours ago in your haste to get to lunch, and second, your familiarity with the details of your health insurance leads me to believe that you use it often."

"Fine, I might bang myself up, but I'm generally only a menace to myself, whereas you're a menace to everyone unfortunate enough to be on the road with you. Driving isn't difficult. Complete idiots do it everyday. It only consists of a few rules. You stop when encountering stop signs, red lights, and pedestrians. You signal when turning or changing lanes. You keep on the lookout for road signs such as 'Duck Crossing' or 'Bridge Out'. And let's not forget the primary rule: You stay within the lines, just like coloring. The majority of drivers don't find it a difficult skill to master, but for you it's a challenge of gargantuan proportions. You didn't even park your car in the damn lines."

"Apparently, it is not difficult at all," he roared. "I have a valid driver's license."

"Yeah, and people have valid appendixes, and I have a valid kitchen, but neither are used very effectively -- just to make a point."

"Though there is something definitely wrong with your self-preservation instincts, there is nothing wrong with my driving," he stated. "I cannot believe that you, Ms. Walking-Disaster-Waiting-to-Happen, would criticize my driving."

"Oh, hell, yes. I'm criticizing that shit you call driving, Mr. Catalyst-for-a-Forty-Car-Pileup. Actually it's beyond criticism -- I'm straight calling you out about your driving. If I had the time, I could give you a complete dissertation on the deficiencies of all of the elements of your so-called driving, including parking, take off, merging, and coming to a complete stop!"

"My driving skills managed to get us here safely."

"Steele, unless it was preceded by the phrase 'lack of', using the term 'skills' to describe your driving would be considered perjury in virtually any court of law. It was the grace of God that got us here safely, not your so-called -- *and I use this term lightly* -- driving skills."

A nurse cautiously peeking in and inquiring if everything was okay interrupted their argument. She departed after reassurances from all parties that nothing was seriously wrong.

"Children, please," Dr. Randolph implored. "You have to be giving yourselves headaches with all of this arguing."

"She started it."

"He started it."

Randolph cocked his head to one side; Steele and Atlanta started laughing.

"We sound like two-year-olds," Steele stated.

"Well, you might sound like a two-year-old, but I sound like a three-year-old." A moment of silence passed. Steele and Atlanta seemed to appraise each other. "Would you like to go to lunch, Steele?" she finally asked.

"Absolutely," he answered.

* * * * *

After receiving instructions and two finger splints from Dr. Randolph, Steele and Atlanta left. Outside of the medical office, Steele stopped and looked at his car.

"I did not park it very well, did I?" he said. Atlanta tried to suppress a chuckle as she walked around to the driver's side door.

"Give me the keys," she demanded.

"You want to drive my Benz?"

"It's not so much that I want to drive your car as I want to live to see the next ten minutes. Though I recited every prayer I knew, it would take a team of mathematicians working around the clock to develop an equation to calculate the number of times that my life flashed before my eyes on the way over. So you understand why I want to drive. Is that a problem?"

“Why should I let you drive my car?” Steele asked. “I just learned your name a few hours ago. How do I know that you are not a serial boyfriend killer? How do I know that if I toss you my keys, you will not leave me stranded here and sell my car on the Internet?”

She smiled. “First, you’re not my boyfriend. And even if you were, there’s no money in killing off your boyfriends. Now if we were married, then I might consider killing you off if you had a juggernaut life insurance policy. Second, you not only know my name, but your uncle has all of my vital info and a vial of my blood and everyone in the place knows that I’m with you. Considering our numerous arguments, which by the way, you keep losing, I’d be the number one suspect if you went missing. Third, I wouldn’t sell your car on the Internet. I might sell your kidney on the Internet, but not your car. I would take your car to a chop shop if I were trying to get rid of it. But I’m not really inclined to catch a charge of grand theft auto for the few thousand dollars; that’s what you’d call a shitty business decision. Fourth, if you were so concerned about the well being of your precious S-class, I wouldn’t have had to remind you to lock it. Now give me the damn keys and get in.”

He walked up to her and dropped the keys in her hands, but he opened the door and settled her in with an admonition for her to be careful of her injury before walking around to the passenger side.

Atlanta could only murmur her thanks before adjusting the seat and controls. Steele, a gentleman through and through, didn’t fail to remember that she was a lady even in the midst of an argument. Tempted to bite the bait of pleasure, Atlanta knew the odds suggested that Steele had some fatal flaw. He obviously had money as he drove a top-of-the-line Benz and rocked hand-tailored clothes, but he had a fierce intellect under all that fine and privilege.

Chapter Four

Looking at her adjust the controls like a pro, he smiled at himself. He had never allowed a woman -- any woman -- to drive one of his vehicles, even though he had a six-bay garage -- five of them occupied. Wanting to hear her sassy mouth once again, he inquired, "Though you have addressed my other concerns, how do I know that you are not a freak?"

Smiling, Atlanta answered, "Oh, though I'm not an axe-murdering psychopath who sells off my boyfriends' cars on the Internet, I *am* a freak." She flashed him an exaggerated leer.

He might not understand all of the peculiar colloquialisms of the English language, but he did understand her intent, and so did his cock. He crossed his legs to hide the beginnings of his erection, reminded again of the many months that had passed since he had been with a woman.

"Are you going to throw all of my words back at me?" she asked.

"And if I say yes?"

"You still won't win an argument against me, but I'll make sure that I give you interesting things to throw back at me. Now fasten your seatbelt."

"Are you sure you can handle this? It is rather large and powerful." He let the double entendre hang.

She merely smiled at him before answering. "I have no problem with large, powerful things, but what do you know about large things, White Boy?" She stressed the nickname with which she had just tagged him.

"Did you just refer to me as 'White Boy?'" a stunned Steele asked. Although he knew that she teased him, he was not accustomed to such blatant disregard of his social status.

"I did."

"Do I get to refer to you as 'Black Lady?'" His tone was playful.

“Only if you want to die, White Boy,” she said, laughing.

“Somehow that just does not seem fair.” He sighed.

“It’s not fair. Life’s like that sometimes. This is just my way of balancing the scales of justice. But since I pride myself on being a fair person, I’ll give you a choice: You can be ‘White Boy’ or ‘The Oppressor’.”

“‘White Boy’ or ‘The Oppressor?’ That constitutes the totality of my choice?”

“Yeah, so pick one already,” she demanded.

Getting into the spirit of her seemingly warped sense of humor, Steele inquired, “How about a nickname that is more soothing to my ego? Something like ‘Devastatingly Handsome Man’?”

Atlanta laughed at that. Steele definitely had a healthy sense of humor. “Because you can’t have a nickname that consists of more than two words or five syllables. Plus, I don’t think your ego is in danger of being bruised.”

“You just made that rule up,” he insisted.

“Yeah, I did, but think about all the great nicknames in history? They’re relatively short.”

Knowing that she presented a good argument, Steele conceded, “Damn. I guess that I will be ‘White Boy’ then.”

“I thought you’d see it my way,” she said, smirking.

“And what do I get to call you?” he asked.

“You can call me Atlanta, or if you prefer, you can always refer to me as ‘Your Excellency’.”

Atlanta drove as well as she spat come-backs. After a few anxious minutes, Steele relaxed. She was a good driver, and if she wrecked his car, hell, he had three more and a motorcycle. He decided to utilize his time thinking about her instead of worrying.

Now that he did not have to worry about her dying, he could give his baser instincts free reign. He looked at her luscious mouth and imagined all of the delicious things in which he could engage it. She was a whole lot more woman than Steele was accustomed to, but recalling the feel of her sprawled all over him, he knew that she was well put together. He imagined those hips cradling him and wondered if her body would accept all eleven inches of his cock. He could always take her from behind. Her braids intrigued him. In various shades of browns, reds, and golds, they reminded him of autumn leaves. They were just the right length to wrap around his fist so that he could hold her where he wanted her, loving her into submission. Would she scream herself hoarse when she climaxed or would she moan out his name until she cried from the beauty of it? He had no doubt that it would be beautiful between them. Funny how he never thought about lovemaking being beautiful before.

She had not spoken since she began driving. He missed hearing her voice already, and besides, his ego begged for a little payback. "You did not ask me where I wanted to go," he remarked.

"Nope, I sure didn't."

"Why not?"

"Because if I ask where you want to go, I'd be giving you the message that I give a damn about where you want to go, and then I'd be obligated to take you there. Besides, I already know where *I* want to eat."

"Do you presume to know what I like to eat?"

"I know what white boys like to eat," she answered, her tone confident, and Steele raised his eyebrows.

"And you know this how?"

"I used to own a strip club, and believe me, I heard it all." She punctuated her answer with a "so there" look.

Steele smiled, thinking that she joked. He let the comment drop because his cock was already hard enough without thinking of strip clubs. "Did you consider that I might be a vegetarian?"

"Please. That's like considering that, as a woman, I might not like chocolate. I ran into you and got quite a feel of your body while I was sprawled on top of you. You have to weigh well over two hundred and fifty pounds which means that you're a straight up carnivore."

"I could be a vegetarian."

"Please," Atlanta scoffed. "I can tell you don't waste your time with that kind of pansy-ass diet."

"What do you have against vegetables?"

"I don't have anything against vegetables. I like vegetables. That's what my food eats."

For the next ten minutes, they engaged in light squabbling. Finally, Atlanta drove into the parking lot of an upscale clothing store.

"Do they serve food here?" Steele inquired warily.

"I should hope not, and even if they did, I have rules about where I eat."

"You have rules?"

"Absolutely. For instance, one should never eat in a restaurant that is attached to a gas station unless one is a long-distance truck driver."

"Anything else?"

"Well, one shouldn't eat at any place painted lime green," she said with certainty.

"Not only are there rules concerning nicknames," Steele mused, "but there are also rules concerning dining out. Where do you come up with these?" He got out of his side of the car, ordering her to stay put so that he could come around and get her.

"I make them up as I go," she replied as he assisted her from the car.

"So why are we here?" He was not familiar with the store, but he knew the area. The details in the architecture -- cobblestone walkways and copious wrought-iron -- hinted at a high-end set of stores.

"Because my jacket is ruined," she said, "and I'm running around in what amounts to a wife-beater for a wife. I don't like to be underdressed. I know, it's not popular, but that's how I feel." Atlanta grabbed her backpack from the back seat.

Careful of her injury, Steele reached for her hand, silencing her explanation. Steele maneuvered her to the inside of the sidewalk, shielding her from traffic.

Atlanta walked into the store, and the salesladies greeted her like a long-lost child. One showed Steele to a seat while the other ushered Atlanta into a dressing room. Five minutes later, she returned, sporting a flowing shirt.

It was obvious that she felt a lot happier. Steele was glad that the shirt had brought out that smile, but a part of him had only one thought: *Dammit. That shirt is covering up two of the most intriguing parts of her anatomy.*

Back in the car, he inquired, "Am I delusional ... ?"

"Since you're a man, I'd say most likely."

He shot her a look before continuing. "... or did you just shop in under ten minutes?"

"That is correct."

"Amazing."

"Well, yeah, but I'm a professional. Don't try this at home."

Swinging back into traffic, she inquired if he had to be anywhere anytime soon, because they had a forty-minute drive. Upon hearing that he didn't have anywhere that he had to be, she launched into a synopsis regarding etiquette as it pertains to eating. "I have to issue a warning now. If there's anything that you want to discuss, spit it out now because once I start eating, I don't have time for conversation."

"So you take your eating seriously?" he inquired.

"Absolutely. Life's too short to eat crappy food."

"What kind of food do you enjoy?"

"Almost any food that's swimming in barbeque sauce, gravy, or chocolate," she replied with glee.

"You know that is not healthy?"

"Shhh, you're in the American South," she joked, "and those words are dangerously close to blasphemy."

When Atlanta pulled into the parking lot of Dréa's, she said, "I know, stay put until you come and open the door for me."

"Ah, an obedient woman; I like those."

Not missing a beat, Atlanta countered, "So do I."

* * * * *

If Steele ever doubted that she was hungry, his doubt withered while listening to her place her order.

"Hey, John. I'll begin with the peach cobbler. I'd like beef tips with a side of extra tips over creamed potatoes ... a side of macaroni and cheese ... a side of potato salad ... and strawberry shortcake to end."

Although Steele's eyebrows rose significantly, the waiter didn't miss a beat. He merely turned to Steele and inquired what he would like.

"Would you like me to recommend something?" Atlanta inquired.

"Please do."

She picked up the menu and pointed to a column. "Everything in this column is to die for, but order extra. As far as sides go, you can't go wrong with the potato salad, greens, macaroni and cheese, potatoes, sweet potatoes or dirty rice."

"Okay. I will have fried chicken, greens, sweet potatoes and dirty rice. For dessert, I will have the apple pie, but you can wait until I finish my meal before you bring that."

"Ooh, you order like you've done this before. When the waiter comes back, get an extra plate so you can taste my food." Steele watched her rub her hands together in anticipation of her meal. She really liked to eat -- and all those calories went to all the right places.

During lunch, their entire conversation consisted of sighs of appreciation. Steele imagined her making those sighs during love-making. Damn, she really enjoyed her food.

The mercifully argument-free lunch ended when the waiter brought the bill. Before Steele could pull out his wallet, Atlanta dug a wad of cash out of her money clip and handed it to the waiter. "Thanks, John."

"What do you think you are doing?" Steele asked in disbelief.

"Paying the bill."

Steele called the waiter back and tried to hand him his card.

Atlanta interceded. "Keep walking, John." Turning to Steele, she said, "We can discuss this in the car. I don't do *real* public arguments."

Once Steele settled himself into the car, he turned to shout at her, "I cannot believe that you did that."

"Dude, don't shout at me unless you're ready to have five and a half feet of angry black woman in your face. I don't know who you're used to talking to, but I'm not them."

"First, my name is not 'Dude', and second, you are not five and a half feet in your wildest dreams."

"If you're truly offended by my calling you 'Dude,' I can call you something else."

"Try my name," he suggested.

"How about I call you by the default name that I reserve for annoying males?"

"Which would be?" he asked, though gut instinct told him that whatever came next would not be good.

"Sorry Mother Fucker."

"Such an array of choices you give me when you are angry."

"Who the hell taught you English -- Yoda? What the hell kind of sentence structure is that? I'm so glad that you didn't learn English from 1970s television because you'd start a riot every time you opened your mouth. And just for the record, I haven't even approached angry, so just settle for being called 'Dude,' and be quiet before you lose yet another argument."

"Who says that I have lost any arguments to you?"

"Wow, you are such a man. Seriously, you can't think that you've come close to winning an argument with me."

"I do not know why I even bother trying to have a decent conversation with you," he muttered.

"Oh, the fact that you think men actually engage in conversation is so cute and misguided. Men engage in many things such as warfare, illicit affairs, and ridiculously dangerous pursuits, but rarely do men engage in conversation. Guys are barely one step up from the sniffing-each-others asses greeting that dogs engage in."

"You are insane and sexist. What if I said such nonsense about women?"

"Well, if it was true, I'd be like, 'Yeah and ... ?' By the way, it's okay to contract your words, you know."

"What?!"

"You can contract your words. I won't think any less of you if you do."

"We are mid-argument, and you are giving me a lesson on syntax and grammar?"

"We're not mid-argument. We just concluded an argument a few seconds ago, which you lost, so technically this is like a pre-argument argument to an upcoming argument which you will also lose. I haven't even gotten warmed up yet."

"I am supposed to pay," Steele told her, trying to steer her back to the topic. "I am the man."

"Well, you're 'a' man, but you're not 'The Man.' I don't know who told you that, but they got you good. You're only required to pay when you invite a woman to lunch. If you recall, I invited you, therefore I had a duty to pay. It's the least I could do after all that you've done for me today." Atlanta glanced at him quickly, a huge smile on her face.

Steele had nothing to say. Anything he would have said died on his tongue when she turned that smile on him. And deep down, he knew that she was right. He would never win an argument with her -- at least not in English -- and he was sure arguing in French or Norwegian would only serve to piss her off more.

* * * * *

They covered a myriad of topics on the drive back to the office. Steele realized that she resembled the women in his family: independent, spirited, and outgoing. Pulling up next to a contraption that looked like it had recently engaged in field maneuvers against an enemy did not surprise Steele, but he just had to comment.

"Interesting vehicle."

"Isn't it though?" she answered as she broke out into another radiant smile.

"Have you recently returned from battle?" he asked with a pointed look at the machine.

"Nope, I returned from a tailgate party," she smiled, "which amounts to pretty much the same thing when you kick it with friends like mine."

Steele realized that he hated the idea of letting her go. Walking Atlanta to her driver's side door, he settled her in before asking for her number.

"If I give it to you what're you going to do with it?"

"I will call and invite you to lunch. Then I will call and invite you to dinner so that we can celebrate when the results of our blood work come back."

"Why would we need to celebrate? I already know that I don't have anything."

"Well, until we are sure, I have the feeling that you will not allow me to kiss you again," he replied.

Smiling, she stated, "Despite my behavior in the office, I usually don't kiss on the first few dates."

"Well, then I will merely have to continue taking you on dates, because I am definitely interested in you kissing me again."

"So you plan on dating me?"

"Oh, yeah," he stated hoarsely.

"Did you just use the term '*yeah*'"

"You must be rubbing off on me."

"Well, then you should be contracting your words in no time."

"Are you going to give me your number?" Steele asked.

"Of course," she said as she dug around in her truck for a business card, "but when we go to lunch, I'm driving, so make sure that you have a full tank of gas."

"And what if I say 'no'?"

"You won't."

"And you know that how?"

"Because you're French. You might say, 'I surrender,' but usually not 'no,' unless it's followed by something like, 'Don't shoot,' or 'don't reduce our country to a pile of burning rubble.'"

Steele tried to ignore the dig. "What makes you think that I am French?"

"The fact that your middle name is Bastille. Impressive name, by the way."

"Impressive man who holds that name." He smirked.

"Dude, whatever. At least your middle name is pronounceable unlike whatever the hell your first name is."

"Eifíkr."

"For the sake of argument, pretend I agree with your perception of your impressiveness. Why then doesn't such an impressive man use his first name?"

"Because Eifíkr is my father, and in a household with four boys and a husband who all seem to try my mother's patience, having two males using the same given name would have one of us running unnecessarily."

"A woman that knows how to control her man. I like that. That sounds mighty aggressive. You sure that she's French, because she's sounding mighty southern?"

"You do not like French?" he inquired.

"Oh, I like French if you're describing fries, toast, maid outfits, or a Riviera, but I've never had fantasies of French men. I tend to like my men more alpha."

"Ah, but you do realize that I am only one-half French; the other half is marauding Viking."

"And what do you plan on plundering?" she asked.

"You," he stated without blinking.

"Oh, damn," Atlanta sighed as she finally handed him her card with her home number scrawled on the back.

Steele held onto her hand when she handed him her number. "You mentioned a lot of French things that you like -- fries, toast. What about French kissing. Do you like that?"

"I love French kissing," she said as she departed. "The trick is finding someone who is good at it."

* * * * *

Back at work, Steele gave up all pretenses of doing anything productive. His thoughts were firmly fixed on the sassy Atlanta -- co-owner of the hottest sports bar in Atlanta, according to her business card. He had engaged in a lot of firsts with her. She was the first person to threaten him with impunity, and the first woman to pay for his lunch. She was the

first woman that he had to work to impress. And there was the fact that he let her drive his car.

Steele wasn't the only one reflecting on the day. When Atlanta finally walked in the door, she was past exhaustion. Damn it, she didn't do mornings for a reason. She still had to go to work tonight. She thought about Steele right up until the moment her head hit the pillow. Damn, he was fine, and he had felt so good sprawled out beneath her.

Meanwhile, Dr. Randolph related the story about the interaction between Steele and Atlanta to a rapt audience that consisted of his wife V  r  ne, his sister-in-law Dani  le, and her husband Eif  kr.

"He has feelings for her," Dani  le stated.

"He has something for her. I've never heard two people argue so much. They were arguing when I walked in. I broke up multiple arguments while attending her. I even set a back argument to quell the big argument. And when I didn't stitch fast enough to please him, he started to go into *berserker*gang." Dr. Randolph paused, awaiting the reaction of his audience. He had been in the family long enough to know that only three things brought on *berserker*gang: great anger, overwhelming lust or fear for their mate, and holding passion in abeyance for too long.

"What?!" Erik, Steele's father, roared.

"Oh my. She's the one," Steele's mother, Dani  le said with conviction.

"Definitely," V  r  ne agreed.

"She might be the one, but he's going to have a time of it convincing her to have him. He didn't seem to impress her. In fact, I believe she had her insults on a loop."

"I have every confidence my son will win her over," Eif  kr stated with assurance. "He has berserker blood running through his veins."

"And if he keeps getting on her nerves," Dr. Randolph warned, "his berserker blood will be evidence for a crime lab. I'll keep you updated."

Chapter Five

The next two weeks were jam-packed full of to-dos, being that almost all games had playoff implications, and it was the holiday rush. Atlanta, almost dead on her feet, had actually spent the night at Evil Twins four of the past five, and she had still made it to her kickboxing classes. While everyone else counted down the remaining shopping days until Christmas, she counted down the remaining days until her favorite times of the year -- Super Bowl, the Pro Bowl, March Madness, and her personal favorite since she despised baseball with such a passion, Baseball Season Is Finally Fucking Over. After closing Evil Twins up for the night, she decided that perhaps it was best if she refrained from doing afternoons also.

Atlanta threw on her favorite jersey before crawling into bed. Deciding to indulge her inner child, she resolved to stay there all weekend. She would only get up for food, and even then she would eat in bed. If only she had someone in bed with her to cater to all of her whims! That thought brought up images of the hot, blond Viking. She fluffed up her pillow and went to sleep thinking about Steele and wondering how he would like the gift that she had sent.

* * * * *

Steele wanted to shake Atlanta senseless. He had told her multiple times not to concern herself about the jacket. But did she listen? Absolutely not. Not only had she committed his address to memory, she also had a discerning eye. The gift gave him a perfect excuse to call -- after all it had been at least two weeks.

Atlanta's phone awoke her from a deep sleep. *I know that's not my phone*. It didn't matter the time; it was enough that the sun was out, which signaled that it was too damn early. Atlanta reached for the receiver and brought it to her ear.

"Yeah?" she answered with her usual 'why the hell is my phone ringing' voice.

“Atlanta?” Steele questioned on the other end.

“Hi, Steele,” she answered as she cracked one eye halfway open. “Ahh.” Yep, the sun was definitely still out.

“Are you okay?” he asked, nervous.

“What time is it, Steele?”

“Three o’clock.”

“Steele, I work at night. Mornings are anathema for me, though I occasionally have to do them since the rest of the world operates on a Monday through Friday, nine am until five pm schedule.”

“It is the middle of the afternoon.”

“Close enough,” she answered as she rose, “considering I had to close the bar last night, or should I say this morning.” Hearing Steele’s sexy voice woke Atlanta right up.

“When is a convenient time to call back?”

“I have a whacked-out schedule, so convenience changes depending upon a host of other variables, including the day of the week, other things I have to do or want to do, and whether it is playoffs and so forth.”

“I apologize. Tell me when it would be convenient to call you.”

“I’m already up now, and I’m thinking about food, so talk.” She wasn’t thinking about food; she was thinking about having him, but she decided to keep that to herself, for now.

“What are you wearing?” he asked.

“What are *you* wearing? On second thought, let me guess. Tailored suit. Handmade Italian shoes. Two-hundred dollar tie. Is that about right?”

“You think you know me, hmm?”

“I know the standard privileged man cliché.”

“You consider me a cliché?”

“All of the votes have not yet been counted,” she said. “One more question? Boxers or briefs?” Atlanta shuddered thinking of him wearing nothing under his tailored slacks.

Almost like he read her mind, he replied, “What if I said neither?”

“I’d say be careful, but perhaps that’s not necessary to say to you. Perhaps I should warn you not to burn your tongue on your five-dollar cups of latté. After all, the tongue is a white man’s most important asset. Is it not?”

“I will let you be the judge of that,” he told her. “Then again, you might need to bring a pen in the likely event that you scream yourself hoarse”.

“From shouting my own name?” she asked as she caressed herself. “I’ve had that effect on myself before. What about you?”

“I have not had the pleasure of screaming out your name *yet*, but I relish the opportunity.”

“Do you say that to all of the women?”

“I do not think it would be prudent to inform every woman I meet that I relish the pleasure of screaming out *your* name.”

“Oh, you’re good,” she replied as she closed her eyes and thought about him pounding her into multiple orgasms.

“*That* I have heard before,” he admitted.

“You should try kicking it with women who have higher expectations.”

“That is what I am doing now; however I generally have women screaming after a simple kiss. Imagine if I gave them all of myself.”

“All three inches?”

He chuckled before lapsing into a language that she didn’t recognize.

“I hope that wasn’t English,” Atlanta joked, “because it sounded like it consisted entirely of contractions.”

“It was not English, but it was a promise.”

“Is it something that I’d want to hold you to?”

“It is much like the car door thing. It is something that I will do regardless of your protests. And yes, it is something that you would want to hold me to.”

“I like that, you know,” she said.

“Are you actually admitting that you like something I do?”

“Don’t tell anyone else, or people will think that I’m sweet.”

“Are you?”

“It depends on which part of me you taste,” she suggested as she tasted herself on her fingers.

“And if I say that I intend to taste every inch of you?”

“I just might let you,” she warned, “so be careful what you promise.”

“You never did tell me what you were wearing.”

“What would you like me to be wearing?”

“Me,” he promptly stated.

“And?”

“Nothing else.”

“Damn, White Boy, you’re bringing it.”

“I do my best, Your Excellency. Will you go to dinner with me?”

“As long as you can fit it in between my mandatory nap and time for me to go to work.”

“How about a late lunch then? Something around one p.m.”

“Make it later; I have my kickboxing class at twelve-thirty.”

"Two-thirty, then?"

"Now you're talking my language. When are you thinking about going?"

"How about next week?"

"How about the week after. The college bowl games start New Year's Day, and Evil Twins will be a madhouse."

"That will be fine." He paused. "You are not going to mention the jacket, are you?"

"You told me that you didn't want to discuss it anymore."

"I did not wish to discuss it further," Steele said. "However, I would be remiss if I failed to extend my gratitude, so thank you. And thank you for the shirt. I'm not accustomed to being the one receiving the gifts."

"You're more than welcome, and it's called a jersey, not a shirt. Are you going to wear it?" She chuckled, imagining him trying to figure out what pants went with a University of North Carolina football jersey.

"I will wear it if you promise to wear something that I purchase for you."

"Well, if it's a 7-series BMW, I promise that I'll wear that," Atlanta joked.

"What color BMW would you wear?"

"Well since you're white, and I'm black, I think I'd wear metallic grey," she joked.

* * * * *

Going out to eat soon became an event to which Steele looked forward, although he did not get to see Atlanta as often as he would have liked. They had only gone out to lunch twice in all of January. The playoffs had come and gone, but then the first two Sundays in February were reserved for the Super Bowl and the Pro Bowl, and as such she was particularly busy at Evil Twins. He guessed that they would be able to spend more time together at the conclusion of football season, but he had underestimated how sports crazed Southerners were. He had seen it himself the few times he ventured into her bar and watched her work the usually standing-room-only crowd like a pro.

Atlanta did squeeze in another lunch right before March Madness, and Steele was grateful -- a first for him. They damn near wore the phone line and email out. Steele discovered that he did something with Atlanta that he had never done with other women -- he engaged in meaningful conversation. That was how he came to truly know her, not just the woman that she presented to the world-at-large.

She presented a paradox. A hardcore feminist, she read *Playboy* and looked at the pictures. Though not untouched, he knew that she did not consider promiscuity to be liberating regardless of how mainstream it had gone. She swore and spoke like a sailor, but she had a mind like a Pentium-5 chip.

Unlike the women with whom he was accustomed to keeping company, she was her own woman. She did not wait for anyone to give her anything; instead she worked her ass

off and bought what she wanted. Many of her positions challenged his masculinity -- such as her adamancy about paying half the time -- but he learned to live with it. Regardless of the odds, Atlanta would not back down from her position, if she felt she was on the right side. Unfortunately, that was not always the winning side. Steadily becoming quite important to him, he waited for her. Soon, it would be baseball season -- and though he still had a lot to learn about the contrary Atlanta, he knew that she absolutely loathed baseball.

* * * * *

Atlanta liked Steele, but she couldn't believe that he still hung out with her. So far, he had made all of the moves. It wasn't that she didn't want to, but the hot, blond Viking intimidated her and work had prevented more effort from her side of things. Mr. Tall, Really-Damn-Light-Skinned and Devastatingly Handsome could have any woman he wanted, supermodel gorgeous and double-doctorate-degree intelligent women with the time to cater to all of his whims. This ride intrigued Atlanta enough for her to remain on until it came to a full stop. She looked forward to their next outing. The weather improved -- she truly loathed cold weather -- and since the busy season at Evil Twins had wound down, she would get to spend proper time with the Viking and subsequently think very improper thoughts about him. Thinking of him was fast becoming her second-favorite thing to do.

Atlanta pulled into the parking lot of Steele's office park. Like Steele, it was a snazzy place that bespoke money. She used to work in a place just like it, and she had hated every second of it, which is why she had started her own business.

Although Atlanta arrived early, Steele already stood, waiting. She pulled up next to the curve and took a moment to ogle him before speaking.

"Hey, Handsome," she called. "Want a ride?"

"My mother instructed me to never get into a car with a stranger," he returned.

"But I have candy," she tempted as she waggled her brows.

"Well, in that case," he said, "I guess I do want a ride." He settled himself into her truck. Atlanta was surprised when Steele bent and kissed her lightly on the lips before snapping his seatbelt into place. It took everything she had not to pull him down and ravish his mouth.

"What was that for?" she asked.

"You said you had candy. I just wanted a taste."

Oh, damn. She could practically feel the cream running into her panties. She thought about last week's Major League Baseball opener in an effort to get her mind off of sex. Atlanta peeled out of the parking lot before her inner diva could talk her into parking the Warhorse and fucking him into a pleasure-induced coma.

"It's a good thing I have this double harness seatbelt," Steele joked.

“Yeah, and if we had crash helmets and a stretch of open highway, I could really open the Warhorse up,” Atlanta said excitedly.

“You actually named your vehicle?”

“Yeah, you got a problem with that?”

“And if I did?”

“I would simply remark on the hypocrisy of it being perfectly acceptable for guys to name their penises, but somehow wrong for a woman to name her vehicle.” Atlanta tossed him a wink.

“Why do I try to start with you?”

“Because you’re a man and you don’t know any better.”

“Well, just for the record, I have not named my cock. I am reserving that honor for you.”

Atlanta got wet just thinking about his cock, but he couldn’t have the last word. “Ooh, do we get to have a ceremony and everything?”

“I will think about it.”

* * * * *

They dined at a mom and pop Italian restaurant. Steele did not really care where they ate as long as they ate. He liked to watch Atlanta eat. As usual, she did not speak while eating. She just moaned and sighed a lot. His cock got hard watching those succulent lips savor her food. Steele was jealous of her food. He wanted to be the catalyst for that look of pleasure that crossed her face, not the berry frangelico torte. She should lick him like she licked the mousse from between the layers of cake and buttercream frosting.

By the time Atlanta placed her fork down and sighed, Steele had long finished his manicotti and tiramisu. He watched the dessert haze clear from her eyes and awaited her next comment.

“Why are you looking at me?” she asked with a lift of one of her perfectly-arched brows.

Because I am infatuated with you. “Why are you not looking at me?” he asked instead.

He watched her roll her eyes. “Because, my beautiful Viking, you’re already arrogant enough. If I spent all day looking at you, your ego would be completely out of control.”

Steele laughed at her sass, although his ego patted itself on the back at her compliment. “If I promise to keep a tight reign on my ego, will you spend all day looking at me?”

“Maybe,” she said with a smile, “since it’s baseball season and all.” She signaled the waiter for the bill. Steele would never grow accustomed to a woman paying for him. Atlanta did not even look up as she scolded him.

“Stop frowning, Steele.”

"What makes you think that I am frowning?"

"Because you do so every time it's my turn to pay."

"But you are not --"

"Hush, Viking, before you get worry lines. Hey, do you have to rush back?"

I have waited damn near three weeks to have lunch with you again. Hell no, I do not have to rush back he thought. "Do I ever have to rush back when I am with you?"

"Oh good. It's a nice day out. Let's go to the botanical gardens."

"Do I get to pay this time?"

"Nope, but if you're good I might ogle you a little bit," she teased as she herded him to the Warhorse.

Oh, I promise you I will be good, but you will be too exhausted to keep your eyes open after I love you to the deep sleep berserkers are renown for he thought.

* * * * *

Steele felt as if he had been separated from her for months. Talking on the phone and email were not a worthy substitute for actually being with Atlanta. The last lunch, nearly three weeks ago, seemed in the distant past. Her suggestion to go to the botanical gardens surprised him. He had expected her to suggest something like a tractor pull, which he would have eagerly attended, just so he could spend time with her.

The Atlanta Botanical Gardens sat on over thirty acres adjacent to Piedmont Park. As soon as Atlanta came to a screeching halt in the parking lot, she dragged him into the lobby, and soon lost herself in the magnificence of the flora. Whereas Atlanta was entranced with the scenery, Steele was entranced with her. His normally talkative woman lapsed into silence as if displaying great reverence for the nature before her. Her eyes lit up like a child at Christmastime when she stepped onto the property. They remained lit as she studied the exhibits in the main lobby and ventured into the Orchid Hall and Tropical Rotunda. When they ventured outside, though, her entire being lit up. The mid-April foliage -- azaleas, cherry blossoms, dogwood and tulips -- were worth the price of admission, but the reaction of his woman made Steele's heart contract.

"Oh Steele," she gasped. "Isn't it the most wonderful garden ever?"

He agreed, but he was barely able to speak; the sight of her overwhelmed him. "Yes."

"I could live here," she sighed.

"And if it were for sale, I would buy it for you so that you could," he whispered. Steele lost his train of thought when he felt Atlanta slip her hand in his, and voluntarily touch him for the first time since she was stitched up. She probably did not realize that they were holding hands, and he did nothing to spook her. While she spent the time admiring the outdoor gardens, he admired her.

Steele watched Atlanta as she held her face up to the sun and simply reveled in the season. She turned to him wearing the temptation of her smile and laughed an invitation to him to enjoy her good time. He laughed with her, because she made him feel good. He could feel her joy, and he wanted that moment to last forever.

It was then that he realized her true beauty -- not in the traditional sense -- but in myriad of ways that caressed all of the hard spaces within him. Her beauty hid within her strength and sass, but she brought him to his knees when she laughed because she did it with her whole being. He loved her. He loved her. Oh God, he really, really loved her.

Instinct kicked in, and he gently enfolded her in his arms, subsequently wrapping her in his strength and promising her his heart. He leaned down and inhaled her scent -- a mixture of honeysuckle, cocoa, and her. He did not want to crowd her, for she was fragile despite her take-no-shit demeanor. When she voluntarily leaned into his strength, he offered a prayer of thanks at the trust that she had given him.

* * * * *

Atlanta lay in bed and thought about the park and conjured up the smell of Steele. He smelled like all of her fantasies. He smelled like passion and victory ... *and like fairy tale endings*, her heart threw in.

Whoa! Men like Steele might have sex with women like me, but they rarely married us, her mind lamented.

Oh, go to hell! her body and heart retorted. She ignored them all and continued thinking naughty thoughts about him. What would be would be, and she would enjoy it while it was.

Steele had become her favorite fantasy. She spent many hours imagining being pleased by him. Regardless of how she teased him, Steele was all man. He smelled like it, he spoke like it, and he lived like it. She was pretty damn sure that he made love like it, recalling the fact that she had creamed her panties from him simply holding her.

His embrace surprised her. Her first instinct told her to pull away, but Steele had made no sudden moves. He merely held her gently. Being embraced in his arms and wrapped in his strength gave her a sense of protection that she had never felt. She instinctively knew that he would only use his great power for her, never against her. With that realization, she had snuggled deeper into his strength and reveled in a feeling more intimate than any sex she had ever had.

The ring of the phone interrupted her musings. "Hello?"

"Good evening, Your Excellency," Steele greeted her, recalling her inverted sleep pattern.

"Good morning, Steele," she responded, recalling his normal one. She glanced at the clock; it was eleven a.m.

“Are you enjoying your evening?”

“Immensely.”

“You are not supposed to be immensely enjoying anything without me,” Steele responded.

“But what if I was thinking about you while enjoying my evening?”

“Then that would be okay. Were you truly thinking about me?”

“Absolutely,” she admitted breathlessly. “I was thinking about the park.”

“And?” he prompted.

“One part of me was grateful that you restrained yourself, but the other part of me was frustrated that you did.”

“Sweetheart, we were in a public place.”

“Steele, my panties were so wet that I had to peel them off.” Atlanta slipped her fingers into her folds before stroking gently. She couldn’t hold back the moan that the memory elicited.

“Oh damn, my erection just switched from massive to raging. Not touching it is painful.”

“Then touch it, Steele. Nothing gets me hotter than thinking about a man pleasuring himself -- especially when that man is thinking of me.”

“Atlanta,” he gasped.

“Are you touching your cock?”

“Oh, yes,” Steele replied. “I wish that it was your soft body welcoming me, and your womb receiving my seed.”

“Steele,” she breathed. Then there was nothing but the sound of their heavy panting followed by his roar and her scream as they both achieved climax.

“Sleep well, Sweetheart,” Steele finally panted.

“I will now. Have a good day, Steele.”

Chapter Six

After sharing mutual climaxes, even if only over the phone, Steele refused to allow any formality in their relationship. He greeted Atlanta with a hug and frequently reached for her hand whenever they were out, determined to maintain contact with her whether by holding her hand, dropping a kiss on the top of her head, or gently pulling her into his embrace.

During baseball season, Steele got to see Atlanta at least once a week. Though he enjoyed lunches with her, he wanted more. Today was his turn to pay, so he took her to Jeanie's Lounge, a three-story warehouse that had been converted to the funkier bookstore on the planet. It resembled multiple living rooms with soft lighting and copious seating for reading and coffee. Though Atlanta didn't like coffee, she loved desserts, and Jeanie's Lounge was renowned for the desserts it served in the café.

"I am glad that you enjoyed the chocolate tortini," Steele commented as he helped her from her seat.

"What makes you think I liked it?" she challenged.

"The copious moaning that I heard coming from you led me to believe that you were indeed enjoying the confection."

"You know we women know how to fake pleasure," she returned as she turned so that he could help her into her coat.

The berserker within Steele stirred at such a blatant challenge. He pulled her to his chest and growled into her ear. "I assure you that you will never have a need to fake anything, least of all pleasure, when you are with me." He punctuated his statement by trailing soft kisses up the column of her neck before placing a light kiss on her lips. Other than their initial meeting, he had not kissed her properly, but he would -- soon. First, he had to let her accustom herself to him before he ravaged her the way his body demanded. Their blood tests had come back many weeks ago, but she had been busy with work, and he did not

want her to think he was rushing her into a physical relationship. He knew her feelings about sharing her body. That was just one of the million things that he liked about her.

"Do you have to rush back?" he asked her playfully.

"It depends on what you have planned for me," she smiled back.

I plan to love you into submission his body roared. Wagging his brows, he said, "Well, there might be a dessert or two in it."

"Then by all means, lead the way."

* * * * *

Steele hoped Atlanta was ready to meet his friend and business partner, Michael. Steele knew Michael had grown weary of being inundated with tales of the mystery woman in Steele's life. He and Michael had been roommates at Harvard. Michael did not pull his punches, regardless of to whom he spoke, be it an instructor or a client. Michael, a standup guy, had earned Steele's respect. Over the years, they had become the best of friends and as close as brothers. They shared many things, including similar temperaments. They had remained in contact since college, and when Michael had dragged Steele home with him, Steele had fallen in love with the metro Atlanta area. Fitting, since now he had fallen in love with a woman by the same name.

Atlanta wasn't sure what Steele had planned, but she went along with it because he always went along with her regardless of what cockamamie thing she wanted to try/see/do.

"So where are we going?" Atlanta asked as she parked his Benz back at his office complex. She had a bad feeling about this. One, they didn't have food here, and two, the kind of people who had lots of money and power filled the place. These people Steele rubbed elbows with and worked with were the kind of people who would not appreciate them being together.

"I am taking you to meet my best friend." *Bad feeling confirmed.*

"Are you sure about that, Steele? I mean, just because we're here doesn't mean that you have to go through with this."

"Of course I am sure. Do you not want to meet him?"

This is where everything goes to hell. "Yes and no," she answered.

Her answer caused him to bristle. "What?"

Yep, going to hell ... in a hand basket. "Steele, I'm curious to meet the man who has earned the label of being your best friend, but I'm sure he's going to hate me. Then where will we be?"

"We will be together because, best friend or not, he will respect my decision."

"But what about your other associates? They're going to talk. Despite how metropolitan the city of Atlanta is, we're still in the South. You could lose business contacts, and --"

Steele cut her off before she could finish. "Atlanta, stop it." He pressed his big body into hers. "Are you ashamed of me?"

"No, Steele. Why would a woman be ashamed of *you*?"

"Then there must be another reason why are you being contrary."

"I'm not being contrary."

"Then perhaps you are scared?"

"I. Am. Not. Scared. I'm just concerned about you."

"Then let us go," he said as he held out his hand.

She snatched his hand as she cussed him out in her head. Though she slapped on a look of confidence, inside she trembled. She liked Steele and didn't want him to end things when he realized how ugly people could be. He led her to his office, and Atlanta realized why he was so unconcerned. He was a partner according to the fancy lettering on his door. A man that arrogant would be accustomed to giving orders in almost all parts of his life. She sat on the corner of his desk while he went and fetched his best friend. She took that time to peruse his office décor and help herself to some of the After Eight chocolate mints he had on his desk. It was the office of a man who wielded power. It contained all of the right things: the wet bar, the private bathroom, the MBA from Harvard. Harvard ... no wonder he didn't know jack about football. The arrival of a devastatingly fine black man interrupted her musings.

* * * * *

"Excuse me, Ma'am," Mr. Fine said. "Might I inquire who you are?"

"I'm Atlanta," she began, disconcerted because she didn't know this man. "I'm a... um... guest of Mr. Magnussen,"

"Ah, you're *the* Atlanta," he responded. "I'm Michael, the best friend. Nice to finally meet you,"

"Really?" Atlanta inquired.

"It depends on what you're asking really to. Really, I'm Steele's best friend, or really, it's nice to finally meet you?" He smiled.

He was smooth; he went right in for the kill. "Both," Atlanta said.

"The answer to both is yes, although 'nice' is relative."

"So is the term 'best'," she parried. She wasn't going down without a fight.

"What if I said that I didn't like you?" he asked.

"Then I would inform you that there's a club for people who don't like me -- and there's a waiting list."

"Any particular reason why the club is so big?"

"Definitely. The average person has a problem with the truth and an even bigger problem when you cuss them out while delivering the truth."

"Good thing that I'm not the average person then."

"Well, how could you be, being that you're Steele's best friend and all?" She finally smiled back.

"I hear you like sports," he commented.

"Not like -- love," she corrected and just like that they launched into a discussion about the miraculous turnaround of the New Orleans Saints.

* * * * *

Steele could not find Michael, so he headed back to his office. He wondered if Atlanta had found the box of chocolates on his desk and whether she had demolished them already. His thoughts firmly on his woman, the sight of Michael laughing with Atlanta shocked Steele. Though he loved Michael as a brother and trusted him with his money, the berserker Steele stirred when he noticed how good Atlanta and Michael looked together. They would make a stunning couple. They were intellectual equals and shared similar passions as illustrated by their animated conversation. They also had something that could not be taught. They shared blackness. In that moment, intense jealousy moved Steele. He did not care how *good* Atlanta and Michael looked together; he and Atlanta looked *right* together. Besides, he did not plan on giving Atlanta up. He did not know what he would have done if Atlanta had not looked up at him just then and smiled.

Steele walked over and stood between her legs. He heard her gasp, but the beast in him simply lifted her chin and kissed the surprise from her mouth. He needed to know that he moved her.

"Ahem," Michael cleared his throat. "You know we have a company policy against that sort of thing."

"And it is a good policy, because if I had walked in here and discovered another male in such an intimate position with my woman, he would die," Steele answered.

"Steele!" Atlanta gasped. "I see you have the fine art of subtlety down."

Michael merely laughed before clapping Steele on the back and whispering sotto voce, "I do believe he's jealous. I am a rather good-looking man." He laughed. "But I fully understand his reason for the warning growl; you are a beautiful and intelligent woman, a rare combination. Be sure to invite me to the wedding." Michael finally left the room.

Atlanta laughed, which infuriated Steele. She must have felt him tense; she tilted his chin up and lightly kissed him. "Are you okay, Steele?"

No. He wanted to beat the hell out of his best friend before throwing Atlanta over his desk and loving her into submission. He wanted to hear his name spill from her succulent

lips, wanted her to be bathed in his scent. He wanted everyone to know that Atlanta was his woman, including her ... especially her.

"Steele, what's wrong, baby?" she asked.

"I am told that Michael is a good catch," he admitted.

"Yeah, I'm sure he is. He has a wicked sense of humor, although I don't believe that he's as easy-going as he pretends."

"You and Michael look good together -- too good."

He expected her to laugh. "Steele, look at me. Michael is an attractive man. It's obvious that he's got it going on in the brains department and is good people, but I'm here with you, Steele. And besides, Michael considers baseball superior to football. What kind of shit is that?" She winked.

Steele relaxed and led her through the rest of his office, introducing her to his associates. Though she adored Michael, she did not seem to feel any affinity for the rest of his associates. Atlanta and Steele encountered some of his business acquaintances en route to the elevator. He had noticed the acquaintances' disapproving glares at their entwined hands, but would have let it go had he not felt the slight change in Atlanta. He thought for a moment that she might have been intimidated, but he noticed that she had a look of challenge on her visage. Steele hated the insolence that he read in his acquaintances' glares and would not put up with it. He stepped forward, but Atlanta stopped him.

"Steele," she whispered before bringing his head down for a kiss that rocked him to his core.

Steele lost all train of thought and all comprehension of time and space. By the time he regained his ability to think, Atlanta had dragged him outside. They arrived at his car before he could again form speech.

"Atlanta," he began.

"Yes, Steele?"

"You cannot kiss me like that in public because it takes away my ability to think."

"That was the idea, and thank you for the compliment."

"You are most welcome," he began. "Atlanta, about my acquaintances ..."

Atlanta pressed her hands to his lips, effectively shushing him. "Steele, don't worry about it."

Leaning down, he whispered, "Do they make you uncomfortable?"

"Do they make *you* uncomfortable? After all, you're the one who has to deal with them."

"No, but they do make me angry," he admitted, bringing her hands up to his lips and gently kissing her knuckles. "You did not answer my question. Do they make you uncomfortable?"

She wanted to be flip, but Steele's countenance told her that he wasn't in a playful mood. Instead, she decided to answer his question with a question. "What if I said 'yes'?"

"Are you saying 'yes'?"

"They don't make me uncomfortable Steele. I've been black all of my life. I'm used to people like that. And even if I was predisposed to be bothered by such immaturity, how could I be uncomfortable since I have you with me?"

"Well, then, I guess that I will endeavor to always be with you." He gathered her in his embrace. He punctuated his declaration with a kiss against her temple. "And just for the record, should any man do *anything* to make you uncomfortable, I would insure that they did not live to make the same mistake again."

"You're such a cretin." She smiled, exhilarated at his spirited defense.

"Actually I am more of a barbarian when incensed."

* * * * *

Atlanta didn't often find herself in bed by eight p.m. Then again, it wasn't often that Atlanta had poured cold beer all over herself. After the second time, her evil twin (at least in crime), Aloha, had sent her home with an admonition to get some rest. Atlanta went without protest. She thought about Steele while bathing. He was so good to her. Each evening he called her to wish her a good morning. He didn't push up on her, which she appreciated. Steele was a true gentleman. She knew they existed but had rarely experienced one.

But more than experiencing the attentions of a gentleman, she experienced the privilege of her femaleness. For the first time, she reveled in her femininity. Whereas she often had to play it down in order to be taken seriously in business dealings, with Steele she couldn't hold it in, nor did she want to. She didn't have to be in superwoman mode 24/7 with him. She only had to be a woman. And Steele never failed to treat her like a lady, regardless of the numerous times she had to set him straight

He didn't seem to mind being in her company regardless of who was around. Many guys had no problems kicking it with her, but they were always quick to point out that they were just friends or fellow sports fanatics if someone hinted at more. It wasn't that she was haunted house material; it was that she was only passably good-looking on her best day. She also had a lot of masculine mannerisms, like the way she lived and breathed sports, took no shit, and spoke her mind.

Though in bed, Atlanta didn't feel sleepy. She felt hot and bothered. Constant fantasies about the hot, blond Viking kept intruding. He was so freaking hot. She caught herself daydreaming about Steele at the most inconvenient times, like when she cut lemons, poured beer or tried to remember what the hell she went to the kitchen for. Good thing she ran her sports bar and wasn't a surgeon. She couldn't imagine telling her patient, "Sorry that I accidentally sliced through your spleen, but my mind wandered off to the hot, blond Viking and fantasies of him ravishing me."

Atlanta already had a short attention span when it came to activities that didn't involve fun; subsequently her thoughts often revolved around her favorite subjects: college football, pro football, and one day having a personal chef who only cooked cheesecake and anything involving chocolate. Recently, she found that fantasies of football and fattening foods slid in between her vivid fantasies of Steele. Now safely in bed, Atlanta could give herself up to those fantasies. She palmed her left breast while using the middle and index fingers of her right hand to explore the slick folds of her sex.

Atlanta moaned, imagining Steele's large hands working her body into a fever instead of her own. Though she normally had no problem getting herself off with her fingers, tonight she needed more. She needed six and half feet of Viking pounding into her. She located her favorite dildo and stuffed it into her sex. She cried out at the welcomed intrusion. As hardcore feminist as the next bra-burning woman, Atlanta still wanted a man who could dominate her in bed. She wanted a man who could fuck her into multiple orgasms. She wanted a man to ride her hard, to make her scream his name until she had no voice left. She wanted a man who would stuff her full of rock-hard cock and demand to know whose pussy he fucked. She wanted a man worthy of her screams of, "Yours! Yours!"

Her body told her that Steele could very well be that man. Atlanta agreed and finally found her pleasure, imagining him giving it to her, then and there. She fell asleep shouting his name.

* * * * *

Atlanta woke completely refreshed. A mind-blowing orgasm could do wonders for one's state of mind. She knew that her evil twin was going to demand an explanation for Atlanta's recent absence of mind, so she wasn't surprised by the summons that ordered her to get her ass over to Aloha's house pronto. Knowing that Aloha cooked only marginally better than she did, Atlanta called in an order; she didn't consider Aloha's customary bag of Skittles a proper lunch.

* * * * *

"Okay, tell me about him," Aloha demanded before Atlanta had even had a chance to finish knocking.

"What?" Atlanta asked as she nearly fell through the door.

"From the state of absent-mindedness you've been in for the past few months, I know you're in deep thought about a man," she sighed. "Give me his specs."

"Give you specs on what?" Atlanta asked, confused. Aloha pulled her kicking and screaming from yet another fantasy about Steele, involving multiple cans of whipped cream and next year's March Madness.

"Not what, whom," Aloha told Atlanta. "Give me specs on the man that has been occupying your thoughts. I presume it's the Viking."

“You conclude that how?” Atlanta asked.

“I conclude that by the recent amendment in your primary topics of discussion. So far you’ve talked about football, hot wings, and the Viking, so give up the details.”

“Oh, Aloha. He’s like the equator.”

“Centered?” Aloha asked with a look of disbelief on her face.

“No, extremely hot,” Atlanta answered.

“How hot is he?”

“Remember that time we called in sick to work and went to the Super Bowl and the Pro Bowl?”

“Yeah, but we had to. The Super Bowl was in Miami, and Miami has South Beach, and the Pro Bowl is always in Hawaii.”

“He’s hot like that.”

“Dammnnn.”

“Exactly.”

“This means that I have to meet him.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re my best friend, and in case he breaks your heart or turns out to be a crazy, psychopath stalker dude, I’ll know how to find him and break his knee caps, for starters.”

“That’s why you’re not just my best friend, but my all-time, all-Madden best friend.” Atlanta smiled.

“Same here, *chica*.”

“Not that I’m not enjoying this *Steel Magnolias* moment, but do you love me even when you’re threatening dire retribution against my person?”

“Even then,” Atlanta sighed, recalling Aloha’s recent bit of meddling. Fed up with the fact that she still possessed and actually used a corded phone, Aloha had disassembled it, thrown the parts in the recycle bin and replaced said antique with a digital cordless phone that had an answering machine. Aloha had even recorded an outgoing message, which thanked callers and told them the odds of receiving a call back were dismal since Atlanta could barely use her phone; she’d never even figured out call waiting. Atlanta had a phone for two reasons: to order take out and buy sports memorabilia. In retaliation, Atlanta had hidden Aloha’s beloved horde of Skittles; Aloha had torn her own house apart looking for them. They were never discovered.

“Yeah, you owe me ten bags of Skittles,” Aloha complained before steering the conversation right back to Steele. “Why don’t we go to Dréa’s next Tuesday? And by ‘we’ I mean you, me, and your Viking.”

"I'll bow to your wishes this once and have lunch with you." Atlanta sighed dramatically.

"Please, like anyone has to coerce you into having lunch. Lunch is the only reason that you actually see the sun on non-game days. Is it okay if I bring someone?"

"Sure. Does your someone speak English or binary?" Atlanta asked, recalling Aloha's computer geek friends.

"He's bilingual thank you very much -- fluent in both English and Woman ... so there."

"Oh, if he's fluent in Woman, he must do hair," Atlanta teased.

"You're just jealous because you're not as smart as we are," Aloha punctuated her sentence by sticking out her tongue.

"Please, I don't need to be as smart as your merry band of hackers. I have you, and I can bribe you to hack stuff for me."

Atlanta saw the smile that lit Aloha's visage and wondered if it was one of her genuinely happy smiles, or evil-plan-hatching smiles. Before she could figure it out, her mind returned to thoughts of Steele, and she forgot entirely about it.

Chapter Seven

Atlanta had finished with her first dessert by the time Aloha arrived. Aloha was perpetually late because something cooler always caught her attention. Atlanta was getting ready to introduce Steele when she realized that Imax stood beside Aloha. Why the hell had Aloha dragged Imax here, and more importantly, how the hell did she convince him to come? Imax wasn't civil on his best day. Atlanta'd once suggested that he dress up as a civil human being for Halloween.

Making the introductions, Atlanta watched the two beautiful men eye each other with distrust. They made quite a picture: both had impressive statures, were dressed impeccably and wore "don't fuck with me" expressions. Their hair seemed the only discernable difference between the two men. Whereas Steele's platinum blond locks fell in soft waves to the middle of his back, Imax's locks were midnight black and tied back neatly. Oh, hell. It wouldn't do for Steele and Imax to hate each other on sight. She decided that a little preemptive warning was in order.

"I see y'all are doing that feeling each other out thing," Atlanta said. "Don't fight because you'll screw with my digestion, and I'm starving." Rising before either man could respond, she practically yanked Aloha out of her chair. "Excuse us."

Dragging Aloha outside to the privacy of her truck, Atlanta asked the question of the hour. "What is Imax doing here? I thought you were bringing one of your weirdo friends who was standing on the cusp of nerd super-stardom."

"I like Ianikut, thank you very much."

"You also like hula hoops, but I don't see you dragging one of those to lunch."

"Ianikut is good people." Aloha returned stubbornly.

Yes! This was good news, given that fact that Atlanta had been trying to fix the two of them up. Atlanta hoped she didn't appear too enthusiastic. "You mean Imax -- the Duke fan - - who by the way does not speak Woman or Human for that matter?"

"Yes, although I can't believe such a beautiful man would be a Duke grad." Aloha shivered. "And how do you know that he's not fluent in Woman?"

"Because he's a heterosexual man. Why did you bring him?"

"Because he has that don't-fuck-with-me look going for him," Aloha stated. "He's your friend, and it's his job to kick Steele's ass should the occasion demand it."

"You brought Imax just in case Steele needs to have his ass kicked?"

"Absolutely."

"a) if Steele needs his ass whipped, I can do it. I've been taking kickboxing since forever you know; b) I'm not so sure that Imax could take Steele in a fight; and c) what makes you think Steele poses a threat?"

"I'm just making sure, and it's a good thing that I came today."

"Why is that?"

"Please, I do have eyes. You guys are practically in heat. It's probably all he can do to refrain from throwing you across the table before fucking your brains out."

The image of Steele doing just that made Atlanta wet. "Steele is a gentleman."

"Go ahead, believe that. Meanwhile, I'm getting to know him. And I'm going to warn him, and I don't care if you have a problem with that," Aloha announced before flouncing back into the restaurant.

* * * * *

Back in the restaurant, Steele and Max were engaging in a stare-down. Steele's internal radar had gone off, and from the look of the other man's face, he felt the same thing. Neither acknowledged the other's uniqueness. They merely stared at each other belligerently.

"Atlanta is mine," Steele began without preamble.

Quirking a brow, Max inquired, "That remains to be seen."

"No," Steele paused and leveled a glare at him, "it does not."

"Ah, so you're her," Imax paused, "consort?"

"I am her man," Steele returned. "Other than procuring her 'yes', there is nothing else to be seen to. Speaking of roles, who are you, her ... minion?"

The look on Max's face showed the come-back impressed him. "I'm her friend," he answered.

"That is all that there had better be to it," Steele warned.

"Atlanta needs someone devoted to her," Max began, "as you appear to be, but should you hurt her, I'll kill you."

“And I would welcome the challenge anytime you wish,” Steele began. “However, I feel it is prudent that we discuss your relationship with *my* woman.”

“Are you accusing Atlanta of less than honorable intentions?” Max inquired, his tone deadly. He looked shocked that the other man would even suggest such a thing. Atlanta might be many things, but Steele knew she was neither a liar nor a cheat.

“No, I am not accusing Atlanta of being nebulous in her loyalties, nor am I accusing you. I am merely warning you that your feelings toward her had better never advance beyond being her ‘friend.’”

“If I had wanted Atlanta, I would’ve already taken her.”

“Perhaps you are merely a little slow on the uptake,” Steele said. “I have reservations about a man who could be in such close proximity to such a devastating woman and fail to see her for the wonder that she is.”

“Oh, Atlanta’s devastating alright,” Max agreed. “Wait until the first few times she sets something afire or leaves something of yours in pieces.”

Both men shared a chuckle at the image of Atlanta in full destruction mode. She did have a special gift for destroying that which should have been indestructible.

Max spoke again. “I haven’t failed to note Atlanta’s stellar qualities, including her beauty. Unlike most males, however, I know how to treat a lady like a lady. I love Atlanta too much to dishonor her.”

Steele appreciated Max’s answer, although he still had reservations about the man that only time would sort out. “I will withhold judgment until a later time. However, while we are both disseminating caveats, let us discuss Aloha. Hurt Aloha, and I will come after you.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, but I’m curious about your interest in Aloha.”

“Atlanta loves her; that is my interest,” he said before lapsing into silence.

“And you don’t want her?” Max inquired softly.

“I want no woman other than Atlanta,” Steele answered. “She is the only woman who has residence here.” He pointed to his heart.

“Then if you prove worthy of her, I might just allow you to live,” Max responded.

“Ah, so your kind does possess a sense of humor,” Steele mocked.

“And apparently your kind possess intelligence,” Max finished before he too lapsed into silence.

* * * * *

The ladies noticed that the guys were silently awaiting their return. “Did you guys fight?” Aloha inquired.

“Of course we did not fight,” Steele replied. “Notice that the building is still standing.”

“Unlike you and the gaggle of weirdos you call friends, we’re civilized,” Max chimed in.

The fare at Dréa’s was remarkable as usual, but more importantly fight-free, which was saying something considering the underlying hostility between the two alpha men. One brief moment of tension arose when the bill arrived. Both men took out their wallets, as did both women.

There were two short side arguments between the couples, but Aloha settled the matter by pulling out a wad of cash and handing it to the waiter. “I called for the lunch, so it’s on me.” Thanking the waiter, she grabbed an angry Max while Atlanta grabbed an equally angry Steele; the couples walked out together.

“Nice to meet you, Steele,” Aloha began as they stood by Atlanta’s truck. “You’re definitely as hot as Atlanta described you, but I want you to know that I’ll kick your ass six ways to Saturday if you hurt her. Then I’ll send Ianikut over to finish the job. Have a great day.” Kissing Atlanta good-bye, Aloha hooked her hands in Ianikut’s and summarily dragged him off.

“So that’s your best friend?” Steele said as he watched the other two leave.

“Actually, she’s my evil twin,” Atlanta replied. Sensing that Steele had something more to say, she remained quiet as she drove back to his office. Parking alongside his car, she shut off the engine and waited for him to say his piece.

“Who is Imax to you?”

“Steele, seriously. You’re kidding, right?”

“Who is he, Atlanta?”

“Imax is my friend, and the man who is going to be Aloha’s husband.”

“So, why is her fiancé so territorial over you?”

“Imax is not technically her fiancé; he’s her man, although neither of them has yet to figure it out.”

“He’s figured it out,” Steele replied, his tone positive. “Is he your ex-lover?”

“Steele, a) that’s none of your business, and b) that’s just disgusting. I love Imax but not like that; that’s borderline incest. I know I’m from the South, but that’s just nasty.”

“You are wrong on one account.”

“Please -- when have I ever been wrong?”

“A few moments ago when you said it was none of my business. I am making you my business Atlanta.” He pulled her toward him and kissed her.

“So you think that I am hot?” he asked when it was necessary to breathe.

“You know that I do, so don’t even start.”

“Believe me, I will not start until I am sure that I can finish.”

Chapter Eight

When time allowed and circumstance demanded, Atlanta got together with her group of best friends, collectively known as the Posse. The Posse, a variety pack of weird, treated each other as sisters. They loved each other unconditionally. They didn't let sisterhood or good manners stand in the way of honesty. They didn't hesitate to call bullshit for what it was, even if that bullshit was a job or a man. And to make sure they each toed the line of good sense and a damn good time, they communed regularly. They had cornered the market on conversations that began and ended with "No, that MF didn't."

Besides herself and Aloha, the Posse consisted of Silana, who had a mind like a steel trap and a wardrobe like a fairytale princess; Reign, the resident movie addict and expert on urban legends and conspiracy theories; Victorious, who had a road trip fetish and a collection of risqué jokes involving priests, rabbis, and pastors walking into bars; Zuri, the pre-eminent scholar of designer shoes, and the ninja master of cussing, which happened to be her second language; Xiloxoch (Jack), the resident expert on fucking people up whose one mood was 'MF please'; Indy, the group's voice of reason and a tornado in a tea cup; and Cayleigh, who had gone underground because of events that were going to require all of Silana's legal prowess.

Today found Atlanta in the midst of their presence enjoying a spread fit for kings. Silana's house, a favored spot for posse get-togethers, sat on many acres of land on the outskirts of Atlanta. The early May foliage made the backdrop picture-perfect, and the day felt like a blissful get-away.

After failing to gain Atlanta's attention for the third time, Indy gave up.

"Something's definitely up," Silana threw in. "That child ain't even touched her dessert, and she's already been here three entire minutes."

Atlanta looked down at her plate, amazed to discover that she hadn't taken a bite of her peach cobbler. "I ..." she began, only to be cut off by a chorus of women.

"We want details," Reign demanded.

"Just the *good* details," Zuri purred.

"We want the entire, unedited truth," Silana, in full attorney mode, decreed.

"Silana, it's not even like that," Atlanta began.

"Then what *is* it like?" Zuri wagged her eyebrows.

"It's a man, and he's hot like fire," Aloha commented after swallowing a mouthful of Skittles.

"Y'all, he is so damn fine," Atlanta said. "Not only would he be an excellent selection for my fantasy football team, he plays every starting position on my *personal* fantasy team. He is ..."

"A stud in bed," Zuri completed.

"We haven't gotten that far, but I'm virtually in a constant state of arousal merely from his touches and conversation. He's a gentleman because he knows that I'm his for the taking should he press the issue, yet he hasn't pressed it."

"Okay, I'm not going to be politically incorrect and say that he's gay, but I'm just saying if he hasn't tried to fuck you yet, he must be like the reigning double-dutch champion," Zuri joked.

"We need to meet him," Silana remarked.

"I already met him, and he's cool," Aloha replied.

"Yeah, but you're fucking nuts," Silana told Aloha, "so your opinion doesn't count."

"I could have a talk with him," Jack offered.

"Jack, please don't kill him," Atlanta pleaded.

"Yeah, not until after she fucks him," Aloha said. "Did I mention that he's total freaking eye candy?"

"And then gives us the details," Zuri added. "My panties are wet listening to her describe all the ways in which he's a stud."

"And when aren't your panties wet, Zuri?" Victorious inquired.

"Atlanta, you seem confused," Indy broke in.

"I am. I don't know why he's being this patient."

"Which is why we need to meet him," Silana stated.

"Umm, no," Atlanta remarked after two seconds of thought.

"Why not?" Silana inquired. "What are you scared of?"

"What do you think we'll do to him?" Jack inquired sweetly -- too sweetly.

"Oh, let me see ... Jack will try to kill him. Aloha has already threatened to whip his ass and have Imax finish the job when she's tired of wailing on him. Reign will try to infiltrate his home looking for bodies buried in the backyard. Victorious will sic the tax guys on him.

Zuri will think of inventive ways to tell him to go to hell while ogling his ass. Silana will hex him if she doesn't like the way he answers her summons."

"Contrary to the beliefs of you politically incorrect," Silana began, "not every woman from New Orleans is a voodoo priestess, and not all voodoo priestesses go around hexing people."

"You might not be a voodoo priestess," Zuri piped in, "but that doesn't mean that you wouldn't hex somebody who worked your last nerve."

"Yeah, but it's not Silana you have to worry about, it's Indy; after all, she's the one who's a pastor."

"Holding master's degrees in divinity and theology does not a pastor make," Indy schooled.

"And running away from your calling doesn't mean that you're not a pastor." Silana threw a glare at Indy, who merely harrumphed.

"So when do we get to meet him?" Jack asked. "Or do we have to *surprise* him?"

Atlanta shivered at the thought. She could just imagine the resulting fallout. The police, the ambulances, the fire departments, the counter-terrorist teams ... it would just be better to bring him to them. That way, they could all avoid jail time and insertion on the authorities' people-to-watch list. And if for some reason they needed to dispose of his body -- *his very hot body* -- she would bet the house that Jack was good at things of that nature.

Chapter Nine

Steele was in his office when his phone rang. Not having a good day, he barked a rather rude greeting. “What?”

Atlanta’s return greeting sounded cautious. “I can call back if this is a bad time.”

“Atlanta?” Steele asked, perplexed. She rarely called him and then only at home. He looked out his office’s large window; the sun was still up. Steele furrowed his brow.

“You sound like you’re having a bad day. I’ll call you back.”

“Don’t you dare hang up,” he began.

“You’re definitely having a bad day; you just used a contraction,” she joked. “What has your panties in such a twist?”

“Dealing with a horde of imbeciles.”

“You’re talking to the government?”

“Not this time,” Steele rejoined.

“I wanted to know if I could interest you in lunch. I bought take-out, but if you’re busy ...”

“I am never too busy for you, Your Excellency.”

“Would you like me to bring it to your office, or would you rather eat somewhere else?”

“Would you mind bringing it to my office?”

“Not at all. I’ll be there in a few.”

“I anxiously await your arrival.”

Steele waited at the entrance to his offices. Spotting her before she spotted him, he indulged himself with an unhurried perusal of his love. She was still the most beautiful

woman around, even when dressed in her signature, casual outfit of sports jersey and jeans. A brilliant smile from Atlanta rewarded him when she finally noticed him.

"Hi, Steele."

"Good afternoon, Atlanta," he said as he relieved her of her bags and escorted her to his private office.

They ate in silence but got around to speaking when Atlanta started on her second dessert. Apparently, she was indulging in a nothing-but-desserts lunch.

"Steele?"

"Yes, love?"

"If you want to," she paused gathering her courage, "the rest of my friends would like to meet you."

"That sounds ominous," he returned.

"Yeah, it can be. They're all fucking nuts, but I love them, and they're concerned about all of the time that I spend with you."

"Oh, you mean they just want to insure that I am not an, how did you put it ... ah, an axe-murdering psychopath?"

"Dude, you're never going to let that go, are you?" Atlanta sighed.

"I will be regaling our great-great grandchildren with the tale."

"You're nuts."

"Well then I should fit in quite well with your friends."

"They think that, ahh," Atlanta faltered, "that we're seeing each other."

Placing his dessert to the side, Steele relieved her of her peach cobbler, on which she had a death grip. "We are seeing each other."

"Steele," Atlanta sighed. "I mean really seeing each other -- like a couple -- not just as fuck buddies."

A look of fury crossed Steele's visage. "I am really seeing you," he gritted. "You are my woman, Atlanta. You should remember that."

"Why? Will there be a quiz later?"

"No, but some other male might try to get you," he growled, "and you should let him know that you are taken. That you are the woman of a very jealous, selfish, and dangerous Viking."

"Am I?" She smiled.

"Most definitely."

Steele knew that Atlanta had no idea of the effect that she had on him. For some reason, she thought men oblivious to her womanliness. Right now, he felt she was nervous, waiting for him to insist that they were merely friends; that would not happen. "I can see

that I will have to work on my seduction, since you failed to notice that I have been diligently working at tempting you.” He pulled her between his spread legs. “Lean into me.”

As soon as she complied, he gently grabbed her hair, forcing her to lean fully against him. The position pushed her ass tighter against his arousal as it thrust her breasts out.

“When I eventually take you,” he told Atlanta before kissing her, “regardless of how hard I throw it down, I will always be making love to you, because I love you.” He turned her head to the side and began a thorough exploration of her mouth, and this time, he held nothing back.

Atlanta gasped, and when she gasped, Steele took her breath and gave her back his. He knew she wanted him, but he controlled her pleasure.

“Please, Steele.”

“Please what, Sweetheart?”

“Please,” she reiterated.

“Tell me what you want,” he demanded.

“You, Steele. I want ...” She couldn’t finish because, in between kisses, Steele had managed to unfasten both her throwback rugby jersey and her button fly jeans. Inserting his fingers into her dripping sex, he thrust a single finger into her cunt. Finding her ready to take more, he inserted another digit and thrust repeatedly. Grabbing her breast with one hand, he managed a few more strokes with his fingers while forming a tight seal over her mouth before she managed to scream down the building as she came.

“Steele, Steele, Steele.”

“Yes, Sweetheart?” An extremely satisfied Steele inquired, knowing she was in no condition to answer his question or explain her own requests.

“Steele,” she said as she collapsed against him. Too stupefied to move, she finally came down from the high of her orgasm. “Steele, what about you? Would you like me to get you off?” She turned and reached out to touch him.

Grabbing both her hands, Steele pulled her against him and replied, “No, Sweetheart. If you so much as touch my cock, I will throw you across my desk and love you until we are both mindless. I will then continue to love you regardless of who walks in this office seeking explanations for your non-stop screaming.”

“Oh.”

Steele seemed to be in full command of his faculties. He licked his fingers clean before buttoning her up.

“When do I get to meet them?”

“Who?”

“Your friends.”

“What about them?” *What the hell was Steele talking about?* Her mind was mush. Steele had said that he loved her. And it didn’t help to have him so close to her with the evidence of his arousal so prominently displayed.

“You were telling me that the rest of your friends wanted to meet me,” he began. The smirk on his face told Atlanta he loved the fact that she seemed to have trouble following the thread of the conversation.

“Oh. How about dinner next week?”

“I will be there. Is it casual or dress up?”

“Like you have casual clothes. Wear whatever you feel comfortable in. I’m wearing jeans and a jersey, and, by the way, I’m driving.”

* * * * *

Atlanta held Steele’s hand and practically dragged him up the staircase of Silana’s stately home. She wanted her friends to like Steele, but she knew that they wouldn’t pretend to like him if they found him lacking. Grateful that Steele had taken this summons seriously, Atlanta glanced at him again. Normally dressed impeccably, tonight he’d outdone himself.

“Hey, Silana. This is Steele. Steele, this is Silana.” Atlanta introduced the two then stepped aside to give them room to sniff each other out. Atlanta rolled her eyes at Silana’s dress; she looked ready to audition for the part of Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* -- all she needed was the cigarette holder, and if she smoked, she would’ve had one. Steele gave Atlanta a look that read, “You said this was casual.” She gave him a look that read, “Shut up.”

“Good evening, Ms. Toussaint,” Steele addressed the striking and impeccably dressed woman and handed her a gift basket.

“Good evening, Mr. Magnussen,” Silana returned the formal greeting and ushered him inside.

“Please call me Steele.”

“Only if you call me Silana.”

And that is how the Inquisition began. Atlanta knew that her friends were nutcases, but she didn’t realize to what extent. She supposed that proximity had dulled her senses in that regard. She could only imagine what Steele would think of her after spending time with the Posse. Sighing, Atlanta waited for the inevitable questions that would fall under the subheading: “Crap surely to offend or scare off a man in whom Atlanta is interested.” Atlanta bowed to the inevitable and took a seat. She only hoped that Steele would at least fuck her once before quitting her ... in the event he survived the evening.

A barrage of questions hit Steele as soon as he was seated.

“What are your intentions?” Silana asked.

“If you had to pick a way to die it would be what? And conversely, if you had to select a method of killing someone what method would you use?” Jack inquired.

“How many hours a week do you spend playing?” Aloha tossed in.

“What’s your favorite movie and favorite line from a movie?” Reign asked.

“The Line of Demarcation divided the world between Portugal and Spain,” Victorious began. “If the world was divided into halves today, who would do the dividing, and who would the world be divided between?”

“In your opinion, who or what do the majority of people worship and why? And what kind of bait do you prefer?” Indy requested.

“What would you do to demonstrate your appreciation of Atlanta as a woman?” Zuri asked, sighing.

If Atlanta could have melted down and slid through the floor, she would have. Regardless of the ridiculousness of the situation, a few things gave her hope that the evening wouldn’t end with the arrival of the authorities: Silana had actually allowed him to enter the house; Jack hadn’t merely shot him on sight; Aloha hadn’t maimed him (of course the Posse kept all implements of death firmly out of her reach); and Steele hadn’t immediately run screaming from the house.

Instead, he pulled Atlanta closer to him and answered each question as if this was a normal occurrence. “Silana, I intend to court Atlanta.” He paused and kissed Atlanta briefly before finishing his answer. “Jack, if I had to select a way to die, it would be while in the throws of passion. If I had to kill someone it would depend on the weapons at my disposal, although I prefer hand-to-hand combat because I like looking my enemies in the eye so that they know it is me. Aloha, I play as hard as I work -- and lately I have been playing even harder because I have been trying to impress Atlanta,” he said as he kissed the top of Atlanta’s head. “Reign, two of my favorite movies are *The Last Samurai* and *La Marseillaise*, which is a classic French film by Jean Renoir that is about the storming of the Bastille and the subsequent birth of the French Republic.

“Victorious, if the world was to be divided into halves today, it would be divided between Microsoft and Wal-Mart. Whoever had the most money would wield the metaphorical pen. Indy, I think that regardless of with what God people identify, that most people worship money and power. I prefer to use live bait. Zuri, to demonstrate my appreciation of Atlanta as a woman, I will continue to cater to her femininity in a myriad of ways, such as opening her car door and withholding my climax until she reaches hers.”

Atlanta did her best to follow Steele’s answers, but Steele kept touching her, making it difficult to concentrate. Silence reigned while Steele answered each question.

“I give him eight point five points,” Aloha piped up.

“I also give him eight point five points,” Zuri added. “All points based upon his answer to the last question.”

“I ditto the opinions of my fellow judges,” Victorious sighed longingly. “I like the way he touches her.”

"I can't believe you guys were fucking taking points!" Atlanta exclaimed. "Zuri, you're such a freak, and I saw you ogling his ass!" Atlanta would have jumped up from indignation if Steele hadn't stayed her hips. She had no idea how she had ended up on Steele's lap, but with his erection pressing into her, it was a good place to sit and caused her to go instantaneously wet.

"Well, yeah," Zuri demurred. "He has a nice ass."

"Absolutely. I give it a ten," Reign added.

"And if I weren't happily married and was tempted to look at it, I'd also give it a ten," Victorious chimed in.

"Well, I looked," Aloha told them, "and I would rate it right up there with the latest Madden video game, peach milkshakes, and calling in sick to work."

"Steele might not be jailbait, but if I were twenty years younger ..." Silana began.

"You'd still be about five hundred years too old to be messing with a stud like him," Indy joked. "By the way, what did the voice of God sound like when He said 'let there be light', and what was it like when y'all first got sunlight?"

"Oh, like you don't think he's fine?" Silana inquired ignoring the dig at her age.

"I think he flat out flew past fine and is straight centerfold material." Indy winked.

"I hate to interrupt this love fest, but I have yet to finish my questions," Jack began. "What would you do if someone were to make an inappropriate comment about your relationship?"

Steele's eyes immediately took on an eerie glow. "I would advise them to mind their own damn business if they wanted to continue to breathe."

"Inquisition over; he passes," Jack declared; she handed him a drink.

"So, Jack, is the boy fine or what?" Indy asked.

"Hotter than hell and half of Georgia," Jack admitted.

"Hey, that's what you said about Iain," Victorious pouted.

"Georgia does have two halves," Jack replied.

Atlanta decided to kill them all, slowly. "You guys are so dead." She felt the beginnings of a rant building in her gut.

Steele interrupted her outburst with a kiss to her temple. Atlanta enjoyed his kiss, but she knew from his smirk that he got off on her being territorial over him.

"Is an eight point five a passing score?" Steele inquired.

"It is," Silana confirmed.

"Is it an *A*, for excellent; a *B*, for above average or a *C*, which is merely average?" Steele inquired.

"It's like a B plus," Reign replied.

"Which is really superior," Aloha added with a suggestive leer.

“What can I do to earn an *A*?”

“You’d have to be a woman to score an *A*,” Silana stated.

“No offense, dude, but you wouldn’t look good as a woman.” Aloha shivered, thinking of Steele dressed in drag.

“Don’t take it personally; no man has ever earned an *A*, and only one other man has earned a B plus,” Indy mumbled around her drink.

“And I would like to state that that honor belongs to my husband,” Victorious threw in with a sigh.

“Which didn’t prevent you from trying to off him,” Jack added.

“I said I was sorry,” Victorious stated. “Geesh, why can’t you guys let it go? Iain has.”

“That’s because he still wants to sleep with you,” Zuri remarked.

“I know that I might be strange,” Silana began, “but I don’t think that a simple ‘I’m sorry’ is sufficient penance for chucking someone in the head with a brick.”

“Should I be worried?” Steele inquired.

A chorus of yeses met his question.

“Don’t worry about being hit in the head with a brick,” Aloha reassured him. “Head wounds bleed an awful lot, and we’ve evolved in our methods of putting a trifling husband in line.”

Somehow, they all moved from subtly veiled death threats to dinner. Steele didn’t know when, but he enjoyed himself immensely.

Accustomed to Atlanta’s silence during meals, the amount of conversation at Silana’s table surprised Steele.

“Now Steele,” Silana said as they ate, “wipe that suspicious look off of your visage. We wouldn’t feed you if we planned to kill you.”

“But we might maim you a little bit,” Aloha threw in.

“Yeah, you need to eat so that you can remain strong enough to rock Atlanta’s world,” Zuri said. “And we’ll be grading that, too.”

“Why don’t you contract your words?” Aloha inquired.

“Is it that obvious?”

“Yeah,” Zuri told him. “If you don’t use contractions, you’re going to limit yourself when it comes to cussing people out.”

And so went the remainder of the evening. Zuri taught Steele the art of cussing people out while Aloha attempted explain the basics of hacking into a mainframe. Reign and he traded movie snippets. Victorious gave him the rundown of romantic road trips. Indy invited him fishing. Silana kept plying him with food while Jack remained silent. All in all, it proved an interesting night. Atlanta left relieved.

Chapter Ten

Atlanta hated the phone, but she expected a return call about tickets to the NBA Finals that began during the first week in June -- next week. Atlanta was splashing about in her bath when the phone rang. "Hello?"

"Good morning, Your Excellency."

"Good evening, Steele," she returned. "I can't talk long. I'm waiting on a call, and I still haven't figured out this call waiting thing."

"That is fine. I called because I remembered our blood work came back months ago, and we never did schedule a time to get our results."

"Oh yeah. I totally forgot about that."

"Would you like to go one afternoon next week, then go out and celebrate?"

"Why afternoon?"

"Because I have it on excellent authority that you do not do mornings."

"Not for most people, but I would be happy to make an exception for you."

"I am honored."

"You should be," she joked. "Let's go next Friday; I am taking off that entire week. Then we'll have more time to celebrate."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, but if you don't want to ..." she began.

"Of course I want to," he interrupted. "I was trying to be considerate."

"Steele, no matter how I tease you, know this: You've never failed to be considerate of my needs and wishes. I do appreciate that."

"For once, I am speechless."

"Say that you'll come get me about ten-ish next Friday morning, and I'll give you directions to my house."

"You do realize that the sun has a tendency to be out in the mornings?"

"Yep. Consequently, I've seen the sun before. In fact, I generally see sunrise; it's sunset that I usually miss."

"I stand corrected."

"Get used to that. By the way, when you get here, I'm driving, and I'm dressing casual."

"You do not even have to dress."

"You won't mind if I drive naked?"

"If you answered the door wearing nothing, the Viking in me would overpower the gentlemen in me, and I would drag you to the bedroom by your hair."

"Dude, for the record, we black women have a serious thing about our hair. If you plan on taking me to your cave, you better toss me over your shoulder. If you drag me by my hair, there's going to be a fight."

"Duly noted. And by the way -- I am a Viking -- we do not dwell in caves."

"Dude, I know you're not trying to talk smack about our nation's superheroes."

"I was, but I will let it go because I do not want to fight with you. I want to ravish you all night long, so bring an overnight bag."

"I've always wanted to be ravished."

"And I have always wanted to drag a woman back to my longhouse."

"Was that 'all night long' part of that proclamation merely wishful thinking?"

"Absolutely not. It is something to which you may look forward."

"Is dragging a woman to your longhouse considered foreplay?"

"If you want it to be."

"And here I was thinking that the French had cornered the market on romance."

"I am more Viking than French, but you should know that there are benefits to having a Frenchman as a lover."

"How would you know?" she teased. "Have you had a Frenchman as a lover? How was it? I want details."

"I do not know why I even think that I will be victorious when I engage you in a battle of words."

"It's because you're a man. For some reason, guys always think that they can win an argument against a woman even though it has never happened."

"I give up."

"See, that's the French part of you kicking in," she joked.

"Perhaps I should keep you away from the French half of my family."

“That might be for the best, considering that Reign is fiending to pull off a *coup d’etat*, and of course the Posse would have to go with her.”

“What do you guys have against France?”

“Absolutely nothing; pulling off a successful *coup d’etat* is something on our ‘do-before-we-die’ lists, and it would make a kick-ass bullet point on our résumés. In fact, we have a fondness for the City of Lights because of the welcome that it extended African-Americans in the early twentieth century, and then there are the desserts. How can you not love a city that’s famous for *crème brûlée*, crepes, and éclairs?”

“I am starting to think that you and your friends might just be crazy.”

“The Posse isn’t technically crazy. They’re nuts. There’s a difference. Crazy people do stuff randomly; the Posse plans their chaos.”

“I will keep that in mind. I know that you need the phone. Until next Friday, Atlanta.”

“*Bon nuit*, Steele.”

* * * * *

Steele barely slept at all on Thursday night. Visions of finally having Atlanta took up residence in his head. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw her in a thousand places. In his arms. In his bed. In his home.

When he finally left to get her, he broke every land speed record in existence reaching her house. He slowed down when he considered the myriad ways that Atlanta would say “I told you so” should he crash en route.

Her house was not what he expected. The brick ranch looked so ... normal. Nestled on about an acre of land and surrounded by real grass -- not artificial turf -- people wouldn’t think that Atlanta lived there until they went inside and walked into every frat boy’s dream home. Atlanta did not have a living room; she had a shrine that was crammed with Carolina memorabilia and sported a seventy-inch television. In the dining room sat an air hockey table. Being adjacent to the industrial-sized kitchen (that looked as if it had never been used) was the only clue as to the room’s original purpose.

“Wow,” he finally muttered.

“Yeah.”

“Where is the locker room?”

“In the basement next to the gym.”

“And the Olympic-sized pool?”

“I didn’t have the space for it.”

“So besides this, is the rest of your house normal? You know, bathrooms that actually have toilets ... bedrooms that have beds?”

“Absolutely,” she assured him. “Wait ’til you see the stripper’s pole in my bedroom.”

He meant to ask her something else, but the vision of a stripper's pole in her bedroom caught him off guard. About to run through the house to see it, he noticed what she was not wearing and stopped dead.

"You do not have on a jersey!"

"I only have so many jerseys, you know."

"You do not have on jeans!"

"It's the first week of June."

"You have clothes that are not Carolina blue ... clothes that do not have a number on the back."

"You seem perturbed by that fact. I can always change into a jersey if it's bothering you that much."

Steele didn't know where to stare first. She wore jean shorts and a V-neck T-shirt, but to him she was just as tantalizing as a centerfold. It was only the second time that he had seen her when she was not mostly covered from neck to ankles, and the first time did not count since she was bleeding. Damn, she was hot and top heavy -- really, really top heavy. And they were real! And he got harder by the second.

"Steele? Steele? Bastille!?" She yelled in an attempt to get his attention. Finally, it registered that she had spoken to him. "I apologize. Were you speaking to me?"

"I was, but if you have somewhere else you would rather be ..." She let the sentence hang.

"Get in the car."

"What?"

"Atlanta, get in the car," he ordered.

"I need to get my bag."

"Where is it?"

Atlanta pointed to the overnighter. Before she could utter another word, he had scooped it up and virtually frog-marched her to the door. Steele settled her in the driver's seat. She started the car and smiled at Steele. He looked back at her, and he knew his face betrayed his need for speed.

* * * * *

Other than giving her directions to his house, Steele didn't speak much; his silence staved off the inevitable arguments that he was sure to lose, so Atlanta didn't have a problem with it. Once, she had almost let him argue to a draw, but quickly decided against that, lest his ego be artificially inflated. He would think that he had a valid point -- and even if he did, who gave a damn? Then, he would believe that he could actually win an argument. Ha, better to crush his ego now so he wouldn't attempt something so futile and foolish in the future.

An hour later -- just in time for lunch -- she swung the big Mercedes into the driveway of a sprawling estate. She expertly backed into the open bay.

"Show off."

"If you ask me nicely, I'll teach you to drive."

Steele helped her out of the car. He started into the house, but Atlanta, still standing beside the car, cleared her throat.

"What?" Steele asked, obviously impatient.

"You have a six-bay garage. Show me the rest of your rides."

"Right now?"

"Yeah, we're here right now."

"Okay."

"Well, don't sound so damn happy about it. I figure if you have a six-bay garage, you should either have a large family or really like cars. Since there's just you, I'm thinking that you really like cars."

His garage boasted another Mercedes, a Bentley, a big ass Harley, and a silver 7-series BMW. "Wait a minute, you have a 7-series BMW, and you've been driving that piece of crap Mercedes?"

"Did you just refer to my car as a piece of crap?"

"Yeah, because compared to that 7-series BMW, it is. Hell, compared to that Harley, it's a piece of crap. Oh wait a minute, I get it. You just don't trust me to drive your precious BMW. Is that it?"

"Did you just call my car a piece of crap? I did not refer to your whatever-that-thing-is that you drive as a piece of crap."

"First of all, the Warhorse is not just a means of transportation. It's a modified 1985 4-man Humvee wagon. And second, if you did call it a piece of crap, you'd better be saying that from the driver's seat of the 7-series with a stretch of flat road in front of you, because the Warhorse is outfitted with every extra except for the rocket launcher."

"I let you drive my car, and you refer to it as a piece of crap?"

"Okay, once again, you drive like shit. If you had rolled up on a skateboard, pulled up in a chariot, or pedaled up on a plastic Big Wheel tricycle, I'd still insist on driving."

The sound of a throat clearing interrupted Atlanta's growing rant. She turned and saw that another man had appeared. She pointed her thumb at him.

"Who's he?"

"My butler, Henry."

"You have a butler? What kind of --"

Before the next argument could get really good, the butler cleared his throat once more. "Is there a problem, sir?" he inquired.

"She just called my car a piece of crap!"

The butler's face remained impassive, the epitome of professionalism. "Sir, wouldn't you like to come in and refresh yourselves?"

"Maybe she thinks that my house is a piece of crap too?"

"Well, I won't know until I see it." She moved past him and introduced herself to the distinguished-looking gentleman. "Hello, sir. I'm Atlanta. It's nice to meet you."

"Please call me Henry, madam," he said as he offered his elbow. "Pleased to meet you."

"Oh, no *Monsieur* Henry. I wouldn't dream of calling you by your first name. We're in the God-fearing South where we take things such as religion, good manners, fried foods, and sports seriously."

"Even when you're delivering a scolding?" he inquired politely.

"Oh, especially then. Verbally putting someone in their place is an art form."

Glimpsing the twinkle in his eyes, Atlanta recognized a kindred spirit. "I can see that we're going to get along like the proverbial house on fire, Monsieur Henry," She took his elbow. "But you must refrain from addressing me as 'madam.' I don't operate a brothel, you see. Surely, you're mistaking me for one of Steele's previous lady friends. Would you mind leading the way? Steele seems to be out of sorts at the moment."

Steele grabbed her bag and followed them in the house, muttering the entire time.

"Steele, are you going to show me the house, or are you going to sulk for the remainder of the day?"

"You called my car a piece of crap."

"Steele, would you like an apology, or perhaps you'd like me to proffer an apology to the car itself? It's a lovely car, Steele. All of the rappers have one. However, if you're looking for street cred, you need to get it pimped out."

Steele didn't respond.

"Well, are you going to show me the house?"

"Are you going to call it names?"

"No, Steele, now that I'm aware of your sensitivity regarding your inanimate objects, I'll refrain from calling them names." She turned to the butler and inquired, *Monsieur* Henry, will you be joining us?"

"No thank you, Atlanta. I'm going to see about refreshments. Enjoy yourselves."

* * * * *

Steele wasn't vain, but he had pride in his home, a six-thousand square foot brick house on three acres. Anxiously, he awaited Atlanta's reaction to it, as he hoped that she would be spending a lot of time here. Her gasps and sighs were music to his ears. After receiving a tour of the house and the grounds, they went in to dine. As usual, Steele placed Atlanta in her

chair before walking to the opposite end of the table and settling himself in. Atlanta waited until he sat down before inquiring why he sat her so far away from him.

"It is customary for the lady to sit at one end and the gentleman to sit at the other."

"I understand custom; however, I don't plan on engaging in a conversation that requires me to scream down the length of the table in order to be heard."

"You rarely speak when you are eating, so why does it matter?"

"Because I might have something to say! Perhaps I want to apologize profusely for hurting your car's feelings. Maybe I want to comment on how devastatingly handsome you are. Then again, I might want to hear you tell me how wonderful you think I am. If I'm going to shout myself hoarse, it won't be from asking you to repeat yourself or from asking you to pass the damn salt!"

"You do realize that you are shouting now, right?"

"Steele, you need to place my setting next to you, please."

"Allow me, Miss Atlanta," Henry insisted.

"Thank you. It's nice to know that someone around here has some culture."

Steele furrowed his brow and looked at his butler. "I notice that you do not refer to me as 'Mister,' although you refer to her as 'Miss'."

"That's because your father is 'Mister', sir," Henry replied crisply.

"Is Steele always this moody?"

"Ahhh," Henry began before looking helplessly at Steele.

"Henry," Steele said, "now you see why I should be praised for my remarkable restraint."

"What restraint?" Atlanta broke in.

"The restraint that I have demonstrated these past six months; I have yet to kill you."

"That's because I refuse to let you drive us anywhere."

The two broke off their mini argument upon hearing Henry's retreating chuckle.

"I should fire that man," Steele threw out, smiling as he said it.

"But you won't, because you love him." Atlanta took a bite of her food. "But if he cooked this meal, I'd steal him from you and put him to work in my kitchen."

* * * * *

Atlanta, the meal as wonderful as predicted, didn't speak until she had polished off her entrée. They got around to talking by her after-entrée dessert. Victorious, a numbers genius, had worked up a chart that detailed how many minutes of cardio Atlanta had to subject herself to per helping of her favorite foods, and her kickboxing generally took care of the rest.

Atlanta inquired about his life and encouraged him to speak about his native land.

“Norway sounds lovely,” Atlanta told him when he had finished. “Though you’ve taken me there with your descriptions, I’d actually like to see the place that you speak of with such reverence.”

Because she had taken another bite of her dessert, she didn’t observe the fact that both Henry and Steele were staring at her with wide eyes.

“Would you come if I invited you?”

“If you have to invite me to come, then I would say that you’re doing something wrong.”

Exasperated at the way she always managed to take over any conversation, he steered her back on track. “Would you come to Norway?”

“Hmm mmm.”

“But it took me more than three months to get you to come here.”

“You’d never invited me to your home. You’ve only asked me if I wanted to see your house.”

“You are speaking semantics.”

“It’s not merely a matter of semantics. The term ‘home’ implies something completely different than does the term ‘house’.”

“I know that in your eyes I am beneath you ...”

She almost wet her panties envisioning him beneath her.

“But I am not stupid.”

“No, but you’re quite blond,” she joked. “And on a serious note, though I’d absolutely love to have you beneath me physically, I’ve never thought that you were beneath me. Even though you’re inferior at driving, arguing, dressing, and sports knowledge, I’ve never considered you beneath me as a human. In fact, I’m surprised it’s not the other way around.”

“Why would I think that you are beneath me?” Steele questioned.

“Rich white guys tend to do that, especially with minorities and women.”

Rising from his seat, he slid her chair out before pulling her to his chest in a strong embrace. “Not this rich white guy, ever.”

From her place against his chest, Atlanta said, “I can’t believe that you have a pool and never told me.”

“You never asked.”

“Steele, there are things that you should always volunteer. Things like possessing any kind of super power, owning a bakery, or having a pool is gots-to-tell-your-woman information. Dammit, I could’ve been coming over here for swims.”

Not quite understanding how possessing super powers and owning a pool fit into the same category, Steele opted to placate Atlanta. “If I had known that a pool was all that it took

to impress you, believe me, I would have offered up that information while my uncle was tending your injuries.”

“Oh, you’ve always impressed me,” Atlanta said as she leaned in to hug him again. “You impress me whenever we’re together by the simple courtesies that you afford me. I appreciate the fact that though I demand that we interact as equals, you never fail to respect the fact that I am a woman and treat me accordingly.”

Her words floored Steele, and her hug humbled him. It did not escape his attention that, although a touchy-feely person, Atlanta rarely touched people. She was always on guard for trouble. Only on two occasions had he witnessed her completely relaxed: while with the motley women that comprised her Posse and when she was alone with him. And though it pleased him immensely that she trusted him, he decided to get her out of the house lest he truly go Viking on her.

“Are you ready to go get our results?”

“Can I drive the 7-series?”

“If you must,” he sighed. “It is a certainty that I will not allow you to drive my Mercedes after you verbally abused it.”

* * * * *

Only the seatbelt stopped her from jumping around in glee. “This is so damn hot. Are you sure you’re okay with me driving?”

“Enjoy yourself.”

Revving the engine before taking off, Atlanta smiled. “We’ll be taking the long way to everywhere.” Atlanta looked at the odometer. “Steele, why are there less than a hundred miles on your car?”

“Because I drive the little piece of crap, as you so graciously referred to it.”

“Dude, let it go. I still don’t understand why you would buy a car that you obviously don’t drive.”

“I enjoy cars. Eventually, I get around to driving all of them, though I have my preferences.”

“Yeah, but one part of me feels like I’m cheating you out of the chance to break it in.”

“Atlanta, it is not a big deal.”

“Maybe not to you, but we Americans have love affairs with our vehicles.”

“Are you in love with that thing that you drive?”

“Absolutely, the Warhorse seriously rocks, although on occasion I take the bike out for a spin.”

“There is no accounting for taste, but I did not see a bike.”

“That’s because you were too busy ogling me.”

“Well, yes.”

“Did you like what you saw?”

“Was it not obvious?” he asked.

They went to the office -- eventually. The negative results didn't surprise them, but both were ready to start their celebration. Afterwards, Atlanta dragged him all over the city. Every place that they visited seemed to require a long drive. They finally called it a day after a tank of fuel. By the time Atlanta backed into the bay, she was on the verge of collapse. She had been going full throttle all day, and she had forgone her usual nap. Though it was easy to fall back into a normal sleep pattern, her body had limits.

“Damn, I'm hungry, but I'm just too tired to eat,” she said, trying to stay awake.

“Why did you not head back sooner?” he asked.

“Because I was having too much fun, and besides, I didn't know if you would let me drive Weeee! again.” At some point during their trek, she had christened the BMW ‘Weeee!’

“You can drive it whenever you would like. In the future, there is no need for you to drive yourself to the brink of exhaustion. Okay?” He assisted her from the driver's seat.

“Even when you're mad at me?” she slurred.

“Even then,” He unlocked the kitchen door and ushered her into the house. She collapsed on the couch.

“You promise?” she asked sleepily.

“I promise,” he answered. Tired of watching her struggle to remain awake, he hauled her into his arms.

“But you're always mad at me.”

“Not always,” he told her, “just the majority of the time.”

* * * * *

Atlanta finally fell asleep in his arms. She did not wake until he settled her on the bed and began removing her shoes.

“I need a shower,” she said drowsily.

“Sweetheart, you're so sleepy right now, I am afraid that you might drown.”

“Can you wait out here to make sure that I don't? I hate going to bed dirty.”

“Ten minutes, then I'm coming in to get you.”

“You must be exhausted; that's the second contraction that you've used. You want to share the shower so we can watch over each other?”

“Atlanta, if I get into that shower with you, there is a good chance that I will pillage you.”

“Well, at least you wouldn't have far to drag me being that we're already in your longhouse,” she teased.

"No, but you are too tired to enjoy the alpha in me."

"Perhaps you need to put your alpha in me, so that I can decide for myself if you've earned that title, or if it's merely braggadocio."

"You are tired and not fully aware of what you are saying."

"I'm aware of what I'm saying. I'm just too tired to accommodate you. I want you so much that I haven't even considered that as a fine, virile man with needs, that you might've ..."

Steele loomed over his woman and kissed her into silence. "I've been celibate nearly nine months" he admitted.

"That long? Why?"

"Because I was intrigued by this feisty woman with kiss-me lips and ride-me hips."

"Oh yeah, I almost forgot about her. I hear she is the mother-fucking shit. You're lucky to have her."

"Sweetheart, go shower. We will discuss this tomorrow."

"Come on," she grabbed his hand and started for the shower.

Though they both got eyefuls of each other, they were too tired to do anything about it. Somehow she managed her toilet despite her exhaustion and the distraction of Steele's hot body. While Steele finished in the shower, Atlanta found her overnight bag and applied a liberal layer of cocoa butter to her body and wrapped her braids in a scarf. Getting ready to throw on her favorite baseball jersey (because baseball was the one sport that could induce her to sleep), she spied Steele's discarded shirt and slipped it on instead. Like him, it was huge and despite their adventure-packed day, it smelled wonderful, intoxicating like the bakery after the first batch of chocolate chip cookies in the morning. Her bedtime ritual complete, she lay atop the covers, awaiting Steele.

* * * * *

Steele took so long because he had to gain control of himself. Sharing a shower with Atlanta had pushed him near his breaking point. She was a whole lot of woman, and he wanted her, in every way imaginable. When Steele finally walked out of the bathroom, finding that she had already fallen asleep did not surprise him, though seeing her dressed in his shirt, and from the looks of things, nothing else did.

Atlanta woke as soon as Steele approached her. "What are you doing?" she asked when Steele began to adjust the covers.

"Tucking you into bed."

She rose so that he could pull the covers back, then quickly resumed her undignified sprawl. She sighed at the feel of his expensive sheets. "You're supposed to kiss me good night."

"I do not think that is a good idea."

“The rules state that you have to kiss me good night, or it’s not a proper tucking in.”

“Oh, the infamous rules that you contrive on the spot?”

“Yep, those rules. However, this is not a contrived-on-the-spot rule; it’s a long-standing rule.”

Steele bent to give her a light kiss. Atlanta grabbed his arm and pulled him down on the bed with her. He pressed down on top of her, and she gasped. Atlanta’s fingers twined in his hair, and then she showed him what a good night kiss was. Steele’s cock ached with need. Groaning in frustration, he pulled back from the kiss. Gathering both of her hands in one of his, he took a deep breath and rested his forehead against hers.

“You have no idea how much I want you,” he began. Taking another deep breath, he fought for control. “But right now I am too tired to do anything except fuck you. Though I want you desperately, the first time that we come together, I will make love to you, and then I will spend the remainder of the day alternating between making love to you gently and making love to you like a madman. When I am finished, you will know the difference, and more importantly, you will know that you are mine.”

“Perhaps when *I’m* done making love to you,” Atlanta replied, “*you* will recognize that you belong to me.”

“I have recognized that for some time. Now go to sleep before you ruin my good intentions.”

“Will you stay with me?”

“If you promise to be good.”

“Oh, I’ll be better than good,” she threw back as she snuggled into his side. To Steele, it felt as if she had been doing it forever.

* * * * *

The next morning, Steele woke early as usual. After spending a few minutes watching Atlanta sleep, he reluctantly left the bed. He knew that Atlanta needed to rest; she’d thrown off her whole sleep schedule the day before, running around with him. Plus he wanted her to be well-rested so that he could enjoy her for the rest of the day. He decided to shower again, hoping to alleviate the ache in his cock. Going to bed with a hard-on and then spending all night serving as Atlanta’s pillow and sometimes her bed, meant that he woke with the same, unrelieved throb.

Steele ran into Atlanta on the way from his shower.

“What are you doing out of bed so early?”

“I was hungry.”

Steele felt hungry, too. Atlanta had yet to change from his shirt; she merely threw on a pair of socks and athletic shoes to run around in. He recalled that one of her numerous pet peeves included people who wore shoes sans socks. He wanted her, but decided that perhaps

it best to sate at least one of her appetites so that he could indulge in his. “Well, then, let us find you something to sate your hunger.”

Atlanta made a beeline for the fridge as soon as she stepped into his immaculate kitchen. Rummaging through it, she muttered to herself about the contents. “Please don’t tell me that your fridge is stocked in alphabetical order.”

“Well, if it is, it is only because that is the way that Henry does it.” After a few minutes of listening to her mutter to herself, he asked, “What exactly are you looking for? The refrigerator is fully stocked.”

“I’m looking for some good food.”

“Oh, you mean something that is on the one-step-away-from-cardiac-arrest list?”

“That’s why I take the kickboxing classes so I can eat food that’s bad for me and not feel guilty about it. Do you at least have cereal?”

“Cereal?”

“Yeah, you know the stuff that comes in a box and has a prize inside.”

“I have food. However, it is the type that you actually cook. Sit down while I prepare something for you.”

“Where’s *Monsieur* Henry?”

“I gave him the weekend off.”

“Why?”

“Because I have a girl over to the house and he might tell my father.”

“Correction, you have a *woman* over to the house.”

“I stand corrected.”

“You should be used to it now. Um, not that I don’t appreciate you trying, but do you know how to cook?”

“Absolutely. I am well-rounded.”

“Yeah, well, so am I according to the construction workers that I pass each day.”

“Point ceded, and you should find an alternate route to take, or I will be forced to have a word with those men.”

“You might not want to go around picking fights with burly construction workers.”

“Burly or not, they would not want to move me to anger, sweetheart,” he said as he placed a bowl of fresh fruit in front of her to tide her over while he prepared breakfast.

“Yeah, whatever. What are you making, and how long is it going to take you to make it?”

“Pancakes and approximately ten minutes.”

“Do you have whipped cream?”

“Of course I have whipped cream. What kind of cretin do you think I am?”

Atlanta laughed. Cooking took Steele's full attention and eating took Atlanta's, so they had no time for conversation. The silence finally broke when Steele placed a plate full of pancakes and a bowl filled with a ridiculous amount of whipped cream and peaches in front of Atlanta.

"*Yessss!*" Atlanta exclaimed before attacking the whipped cream and peaches, completely ignoring the pancakes. As usual, Atlanta didn't speak while eating. The amount of food that she packed away amazed Steele. If it were not for the fact that she spent so many hours running herself ragged at Evil Twins, her weight would rival his. He smiled to himself as he began to eat. Because Atlanta apparently ate for her and the legion of tapeworms that inhabited her body, he finished long before she did. He went from being amused to being aroused in short order. Watching her lick the whipped cream and peaches from her fork proved a bad idea. His libido kicked into overdrive as he imagined her using that tongue on him.

"Atlanta," he croaked.

"What?" Atlanta did not even bother to look up from her food.

"Either finish with that, or I am going to start with you."

Steele got Atlanta's full attention. She finally stopped eating long enough to look at him. The façade of a privileged man vanished. He looked like a predator. And from the expression on his face, she bet his towel would come off at any moment. *Damn, he was hot.* She stuck her finger in the whipped cream and licked it slowly, never breaking eye contact. When she finished, she arched a single brow at him, as if to say, "Now what?"

The game commenced. Steele rose from his chair and stalked over to Atlanta. His eyes blazing with promises of retribution, he jerked her out of her chair. Placing his hands around her waist, he raised her to eye level and warned her, "If you don't want me to begin say so now; otherwise, I will not stop until both of us are too exhausted to continue."

It was a good thing that she had slipped on a pair of panties because she could feel the moistness pooling between her thighs. She knew that Steele possessed great strength, but she was still amazed that he could hold her like this without effort. At one hundred and forty-five pounds, she bet that she was far heavier than the women with whom he was accustomed to dallying. Bracing her hands on his shoulders, she licked her lips and kissed him. With a growl, Steele threw her over his shoulder and headed for the stairs.

Taken aback by her new position, it took Atlanta a moment to get her bearings. "Steele, wait. Get the bowl of whipped cream and peaches!"

"You cannot still be hungry. You just polished off one bowl and a can of whipped cream."

"I have other uses for them, White Boy."

Steele grabbed the bowl and stalked up the stairs.

"Hey, you're going the wrong way," she panted. "My room is that way."

“That is the guest bedroom, and you are no longer a guest.”

Reaching his bedroom, he placed the bowl on the nightstand before placing a shocked Atlanta onto his bed.

An irrational wave of jealousy hit Atlanta as she looked around the room, obviously designed for pleasure. She didn't want to be just another woman with whom he had sex.

Almost as if he could read her mind, Steele stepped between her legs and lifted her chin; he looked directly into her eyes. “I have never brought another woman in here. Just you. Only you.”

“Oh.” She smiled, seeing the desire raging behind Steele's eyes.

“Is this what you want, Atlanta? Just because you spent the night does not obligate you to become intimate with me.”

Atlanta appreciated the way that Steele always placed her wishes before his own pleasure. Rising to her knees, she began unbuttoning her shirt. “Yes, Steele, I want this. If I didn't want this, I wouldn't be here. The question is, do you want this? Just because you cooked me breakfast doesn't obligate you to submit to my sexual fantasies.”

“Oh, but I so want to submit,” he admitted after swatting her hands away and finishing unbuttoning her shirt himself. He trailed kisses down her throat and across the hollows of her shoulders before blanketing her with his body. Tangling one hand in her hair, he used the other hand to tear off her panties.

A battle had been declared during their steamy kiss. Shifting his body, Steele grabbed a handful of her ass. Atlanta countered Steele's move by grazing her fingernails across his nipples before gently tracing the contours of his well-defined abs. She might've been embarrassed about how very wet she was if Steele's desire wasn't so blatantly obvious. *Oh damn, he packed impressive equipment.* He was hard everywhere. She reached between them and slowly stroked him.

Steele gasped and abruptly broke off their kiss, grabbing Atlanta's hands.

“You have to stop,” he pleaded, his body vociferously protesting his mouth's ludicrous decree.

“Make me,” she threw back. “You were the one who grabbed my ass.”

“And what a delectable ass it is.”

“I'll take that as a compliment,” she replied. Steele's reaction pleased the diva within her. She straddled him, and then proceeded to have her way with him. She traced his full lips with her tongue before entering his mouth. Following the rhythm of his heartbeat, she ground her sex against his stomach, almost bringing herself to orgasm in the process. She left the temptation of his mouth and kissed her way down his body. Reaching for the bowl of peaches and whipped cream, she spread the concoction across his chest. She laved each nipple before tugging gently with her teeth. She continued her gentle assault until both nipples crested into hard points, bearing the evidence of his passion. She kissed her way across his abs before working her way to his cock. She used her tongue to trace its veins,

standing out in bas-relief. As she began to take him into her mouth, he stilled her and reclaimed the dominant position.

Steele demanded entrance into her mouth and launched an assault on all of her senses. Atlanta considered kissing one of the most intimate acts of lovemaking. Making love with one's mouth was an art form that took time and a good partner to master. Though she thought highly of her technique, she had to concede that Steele demonstrated true mastery. It wasn't that he kissed her with precision; it was the fact that he kissed her with passion and thoroughness that had her teetering on the cusp of a violent climax. He didn't just kiss her, he worshipped her, he reveled in her, he consumed her. All the while his hard cock lay between them as evidence of his own enjoyment.

The heady combination of Steele's hard body and skilled tongue took Atlanta to places that not even her active imagination could conjure. She dug her nails into his back, silently demanding more of everything. For once, Steele didn't indulge her whims. He merely continued to kiss her while demonstrating that it was he who controlled her body, and subsequently her pleasure. Using a delicate touch, he feasted on her luscious bottom lip before tracing the ridge of her teeth. He gifted her with whisper-soft kisses before withdrawing and exploring another area of her mouth. He mimicked sex with his tongue, and even that was done with a delicacy that could only truly be admired by a woman who wasn't on the brink of a mind-blowing, earth-shattering orgasm that was too X-rated for fantasies.

The kiss itself was a highlight reel on how to make a woman come. Every touch of his tongue ignited a new fire within her. He breathed for her when she needed breath, only pausing when he needed to breathe. And she was so lost in pleasure that she had almost forgotten that she needed to breathe. Lost in a sea of sensation, Atlanta's body clamored for one thing: Steele's possession, yet he continued to withhold it.

While her body racked with mini orgasms, Steele continued to kiss and stroke her as if he commanded time. He wouldn't be rushed, regardless of how frantically she rubbed her sex against him. No matter how hard she spurred him with her nails. No matter how loud, persistent, and needy her moans were.

Steele was not ruled by his raging cock. He had something to prove to Atlanta and himself. His rational mind wanted to believe that he was punishing her for making him wait so long to experience the pleasure of his body, but his heart knew that was not the truth. He wanted her to surrender everything to him. He did his best to leave an indelible mark on her mind as well as her soul. He wanted her to look at him and go instantly wet from the memories of how completely he had pleased her. With his words of endearment, with his caresses, with his very self, he was telling her that she was his.

They were a tangle of arms, legs, and hair. Fearing that she would shatter his self control with her silent demands, he grabbed both of her hands in one of his and began a sojourn of her body's topography. The column of her neck, her delicate throat, the hollows

of her collarbones, her breasts ... He kissed, he nipped; he left his mark that he was there before returning to the breasts that he had been fantasizing about for the past four months. Relinquishing her hands, he cradled her body as he traced the areola, and then indulged in a mouthful of the succulent fruit. He suckled as if he could draw her soul out through her breast. He paid no heed to the moans that had become cries, then moans again. Instead he switched to her other breast and began the same journey. He took his time regardless of her silent demands, screams of pleasure, and evidence of the multiple orgasms that he had coerced from her ripe body. He merely used his weight to hold her where he wanted her and continued to conquer her body one orgasm at a time.

Gathering her well-rounded hips in his hands, he continued the gentle assault on her body. When Atlanta had moaned herself into a seeming state of frenzy from his deliberate lovemaking, he drank from her fountain of life. He ignored the strangle hold that she had on his hair and continued to sip from her, savoring every shudder that rocked her body, every moan that reverberated through her, every drop of her essence. He continued to drink from her until he had enticed her body to surrender two additional climaxes. He continued to drink from her until he was sure that she would inadvertently rip him bald if he did not attend to her most primary need.

Kissing his way back up her body went faster than he had intended due to the fact that she literally drug all two hundred sixty pounds of him up her body. She was frantic in her need. Her braids were spread wildly across his pillow. Her eyes were glazed over from lust. Her lips (both sets) were swollen from his kisses. He considered denying her what she wanted, but he had underestimated her strength and her will.

She flipped him over, grabbed his hair and proceeded to dominate his body. All through his tender assault, Atlanta had alternately cursed and thanked him. The first climax had been too sudden for her to properly access, as had her second and third. She had been moved by the fourth and fifth climaxes. By her sixth climax, she had decided that she was definitely going to slay the Viking -- no matter how damn fine he was. After her eighth climax had claimed her ability to speak, she had nothing but revenge on her mind. Two could play this game.

She began with his cock. Circling the head, she inserted her tongue into the slit, and lapped at the pre-ejaculate. She savored his sharp intake of breath before taking the entire head into her mouth and suckled him until her jaw threatened to lock. She stopped, only to grip his cock in her hand so that she could stroke him. Oh damn, he was packing. She couldn't close her hand around him, he was so thick, and she had to really work to get most of his length in her mouth. She continued to stroke him from base to tip, at her leisure, and she had all damn day. She ignored his attempts to drag her up his body, knowing that he could only accomplish that by dislocating both of her shoulders. No matter how far gone he was, she knew that he would never harm her in any way, though she was pretty sure that the words spewing from his mouth were curses in Norwegian.

She stroked his length with her tongue, carefully tracing the veins and contours. She alternated between light licks, gentle caresses and deep strokes. She kept up her assault until he thrashed the rest of the covers off the bed and let loose a chorus of moans. Then she struck by taking his entire length in her mouth. That was when he lost it. Even though she wondered if she would have permanent hearing loss from his roar, she reveled in his rare loss of control. She was enjoying her revenge until he tugged her braids with enough force to remove his cock from her mouth. It didn't hurt, but it pissed her off.

"Dammit, I wasn't through."

If he heard her, he gave no evidence of it. He pinned her underneath him before ramming all eleven inches of rock-hard cock into her dripping wet cunt. One moment she was cursing him, and the next she had lost her ability to form coherent strings of thought.

She was reduced to screams in octaves that she never knew she could reach, moans in bass and a series of pants in between. She sung out litanies of *damns* and *ohhhhs*, and alternately paid tribute to the godfather of soul with her choruses of *please, please, please*. Still, he ignored her and pounded into her while grunting in time to his thrusts. She imagined that they sounded like a riot at its peak. Still he didn't let up, and neither did she. She thrust back every time he thrust in. Soon they were engaged in a battle of wills that neither would concede. Atlanta knew that she was on the brink of a catastrophic climax. She felt as if her body was being rocked by supernovas. She saw Steele through a montage of firecracker displays. For one crazy moment, she thought his eyes glowed Carolina blue. There's no telling how much time would've passed had their bodies not seized control and spiraled them into a climax so strong that they both passed out with the sound of each others screams in their ears and the smell of sex in their nostrils.

Steele was the first to revive. Stretching his massive body, his movement woke Atlanta. Gazing into each other's eyes, they spoke simultaneously.

"Atlanta," he rasped.

"Steele," she moaned.

"I've never," she began.

"Neither have I," he finished, knowing that Atlanta owned his heart and every smidgen of love that he possessed. Something within him was freed with the acknowledgment of the simple and beautiful truth. Atlanta was his, and she would simply have no choice but to accept that fact, or she would have 6'7" of determined Norseman dogging her every step, threatening any male foolish enough to come too close.

As strong as he was, his hands shook as he caressed her. He peered into the depths of her eyes, trying to communicate everything within his heart. He began with a series of soft kisses -- no tongue, just feathery kisses at her temple, at the corner of her luscious mouth, and over her silken skin. He savored her body, one millimeter at a time. He stopped at her navel, then at her sex where he stayed and played for a while.

He kissed his way down her thighs that were thick with muscle, and he paid tribute to her strength. He kissed the insides of her knees that had refused to buckle under the pressures of the world. Then he kissed and caressed her well-formed calves and the bottoms of her feet. Atlanta was not a dainty or a delicate woman, but strong with the heart of a warrior. Still, he made a vow to approach her only with gentleness and always speak her name with reverence.

He continued to caress her and to worship her body even when he entered her. Though he filled her completely, he used the gentlest of strokes. He eased in inch by inch and pulled out just as slowly. He commanded her to open her eyes so that he could witness her pleasure. He reveled in the array of emotions that he read there -- wonderment, joy, and awe -- but he wanted more. Her climaxes fed his pleasure, but still he staved off his own until he had it all. Finally, when he gifted her with yet another climax, through the veil of tears that freely rolled down her cheeks, he saw what he wanted: her recognition of him as her man. And when he finally gave into his own release, he was surprised to feel tears roll down his cheeks also. Finally they settled from the ripple of sensation caused by their shared climax; Steele was weeping, and Atlanta was outright crying.

"Mine," Steele promised before pulling her tightly to him, the beast within him freed.

"Mine too," Atlanta decreed as she burrowed deeper into Steele's embrace. It was as if her body was connected to Steele's. As if they were the Wonder Twins, instead of knocking fists and taking the shape of an animal and form of water, they had made love and been transformed into man and woman, two imperfect halves coming together to form a perfect whole. And just as when God created the universe, He looked upon them and saw that His creations were good.

Steele felt Atlanta's femininity seep into his pores and spread throughout his body. He felt her within him the same way that he felt his heart beating within his chest. She had entrenched herself in there, altering its rhythm. *Love her, love her, love her*, his heart now strummed, discarding the steady *lub-dubs* it had been playing until then. There was no way that he could let her go -- none at all. Could not do it, would not do it, and that was just how it was, just had to be.

Though the man in Steele had claimed Atlanta, the gentleman in Steele knew that he had to conquer every piece of her heart. To accomplish that, there could be no secrets between them. Mentally girding up his loins for battle, Steele kissed Atlanta to wakefulness.

His feelings unquestionable, there was one more thing that had to be done before Atlanta could truly be his.

Basking in the aftermath of their intense lovemaking, Atlanta was about to drift off to sleep when Steele roused her. She ignored him and snuggled closer. Though rock hard, his firmness made her feel safe rather than uncomfortable.

"Atlanta," Steele began. "Wake up. I need to tell you something."

Sighing, Atlanta wondered what Steele needed to say so badly that he was disturbing the best feeling she'd ever experienced. "What, baby?"

"Atlanta, look at me, please."

Hearing the pleading in Steele's voice, Atlanta pulled back just enough to look into those Caribbean blue eyes. "Yes?"

"Atlanta, I am not what I seem," Steele began.

"You mean you're not really the hottest fucking man that I've ever encountered?"

"No. Yes. What?" Steele asked incredulously.

"You said that you're not what you seem," she began.

"I am beyond flattered that you think such, but that is not what I meant. Atlanta, have you not noticed anything odd about me?"

"Yeah, your total ignorance about the intricacies of football."

Sighing, Steele asked, "Have you not noticed anything else?"

Atlanta hadn't noticed; then again she didn't have time to notice details like that when the hot ass man next to her was throwing it down. "You mean like how you don't contract your words, your ridiculous driving, or the fact that you have no idea what the hell casual wear is?"

"Atlanta," Steele sighed. "I am serious."

"Steele, how the hell do you expect me to notice a damn thing when you're laying it down like *oh my goodness?* I wouldn't have noticed if the space time continuum had been interrupted."

Steele took her face in his hands, tilted her head to look at him, while his eyes flashed as if lit by an internal light.

"I thought I'd imagined that! Oh damn, your eyes *do* glow Carolina blue."

"Not Duke Royal Blue?"

"Oh, hell, no."

Steele paused for a moment before continuing. "Atlanta, I am berserker."

Atlanta paused in her examination. "Yeah? And?"

"That is all that you have to say?"

"Dude, you've met Reign. Her life is one big search for legends and conspiracy theories. After she met you, she told me all about some mythical race of warriors descended from Odin. I thought it was just another one of her rants, but now ... Hey, can I tell Reign she was right? She would really get off on that."

"You knew that I was berserker?"

"I didn't know, but now that you admit it, I'm not exactly surprised. You are from Viking stock. Now if your ancestors had hailed from sub-Saharan Africa, and you had dark

brown eyes, I might question your assertion. Now can I see them again? And what else do you have being berserker and all?"

Realizing that his revelation did not faze Atlanta, Steele thanked Father Odin for her and begrudgingly thanked the uninhibited Reign for expanding Atlanta's mind to whole new worlds. As a reward, he would share his heritage with the crazy young woman, but first, he needed to show Atlanta what other accessories a full-blood berserker came with. "I also have this right here," he replied while audaciously pressing eleven inches of hard cock against her.

"Oh damn," she sighed while opening herself up to him, just the way she should.

Chapter Eleven

Steele woke at five o'clock that evening. The smell of their lovemaking permeated the room. He had never gone to sleep with the scent of a woman clinging to him; then again, he had never allowed a woman to spend all day in his bed. He rather enjoyed the scent of Atlanta and took pride at the knowledge that, likewise, his scent clung to her.

Never had lovemaking affected him like this. He felt complete. Looking down at the slumbering Atlanta, he smiled, realizing that she slept like she did everything else -- with gusto. Not sure why she needed three-quarters of the bed and all of the covers, Steele decided he would not complain as long as she continued to share his bed.

He loved her, and he meant to do something about it. Changes would need to be made. Changes that she would not like, but would have to accept. More than his woman, she was his heart. Atlanta did not expect the deference due to her gender and therefore opened her own doors, fought her own battles, and argued for her own victories. That was fine when she was her own woman, but now that she was his woman she would have the deference that was her due. It would take time, but she would learn what it meant to be his woman, and so would everyone else. He knew that she considered him soft because he appeared rather easy going, but she would come to recognize that under that veneer of privilege that he was all man, all of the time.

His thoughts drifted to their recent lovemaking, and he grew hard all over again. Though he wanted her right now, his duty told him to see to her comfort, especially considering how intense their lovemaking had been. He had not meant to be so forceful, but she triggered all of his primal instincts. Somewhere in between her tenth and eleventh climax, he had lost his ability to behave like a gentleman and had truly gone into full berserker mode. And when he felt her nails shred his back, he had not heard anything except the silent chant of *mine, mine, mine*.

First thing's first, he had to remove her belongings from the guest bedroom and put them where they belonged -- in their bedroom. That simple task completed, he went downstairs and ordered from her favorite restaurant. They normally did not deliver, but from the quirkiness of the order the owner guessed that Steele was ordering for Atlanta, one of her best customers and favorite people, and was only too willing to assist him.

Steele showered before drawing a bath for Atlanta. His bathroom resembled a spa, stocked with a ridiculous assortment of body care products and plush towels. Initially searching for items that he thought would please Atlanta, Steele had ended up buying damn near everything in the store. His goal was to pamper Atlanta, knowing that Atlanta neglected to pamper herself. She would balk at spending hard-earned money on something frivolous when there were sports-related things to purchase. Being his woman now, anything that catered to her needs became necessary, not frivolous. She might carry herself like a warrior, but to him she was all woman, the only woman, and would always be treated as the most delicate of Odin's creations.

* * * * *

Atlanta woke to the exotic smells of honeysuckle and man. Stretching, she wasn't surprised to discover that she was sore in places in which she hadn't been sore since she first started taking kickboxing classes. Being passionately made love to definitely beat the hell out of kickboxing any day of the week. Turning over, she was surprised to see that it was after six. Damn, Steele had really thrown it down.

Everything in her body alerted her to the fact that she had been well and truly loved. She felt ravished -- completely and thoroughly ravished. Her whole body was tender: her breasts, her pussy, her hips. She had never been one for horse riding, but she had relished the challenge of trying to retain her seat on her Viking and was rewarded with multiple orgasms. Even her voice was raw from screaming out her appreciation at his skills. Hell, even what was left of her fingernails hurt. She wondered if she had scarred Steele for life and if he would refuse to fuck her again until she was de-clawed.

She was surprised to discover that reminiscing about their lovemaking was arousing her. She was so involved in her fantasy rewind that she almost failed to hear Steele emerge from the adjoining bath.

"Good morning, Sweetheart," he murmured while perusing her thoroughly ravished appearance.

"Good evening, Steele," she returned smiling at the familiar greeting. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"How am I looking at you?"

"Let's just say that if a man were looking at my daughter the way that you're looking at me, I'd lock her up."

“And if a man looked at our daughter the way that you think that I am looking at you, then I would beat him to within an inch of his life as an example to other men.”

Atlanta gasped at Steele’s implication. *Our* daughter, he had said. “So, when do you plan to let our daughter date?”

“When she is thirty-five,” Steele replied without missing a beat.

“Does that mean that you’re going to wait until I’m thirty-five to make love to me again?”

“No, but I might be able to wait thirty-five more minutes.”

“That long, huh? Are you sure?” She seductively peeled the coverings away from her body.

Pulling her from the bed, Steele softly ground himself into her while his hands busied themselves cupping the lushness of her ass. “If you do not stop tempting me, then we will be in that bed, on the floor, against the wall, and any other place that I can think to take you for the remainder of the day. Though it is tempting, you need to soak in a warm bath so that I can take you again.”

“Are you subtly telling me that I stink?” She raised an eyebrow at him.

“Definitely not. You smell like me. If I had my way, you would not go out in public unless you left smelling like me.”

Atlanta’s heart skipped a beat, hearing the fervor of his words. Still the feminist in her had to say something. “Isn’t that a bit sexist?”

“No, it is possessive.”

“You know I’m a grown woman and can take care of myself.”

“Noted. However, although there is little that I would not do for you, I will not take chances with you or allow you to take chances with yourself. I am not as soft as you consider me.”

Enjoying the peculiar feeling of a man being both possessive and protective, Atlanta proclaimed, “I never thought that you were soft.” She stroked a line down his rock-hard abs to his rock-hard cock.

“And I never thought that you were hard,” he returned, gently caressing the softness of her breasts. He stopped only to pick her up and walk her to the connecting bath.

“Hey, where are you taking me?”

“Right here if you do not cease squirming,” he answered as he bent to take her mouth in a possessive kiss.

He caressed her gently before pushing her in the direction of the huge tub. “Go enjoy your bath while I finish taking care of you.”

Atlanta smiled and headed for the tub but paused when she heard Steele’s declaration. “Atlanta, after what we have shared, I will never give you up.”

* * * * *

Atlanta pondered Steele's proclamation during her relaxing bath. When she had soaked away the majority of her stiffness, she saw to her toilet and went to dress. Looking around the room, she could now appreciate its decadence. Whereas the room that she had spent the night in looked as if it came straight from the wet dream of a debutante, his room resembled a harem. It appeared almost as decadent as the man. Discovering that Steele had left out one of his pristine dress shirts for her to wear, she donned it and headed downstairs in search of her man and something to eat.

Once again, she found Steele in the kitchen. He stood amid boxes of takeout from Dréa's. The beautiful setting struck Atlanta speechless. She looked at Steele. Ushering her to her seat, he placed a dessert in front of her then proceeded to fix her plate. When he finally sat down, Atlanta paused from her dessert long enough to inquire, "Why are you being so nice to me?"

"Because I take care of what is mine. You need to understand what it really means to be my woman."

Atlanta started to cry.

"Dammit, Atlanta, why are you crying?" he roared.

"Because you're saying all of the things that every woman wants to hear -- even me. And those things are just too beautiful to be thrown out as lines."

"You think that I am using a line on you?"

"Well, aren't you? Are you just feeding me lines to get more sex?"

"Atlanta, why do you not believe that I want all of you?"

"Because you can have any woman you want, so when a fine as hell, wealthy and a devastatingly handsome man claims that it's me that he wants, I'm thinking about that hook."

"Atlanta, before I met you, I did think that I could have any woman I wanted, for the very reasons that you mentioned. Then I met you, and suddenly I was playing with a whole new set of rules. You are not the only one who is scared."

"What are you scared of?" Atlanta asked, disbelievingly.

"I am scared of the lengths that I would go to in order to keep you by my side. Then there is the power that you wield over me. There is a power imbalance in this relationship, and it is in your favor; you hold the only tool that could destroy me. You own my heart."

Atlanta's own heart stuttered at his fervent declaration, but still she had to ask, "Steele, what about your family? Your business acquaintances? Your friends? When they find out that you're involved with a black woman who isn't a supermodel or something as spectacular, there will be remarks. You're going to discover the true nature of people that

you love, respect, and admire. Can you face losing what you have and risking your place in society?"

"Atlanta, I can face anything except losing you. I know that you doubt my street credibility, but know this. I am not a man with whom one should trifle. If anyone speaks of you or to you without the proper amount of reverence in his or her voice, he or she will be on the wrong end of an angry and possessive man."

"Steele, you ..." she began, but he interrupted her.

"Atlanta, that is the way it is going to be. That might not impress you, but trust me, I can be the type of bastard that no one wants to cross. Those who know me well know this and do not provoke me."

Steele's fierce countenance startled Atlanta. If he had ever looked at her with that expression, she might've thought twice about trying him. At that moment, Steele looked every inch the alpha male. "And what about me? What will you do when I provoke you, because inevitably, I will?"

"I will only love you. You will never have reason to fear me, unless you put yourself in unnecessary danger, and then, nothing will save you from my wrath."

"I can take care of myself."

"That is beside the point," he replied while tracing the brutal scar on her forearm. He recalled asking her how she had come by it. He thought that his heart would stop when she blithely informed him that she received it when a man pulled a knife in a fight with her. When Steele had inquired what led to the fistfight she just as blithely answered, *I guess he didn't appreciate the way I told him to fuck off*. "Things such as physical confrontations are definitely going to stop, else there will be a plethora of dead mother fuckers littering the planet."

Ignoring the fact that Steele had just cussed in her presence, she concentrated on what he had said. "I won that fight, dammit."

"Irrelevant. You will not be fighting men, breaking up fights, inciting riots and the like."

"And if I do?"

He laughed softly and without humor before turning to look directly in her eyes, "I will handle it in the same manner as Jack would, and then I will tell your mother."

"Dude, did you just threaten me with my own mother? She's worse than I am."

"Perhaps I will keep you pregnant to keep you out of trouble. I know that you would not take unnecessary risks while carrying our children."

"You assume that you are man enough to keep me pregnant?" she asked with a lift of her brow.

"Oh, I am more than man enough, *kvinne*," he declared as his eyes flashed blue.

"I have the distinct feeling that I'm going to need to cuss you out for that word, but before I do, tell me what '*kvinne*' means so I know exactly what I'm cussing you out for."

"Cuss all you want to Atlanta, it will change nothing. You belong to me and you will stay away from anything that will bring you close to danger. *Kvinne* is Norwegian for woman."

"Did you just call me 'woman?' Dude," she began and stopped mid-sentence when she realized that Steele was caressing her stomach.

"You know that any kids we have will be black?"

"And?"

"Steele, be serious. Did you expect to have black children when you grew up? Regardless of the fact that any children we have will technically be biracial, society will interact with them as if they are black."

"Atlanta, I love you, and when all else fails, that will be enough."

"Oh, Steele. You don't know how much I want to believe that."

"You underestimate the lengths that I will go to in order to make that true. First thing Monday morning, we select your engagement ring."

"You're serious?"

"I am."

"Maybe I missed it, but aren't you supposed to actually ask me to marry you?"

"I did ask you, all day long with my body, my heart, with every 'I love you,'" he proclaimed. "I heard your answer in the litany of screams, moans, sighs, and responding 'I love you's.' I saw it in your tears and in your eyes."

"Oh," was all that Atlanta could say before being swept into his arms.

Chapter Twelve

Why did he think that ring shopping would go smoothly? What had prompted him to think that he would merely waltz her into a prestigious jeweler and select an appropriately expensive ring, slide it on her finger and be done with it?

He had not realized that he had voiced his question aloud until the love of his life responded.

“Because you have that genetic defect called a y-chromosome, that’s why.”

Though Atlanta had plenty of money, it was obvious that she didn’t have Steele-type money. As soon as they walked into the jeweler’s, they were immediately ushered to a private room. The owners paraded a collection of jewelry that could only be described as bling to the infinite degree. Steele promptly found several rings, and Atlanta just as promptly dismissed each piece, although she continued to help herself to the chocolate-dipped strawberries that the jeweler provided.

“Atlanta, what is wrong with the rings that we have looked at?”

“They’re ridiculously priced. Why do I even have to have a ring? Why can’t I just have your 7-series? You don’t even drive it.”

“Because the 7-series is already yours, and it is too heavy for your ring finger. I want every man out there to know that you are spoken for.”

“Well, if I have to have a ring, why can’t we adhere to the two months salary rule -- two months of my salary?”

By the look on the jeweler’s face, this was not an argument that he had ever been privy to in his career.

“Because two months salary doesn’t send the appropriate caveat to other males, nor does it express the magnitude of my love for you.”

“Steele,” Atlanta began.

“No,” Steele abruptly cut her off. “The matter of your engagement ring is not negotiable.”

An hour later, a beaming Steele placed a platinum, eight-carat, three-stone emerald-cut diamond ring on the finger of a softly weeping Atlanta, who had put down the chocolate-dipped strawberries long enough for him to accomplish his task. Finding a ring that Atlanta liked made Steele happy, but he was not content with just the ring. While the jeweler fitted Atlanta’s ring, Steele made other selections, including a diamond wreath necklace and the matching bracelet.

A stunned Atlanta slid behind the wheel of the car when they finished shopping. Steele had dropped more money on jewelry than she had spent for her house.

Sensing her confusion, Steele inquired, “What is it, love?”

“I don’t need all of this.”

“No, but I want you to have it.”

“That’s all that you’re going to say?”

“I love you.”

“You know, saying ‘I love you’ isn’t *carte blanche* to getting your ass out of trouble.”

“Nevertheless, I will continue to say it.”

“What did you mean that the 7-series is already mine?”

“Atlanta, I drive one brand of vehicle, and it is not BMW.”

Gasping, she inquired, “Is this your normal paradigm?”

“Only with you.”

“You’re so bad. I need to eat, and you still haven’t met my parents.”

“You have yet to meet mine.”

“What if they hate me?”

“That will be unfortunate for them because they will no longer be seeing me.”

“You’re serious?!”

“I am.”

“Dude, you’re ruthless.”

“Only when I need to be.”

“Now that we have settled the matter of the ring, would you mind driving us to the park?”

At the park, Steele guided her to the spot where he had first embraced her. Embracing her now, he brought her ring finger to his hand and kissed it.

“Steele, why are we here?”

“Because this is where we were when I realized that I loved you. I watched you revel in the warm spring day, and I envied the day for putting that look of pleasure on your face.

This is where you first allowed me to hold you without pulling away from me. I fell in love with every part of you right here. This is where we were when I first asked you to marry me. You just did not hear me because your heart was not ready.” Kissing her again, he dropped to his knee. “I think that you hear me now. Atlanta, will you marry me?”

“Oh, hell, yes, Steele!”

And that is how the passersby saw them -- a white man kneeling at the feet of a black woman. And that’s not something you saw everyday in the God-fearing South. Regardless of the thoughts that occupied the minds of the spectators, no one who saw the couple could deny the love that flowed between them.

* * * * *

Once again, Steele found himself in the company of Atlanta’s friends. Only this time, he did not understand what the hell was transpiring. He thought that they would offer congratulations on their engagement. Instead, he found himself the subject of the unwavering interest of seven women. It had all begun when Victorious asked about the playoff game, and it had gone downhill from there.

“What do you mean that you didn’t watch the game?” Indy shouted. “You never miss a game. You’d miss the birth of your firstborn child to watch the playoffs.”

“I was otherwise occupied,” Atlanta replied.

That’s when seven pairs of eyes turned to stare at him in varying degrees of disbelief and approval.

“That good, huh?” Jack asked, saluting Steele with her whiskey.

“So good that she stayed in bed for two days,” Aloha threw out, recalling how ravished Atlanta had looked when she’d finally had the energy to drag her behind home.

“Aloha, you’re such a tattletale,” Atlanta complained.

“Get the fuck out of here!” Reign exclaimed.

“You stayed in bed?” Victorious asked. “I’ve never known anything to put Atlanta in bed for two entire days. Damn, Steele, what did you do to her?”

“Yeah, and can you tell the rest of the male population, so that they can do it to us?” Zuri pleaded.

“I ...” Steele faltered.

“Put it on her like nobody’s business,” Silana finished

* * * * *

Later that night, Steele took Atlanta back to his home and made out with her like they were teenagers. He enjoyed having her around him for he could pamper her. After using his

tongue to bring her to a climax, he carried her to his shower where they brought each other to orgasm with their hands. Now they both lay in a nearly mindless heap on his bed.

Taking advantage of her relaxed state, Steele suckled her nipples before lying between her thighs and feasting on her once more. He left no part of her cunt untouched or untasted. Holding onto her thighs and tasting her at his leisure, he brought her to multiple climaxes. When she came down from the ride, he kissed her before gathering her in his arms. He had no intentions of going further, but Atlanta attempted to straddle him only to have him stay her hips.

"Steele," she complained, sitting up and staring at him with passion flaring in her eyes.

"No, Sweetheart. You are sore because I have been too rough with you."

"But, Steele," she began.

"No, your body needs to rest."

"Does this mean that you're going to hold back whenever we make love?"

"No, it merely means that I am going to give your body a rest so that you do not feel any lingering discomfort from our lovemaking."

"Steele, I love how I feel after you make love to me. I feel pillaged, ravished, claimed ... loved."

Tears came to his eyes when he saw the truth and the tears in her eyes, but he would not be swayed. "I love you, and as your man, I will care for you, even when that is not what you want." He attempted to pull her back in his arms, but she was having none of that.

"I love you for caring for me, but I'm having my turn," she declared.

"Atlanta, I am not taking you. You need to rest."

"I *will* take you; then I will rest," she declared as she pushed him back and took him within her mouth.

"Ah, daammnnn." Steele moaned at the feel of her lips around his cock. "Oh, so damn good."

Atlanta continued her assault, pleasuring him as he had pleased her minutes earlier. Steele had very little body hair, and his pubic area was completely smooth.

She alternated between deep-throating him and swirling her tongue around the head. Stroking him with her free hand, she gently suckled his testicles before returning to take his entire length into her mouth once again. She let his moans direct her. When he suddenly grabbed her hair, not even carefully, she increased her suction and sped up her sucking, until he exploded in her mouth. She continued sucking. Only when she had taken every last drop he offered did she cease.

Climbing up his chest, she kissed him enjoying the taste of her own nectar on his lips.

"That was amazing. Thank you, Sweetheart."

"I know. You weren't careful with my hair." She smiled before snuggling back in his embrace to enjoy his caresses.

"I could not help it. Did I hurt you?"

"No, and I would have been greatly offended if you had managed to retain control."

* * * * *

Atlanta had practically moved into Steele's home so that they could spend as much time together as possible. Steele didn't complain about her practically taking his house over. He only complained when Atlanta's exhaustion prevented her from driving there after closing Evil Twins. The tourists never ceased flocking to the city even in the hot month of July, which featured events including the fourth celebrations and the National Black Arts Festival. After the third consecutive night when she couldn't make it to his house, Steele had taken matters into his own hands and come to her. He'd pulled into her driveway moments after she had, and pounced on her as soon as she opened the door for him.

"Steele," she breathed. "I need a shower, baby."

"What a coincidence, so do I," Steele said as he began to strip.

* * * * *

Steele stroked himself as he watched her tie her braids back and adjust the faucets on the shower. He stopped self-pleasuring and embraced Atlanta from behind. He captured her mouth once more before reaching down to fondle her soft and bountiful breasts. Without breaking their torrid kiss, he scooped her up and entered the shower. He poured a handful of cocoa butter-scented soap in his hands and seductively lathered her up while she returned the favor.

"Don't get my hair wet!" she shrieked.

"Do I ever?" He paused before pulling her back against his chest and recapturing her lips. He could kiss her all day and still be hungry. She always tasted sweet. Tonight she tasted like peaches.

He released her lips and nipped a trail from her neck to her shoulder before slipping two fingers into her.

"Steele," she moaned.

"Yes, Atlanta?" he growled as he crushed her to him.

"Hmm, Steele, catch me," she pleaded before lapsing into a chorus of moans and surrendering to her climax.

"You will not have a chance to fall because I will never let you go," Steele breathed. He felt her orgasm ripple through her and caught her screams in his mouth. He reveled in the feel of his woman pliant against him and basked in pride, knowing he gave her such pleasure. He held her while her breathing returned to normal. Only then did he allow her to escape his embrace. He felt her turn in his arms, and when he opened his eyes, the demand that he glimpsed in her eyes surprised him.

Atlanta wanted Steele, and she intended to have him now. She dropped to her knees and took him in her mouth, slowly licking him from base to tip before suckling him deep. She slowly worked up and down the length of his cock enjoying the low growls that rumbled through him. She smiled around his cock, feeling him close to losing control. She wasn't surprised when Steele pulled away from her and lifted her up the length of his body.

"Atlanta, I need you," he proclaimed before lifting her onto his cock and pumping into her at a dizzying pace.

She grabbed a fistful of his hair and jerked him down for a kiss. His glowing eyes lit up the room, but she would enjoy the memory of that after he finished fucking her. Right now, she closed her eyes and enjoyed the rough but delicious ride.

Both the man and the berserker demanded their woman. Though he loved the way she loved him with her mouth, he needed to be inside her cunt. He paused briefly and gave thanks to the powers that be that Atlanta had a roomy shower with slip-proof flooring; he couldn't make it from this shower without having her. Hard. And fast. He enjoyed the fact that Atlanta was so much woman because he had something to hold onto while he loved her. He opened his eyes so that he could witness her pleasure. *Mine*, he thought. *Mine! Mine! Mine!* And then he exploded within her.

* * * * *

Steele watched her apply her cocoa butter lotion and grew hard all over again. He was about to do something about it when he realized that she had not said a word since they exited the bathroom. Atlanta was rarely silent and when she was, it was usually due to her body reaching its limit. Steele grew angry with himself for being a selfish bastard and with her for working herself to the brink of exhaustion.

"You are exhausted," Steele snapped.

"Yeah," Atlanta agreed as she nearly collapsed on the bed.

"There is no need for you to work yourself into the ground."

"I'm not working myself into the ground, Steele. I'm just tired. It's been a hectic week at Evil Twins."

"It's always a hectic week at Evil Twins. You spend too much time there, and I do not like seeing you this exhausted."

"Steele, I'm fine -- just tired."

"You are not fine, Atlanta. Tell that bullshit to someone else. You continuously push yourself, and there is no need for it. I have enough money to satisfy your whims."

Steele knew that he had sparked her anger when she shot him that *Oh no that mother fucker didn't* look. He waited for what she had to say, sure that it would push him to anger.

Atlanta felt tired, but she wasn't dead, which would have been the only way that she would let Steele get away with talking to her like that.

"First off, Steele, I work for a living, not merely as a means to satisfy my supposed 'whims,' so don't go there. Second, you weren't so worried about me being tired that you refrained from fucking me."

Steele forcibly interrupted. "I do not fuck you. I make love to you!" His eyes started glowing.

Atlanta took a breath and continued. "And third, I'm tired and not in the mood for a temper tantrum from a grown damn man, so you better take that glow out of your eyes and the bass out of your voice when you're speaking to me." Atlanta stood, defiant, her hand on her hip.

She watched as Steele struggled with his temper, but she held her ground. If he couldn't handle her independence, better she find out now.

"You do not need to work," he spat out. "I can support you."

"And I can support myself. Steele, do I complain when you do your job? No, I don't. So don't complain about my job."

"I make plenty of money," he began.

"And so do I, Steele. I don't play at my job. I do my job pretty fucking well if you'd ever bothered to ask. Just because I don't have as much money as you doesn't mean that I'm not successful. I'm successful every damn day that I don't end up a statistic or a stereotype. So fuck you, Steele and that piece of shit car that you drove here in. Notice that you didn't come get me off of the street. You drove to my home -- that I outright own -- located in a respectable neighborhood. And you know why this is my reality Steele? Because I worked hard for it. I didn't take the empty promises of men to heart because I know what most men want -- some easy pussy."

"Atlanta." Steele sighed. "I apologize. I just do not want you to work that hard to have the money that you need."

"Steele, contrary to popular belief, there's nothing wrong with hard work. And not everything's about money. Evil Twins is about ownership. It's about pride. It's about personal choice -- my choice about what constitutes my version of the American Dream. And while my version might not look like everyone else's, it's mine, and if you can't handle it, get your shit and get the fuck out, Steele, because I'm not selling myself out for any-damn-body -- regardless of how much money he has, how fine he is or how well he throws down some loving.

She finally stormed out of the room.

Steele had been cussed at on the rare occasion, but he had never been cussed out -- by anybody -- and if he had been he would bet that he would not have been cussed out so spectacularly. Dammit, they were both wrong. There was no way in hell he would allow her to leave him, so she could just get over that ridiculous thought.

He rushed out of the room and caught her before she reached the kitchen.

"Get off of me," she spat.

"No, baby," Steele told her. "I cannot. Please. I'm sorry. Forgive me." He held her struggling form in his arms. He held her fast to his chest because he could not let her go. He continued pouring apologies out of his heart. "I cannot let you go, Atlanta. I cannot let you go."

She went rigid in his arms, but at least she had stopped struggling. He did not know how long he held her, but he would hold her all night if he had to. He was not going anywhere.

"Sweetheart, please talk to me," he begged. When she remained silent, he knew that she was still angry, but he continued talking, whispering how much he loved her, and repeating how sorry he was.

Finally, he heard her sob, and it broke him; it took something of great magnitude to move her to tears. Knowing that he was the something that had caused her tears hurt him more than anything else ever had. The berserker in him demanded that he fix it. Gently turning her in his arms, he kissed the top of her head before going down on his knees before her.

"I'm so sorry," he repeated over and over. He did not know how long he kneeled at her feet, but when he felt her hands moving through his hair, he realized that tears wet his face. And when she snuggled into his arms, he rested his forehead on the top of her head and outright cried as he held his woman to his chest and rocked her in his arms. He never wanted to feel this way again.

"Don't cry, Steele," he heard Atlanta plead.

"You are crying," he answered.

"I'll stop if you do," she promised.

"You first."

She laughed. "You know, we always end up sounding like three-year-olds when we argue."

"Well, you might sound like a three-year-old, but a woman of great intellect told me that I only sounded two years old when I argued."

"Take me to bed and make love to me, Steele."

"But you're ..." he began only to be cut off by Atlanta kissing him.

"Please, Steele. I need you to love me."

"I do, Sweetheart," he said as he took her to bed and made tender love to her, "and I always will."

* * * * *

Atlanta had the next night off, so they simply puttered around the house before making their way back to the bedroom where they had another amazing bout of lovemaking. "I still cannot get over the fact that there is a stripper's pole in your bedroom -- regardless of how many times I see it. Convince me why I should not be jealous?"

"It's a remnant from the days when Evil Twins used to be a titty-bar. And I used to own it. I believe that I mentioned that before."

"Ah, a gentleman's club, and I thought you were joking."

"Steele, I tried to get you to wait with the marriage thing, but you wouldn't listen to me. And, no I don't mean a gentleman's club, I mean a titty bar. And no, you shouldn't be jealous because I didn't dance there, but that didn't stop me from picking up a thing or two from the girls."

"Will you dance for me?"

"Are you a good tipper?"

"Are you a good dancer?"

"I only have the opinions of the girls. Would you like for me to dance for an audience of guys and ask their opinion?"

"You should only dance for those men who are no longer interested in continuing to live."

"Are you going to be a jealous husband?"

"I am already a jealous fiancé, so do not doubt that I will be a jealous husband."

The ring of the phone interrupted their squabble. Atlanta picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Atlanta?" the receiver sang out.

"Hi, Momma. I didn't do it."

"No need for sarcasm, young lady. Your father and I are back, and we were just calling to ..."

"... see if I was still alive? Needed legal counsel? Had need to suddenly flee the country?"

"That, too."

"How was your trip?" Atlanta asked.

"Wonderful. Have you and Aloha managed to stay crime free in our absence?"

"Absolutely. I don't know why you insist on thinking that Aloha and I are magnets for trouble, especially when you know that it's mostly Aloha."

“Well, if you haven’t gone on a spree of any kind, what have you been doing to occupy your time?”

“I have been watching as much ESPN as humanly possible in between work and play and plotting world domination with Reign.”

“Thinking about the antics of you and your friends causes me to shudder in dread. What are you doing now?”

“I’m entertaining a hot man in bed.”

“Atlanta, really. Must you be so crude?”

“Yep, or you wouldn’t believe it was me. Momma?”

“Yes, darling?”

“We’re engaged.”

“Engaged to be married?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because he wouldn’t agree to keep supplying me with mind-blowing sex without a commitment. I think it’s also because he wants a green card.” Atlanta smiled, looking at Steele’s reaction to her end of the conversation.

“Tell me about him.”

“Which version?”

“The least obscene one.”

“Well, then all I can tell you is that he’s the hottest man that I’ve ever encountered.”

“Might I speak to him?”

“I guess. But be nice to him,” she teased, enjoying the thunderous look on Steele’s face. “He has a weak constitution, and he doesn’t speak English that well.”

“Honey, I’m nice to everyone, and I’ll speak slowly so that he can understand me.”

“Momma, perhaps in your advanced age, you’ve forgotten that I used to live with you. Do I have to count off the number of teachers, parents, and the like that you’ve cussed out or threatened to dismember?”

“That’s different. They deserved it. I am a true southern belle possessed of delicate sensibilities.”

“Wow, if I wasn’t so scared of you, I would say that’s an outright lie, but since I am scared of you, I will instead say that that statement is coming precariously close to approaching a falsehood.”

“Let me speak to your young man.”

“Oh, he’s my man, but he isn’t young,” she stated while thoroughly enjoying Steele’s look that promised retribution.

“How old is he?”

“Positively ancient. I think his first car was a chariot so speak loudly and slowly.” Atlanta finally handed the phone to Steele. “She wants to speak to you.” Atlanta sighed. “Speaking with Momma is like Double Dutch -- you have to jump in.”

“What is Double Dutch?”

“Never mind, dude. Take the phone. I doubt that you’ll get a chance to talk anyway.”

She listened as Steele attempted to get a word in edgewise with her mother. *Good luck with that*, she thought. Her father had been trying to get a word in edgewise for the whole of their marriage. She felt confident that she could sneak away and take care of her grooming while Steele spoke with her mother.

She came back just in time to hear what sounded suspiciously like Steele agreeing to attend church with her parents. Frantically, she shook her head and made *no* gestures, but too late. Steele had just clicked off the phone. She was only gone for two stinking minutes, and Steele had pledged their attendance at a function that she didn’t want to attend.

“Did you just agree to attend church with my parents?”

“Yes, I did. However, I feel confident that I can handle meeting them, since I survived meeting the Posse.”

“You say that now,” Atlanta began.

“Why do you sound ominous? Attending church with your parents cannot be that bad.”

“Have you ever been to a black church?”

“No.”

“I should let you go by yourself. That will teach you to let my mother rope you into stuff. A black church sermon can last all day.”

“Is that your only opposition to going?”

“No, but it’s one of them. My primary issue is the fact that you just made a commitment for me without asking how I felt about it. You notice that my mother didn’t ask me, she asked *you*, because she knew that you would cave. I, on the other hand, am fluent in the numerous ways to say ‘hell no.’”

“Is it because I am white?”

“Is what because you’re white?”

“Are you afraid for me to meet your parents because I am white?”

“And if I said I was?”

“I would say that that was too bad because I am still marrying you.”

“Well, your whiteness has nothing to do with this. My parents won’t care that you’re white, and if they did, I wouldn’t really give a damn. And they know it. They’ll be surprised, but mostly they’ll be relieved to marry me off to anyone. After the titty-bar stunt, my mother ‘surreptitiously’ began to look for signs of a domestic partner.”

“She sounds like a take-charge woman.”

“She is, but that’s not what you need to concern yourself with.”

“So then, with what should I concern myself?”

“Pleasing me mostly. However, you might want to concentrate on coming up with ways not to pass out in church when we go.”

Chapter Thirteen

Three weeks later, Atlanta found herself in the sanctuary of her parent's church. Two hours and forty-five minutes into the service, Atlanta pondered inventive ways to kill Steele. She had gone through the entire alphabet of ways to off him and had settled on disembowelment forty minutes ago, but she no longer felt that disembowelment was a sufficient punishment. Oh, yes, Double Dutch, then disembowelment. She should have opted to attend the early morning service, because now she would definitely miss kickoff; granted, it was only a preseason game, but it was still football. She would've merely left and waited in the car where she could listen to the pre-game coverage on the satellite radio, but Steele had a death grip on her hand. They weren't even close to the benediction.

Her conscience had initially chimed in that considering inventive methods to kill someone while in church was counterproductive to the whole church experience; however, it had fallen asleep an hour ago, so it didn't even utter a peep when she pulled out her pen and wrote Steele a note in the program. *Pay attention so that you don't throw the rest of the church off with your white boy sense of rhythm.* Steele perused the note and pulled her closer to his side. Leaning down, he whispered, "I will address my 'white boy rhythm' with you later." He turned his attention once again to the service.

Watching Steele's reactions during the service was almost worth the cost of actually having to endure it. When in a better mood, Atlanta would tease Steele about his reaction to the call-and-response interaction of the pastor and the congregation. Steele had to stand and introduce himself during the greeting portion of the service. Even though she had tutored him on the protocol of introducing himself in a black church, he wasn't prepared for the pomp and circumstance that accompanied it. Of course, being the only white person in attendance, the church members really did it up and went out of their way to make him feel welcome. *And he was so hot.*

Atlanta wasn't sure if she had actually passed out or merely dozed off during part of the service, but when she came to, they were preparing to end it. *Yessss!* She would make kickoff to the late game if she wolfed down her food, and then drove like a bat out of hell, or she could eat while driving. Atlanta thought about allowing Steele to drive so that she could give her complete attention to the games, but she wasn't in the mood to die. Since she had to endure church, she would leave Steele at the mercy of her mother and nieces while she watched the game with her father. That would be better than the disembowelment that she had planned for Steele. Momma could drive all males nuts in twenty minutes or less or the next interrogation was free.

Atlanta knew three things would happen as soon as they set foot in the house. One, her mother, Mrs. Jackson to Steele, would ask her what the sermon was about because Momma knew that Atlanta let her mind wander during service. Two, Mrs. Jackson would herd them all into the kitchen to help with lunch. Three, Atlanta would make an escape as soon as possible so she could watch the game. She was pretty sure that her momma wouldn't murder Steele, because it would be undignified to resort to murder so soon after service.

As soon as they entered the house, Atlanta's mother summarily dragged Steele into the kitchen. It was a good thing that he had gotten a sufficient amount of rest because Atlanta's mother immediately put him to work prepping food. Up until that moment, her family had acted unfailingly polite, but he felt certain that there would be an inquisition. After being seated at the large kitchen island, Atlanta's mother placed a bowl of beans in front of Steele and Atlanta before giving him brief but thorough instructions on the proper method to snap them. Atlanta sighed like a martyr and threw a look of disgust at the bowl. While everyone else indulged in polite conversation, Atlanta snapped beans like she was on a sugar-induced high. Steele noticed that the gathered company's attention remained trained on him. He continued with his task, wondering when the interrogation would begin and who would lead it.

Wielding a knife, Mrs. Jackson stood next to him and began vigorously slicing vegetables.

"Atlanta, what was today's sermon about today?" she asked.

"Jesus," Atlanta answered quickly.

"That is your answer every time, young lady," her mother scowled.

"Because that's what the sermon's always about" Atlanta smiled.

"Steele, what was the sermon about?"

Steele had paid attention instead of relying solely on Atlanta's overview of black church ritual. "The sermon was about proper conduct to each other, and the pastor preached from the book of Amos."

"Show off," Atlanta muttered before sliding the bowl in front of Steele and rising from the table. "The rest is your half." She loudly accused Steele of sexually corrupting her before

skipping off, probably to find the nearest television. Steele braced himself for a battle, although he did not move from his chair. He would throttle Atlanta if her parents and brothers did not kill him first. Atlanta's mother interrupted his thoughts.

"Where are you from, young man?"

"Norway, madam."

"And do you attend church?"

"Very rarely, madam."

"Hmm. Well, that's one thing you and my daughter have in common. Are you a Christian?"

"Yes ma'am. I am Catholic."

"What makes you think that you can handle my daughter?"

"I have no other choice but to try because I love her."

"What will you do if a man acted inappropriately toward Atlanta?" she finally asked.

Steele paused in the midst of snapping beans, surprised at the question. Still, he looked her in the eye and answered, "Well, Mrs. Jackson, it depends upon what you mean by 'acted inappropriately.' If he disrespected her, I might let him go with a sound thrashing. However, if he put his hands on her, I would kill him, slowly and with great pleasure."

Steele was not sure that was the answer that she wanted to hear, especially as she seemed to be a religious woman. He was many things, but a liar was not one of them. He did not intend on being Atlanta-less. He wanted to get along with her family, but it was not necessary. He was surprised when her mother broke into a smile and embraced him.

"You may call me Tina."

After her single question, she instructed everyone to finish their tasks and quit the room. Every male stopped and patted his back while the women leaned in to kiss his cheek before leaving. The remainder of their talk -- actually, she talked and he listened -- consisted of a bevy of instructions for the care and feeding of her beloved daughter. He noticed that she never set the knife down, using it like a conductor would a baton. She might be petite, but it was obvious that she was deadly with both words and knives.

* * * * *

Atlanta pulled out of her parent's driveway, and Steele turned his wrath on her, albeit politely. She had expected it. "I just want you to know that I did not find it amusing when you informed your family that I was taking advantage of you sexually."

"Actually, I just told Momma that you had corrupted her innocent little baby with your strange sexual fetishes. Then I skipped, not ran, out of the room."

"There could have been a fight."

"There wouldn't have been a fight, but if there was, I would've helped you."

“Atlanta, that was not funny. Had our daughter informed me of such behavior from her young man, I would still be thrashing him.”

“Dude, after the titty-bar fiasco and being acquainted with my lovely person, my family knows how I am. They know that I would not let a man -- *regardless of how hot he is* -- demean me. Do you honestly think that I would bring a man who didn’t respect me to my family’s church or home?”

Though her words made perfect sense, he still wanted to remain angry. He continued, “What made you so sure that your father would not go insane after hearing his only daughter say such a thing?”

“Dude, after thirty years of trying to keep my mother out of trouble, my dad is way too tired to wild out. By the way, black people generally don’t go insane; we wild out. Plus, I’m wearing an engagement ring that is made up of so much bling that it could put someone’s eye out if they looked at it in direct sunlight. My parents know exactly what you are because while you were busy adapting to a new environment, they were studying everything that you did and didn’t do. They concluded that underneath your Cro-Magnon exterior, you were a gentleman, which is only reinforced by the way you treat your elders, children, and strangers. Plus Mom and my sisters-in-law agreed that you were indeed hot. Now my dad and brothers might have gone on a wild-out had they heard that.”

Leaning over to give Steele a quick kiss, she remarked, “By the way, how did you enjoy playing Double Dutch with my nieces?” Atlanta laughed.

“I enjoyed all ninety excruciating minutes of it. You simply could have explained Double Dutch to me.”

“It was fucking hilarious. Explaining something is not a substitute for experiencing it. Double Dutch is more of a show-and-experience activity. Besides, I can’t Double Dutch worth a damn. Next time you’re considering something my mother asks you, remember your experience today. While I sat in church all afternoon, I was thinking of a myriad of ways that I could pay you back.”

“I am glad that you had fun. Remember that you still have to meet my family.”

“And I will think of something as outrageous to tell them.”

“Well, while you are considering what to tell my family, let us discuss your comment in church. I believe you called out my white boy rhythm.”

“Yeah, and?”

“And when you park the car, you should run into the house because I intend on showing you my white boy rhythm many, many times.”

Oh damn, Atlanta thought.

* * * * *

Atlanta pondered Steele's promise all the way home. The closer that she got to her house, the wetter her panties became. The fact that she didn't merely slide right off the seat amazed her. She could think of no way that she could make it into the house before Steele was on her. And though she wanted him on her, she had to put up a little fight.

"Give me a thirty second head start," she said as she shut off the engine.

"As you wish, but know this, Atlanta," he warned, "It does not matter how much of a head start you have, I will always come for you, and I will always find you.

Oh, yeah, she cheered inwardly as she ran for the door.

Steele wanted Atlanta -- badly. The berserker in him longed to come out. She had challenged him by calling out his rhythm and he planned to answer her challenge and enjoy every second of it. He locked the door and reset her alarm because after he finished loving her, neither of them would be in any shape to get up and insure the house's security. He planned to love his woman to sleep.

He slowly undressed as he stalked to her bedroom. He knew that she was hiding in there -- he could smell her. She smelled like chocolate. His cock almost burst through his boxers thinking about what he was going to do to her. He was always hard, which is why he had to switch from boxer-briefs to boxers since he had started dating Atlanta. She was hell on his anatomy. By the time he reached the bedroom, he wore nothing, although he had his tie in his hand.

"Atlanta, you know that you cannot hide from me. Your body calls to me. I smell your arousal."

The fact that she did not answer did not surprise him. She was stubborn. He threw the tie over his shoulder and leaned against the doorframe. He said nothing. Instead, he merely stroked his hard cock, slowly, just the way Atlanta liked him to. She enjoyed it when he pleased himself. He could not hold back the sounds of his pleasure. He knew that Atlanta could not hold back hers either. No sooner had he thought it than she moaned. He smiled to himself and stalked toward the armoire.

"You know that you cannot hide from me, baby."

"Who said that I was trying to?" she sassed as she knocked his hand away and began stroking him.

"You did ask for a head start."

"That's because I know that you're older and would need to rest before trying to handle me."

He chuckled before picking her up and tossing her onto the bed. "Well then, I am thankful for your thoughtfulness and will make the most of my rest." He took her mouth in a deep kiss. She was his -- all his -- and he would show her for the next hour or so, and then everyday for the rest of their lives.

Atlanta loved it when Steele went primal on her. Everything within her preened that she could make this man go so nuts. Her pussy, so wet, didn't need any foreplay. She'd had all she needed on the ride back. Steele had kept throwing "I'm going to fuck you senseless" glances at her and drawing her attention to his hard cock.

"Steele," she pleaded.

"Yes?"

"Please."

"Please what?" he asked, his tongue tracing her ear before he gently bit down on her earlobe.

"Please fuck me, Steele."

"You only had to ask," he said right before plunging into her sheath. "And I am making love to you, not fucking you."

Atlanta gasped from the pleasure and gave herself up to it. Steele began to rock into her, hard, and then he pulled out and slid into her with exquisite slowness. As she prepared to cuss him out for toying with her, he withdrew and dragged her down the bed. She didn't get a chance to protest before 260 pounds of hard man straddled her and tied her hands to the headboard with his tie.

"Steele," she began before he growled. "Steele?"

"Are you hurt?" He asked.

"No," she answered quickly. Steele would never hurt her.

"Are you frightened?"

"Never of you, Steele."

"Good. That is exactly what I wanted to hear." He smirked.

She hated it when he smirked, and he knew it. "Steele if you --" she began only to have about six inches of his hard cock stuffed into her mouth.

"I did not ask you to say anything. I would not want your talking to throw off my white boy rhythm," he said as he gently grabbed a fistful of braids and fed her more of his thick cock.

Atlanta would cuss him out later, but right now his show of dominance pleased her. He knew that she got off on sucking his cock. She especially liked it when he controlled the pace at which she sucked him. With her hands tied above her, and all that alpha above her, she was completely at his mercy. She enjoyed every grunt that her sucking elicited. Two could play this game. She would show him *her* rhythm.

Steele had to pull out lest he lose control. She already owned him, and when she suckled him, she robbed him of what edge he had. He chuckled to himself when he heard

the disgruntled noises she made when he pulled out. He leaned down to kiss her before settling his body over hers once more.

"Are you okay, Atlanta?"

"Are *you* okay, Steele?" she asked with a look of challenge.

As a berserker, he could not have her tossing about challenges so carelessly. He had a reputation to uphold. He had a woman to convince. He grabbed the arches of her soft feet and pulled them over his shoulders before stroking into her with infinite slowness. When she sighed out her pleasure, he switched from slow to fast and began pounding into her.

"I am your man, Atlanta. It is I who brings you pleasure -- even with my suspect white boy rhythm."

"Steele," she groaned.

"Does it feel good?"

"Yes," she sighed.

He listened to her pants and decreased his speed whenever he felt her orgasm upon her.

"Steele," she begged.

"Yes?"

"Please."

"Ah, this again?" he asked resorting to slow strokes. "Please what?"

"Oh please, Steele," she repeated.

Steele came to a complete stop and feasted on her mouth, kissing her pleas away. He loosed her hands from the tie, knowing that the muscles in her arms would ache if he did not. Plus he wanted to feel her hands on his body and tangling in his hair.

"Steele," she begged as she thrust her hips up.

He once again pulled her down the bed; he planned to pound into her and did not want her to hit her head. Even though she was the one who was begging, he wanted her, needed her, had to have her. He could no longer deny either of them and slammed into her. He continued pounding into her, hard.

"So how do you like this white boy rhythm?" he asked.

"Oh," she answered.

"Atlanta, tell me what tempo you want me to make love to you to," he demanded. "Hard, fast, slow, gentle? Tell me!"

"All of them," she cried.

Steele did not expect that answer, but he liked it and as such he gave her a sample of all of them, and then he brought hard and fast for the finale. The berserker was coming out and his glowing blue eyes lit the room and his roar filled the air as he exploded into her. He carefully rolled his great weight off of her before collapsing beside her.

“Do you like my white boy rhythm?” he asked.

“It’ll do,” she said before slipping into a deep sleep.

He placed a gentle kiss on her lips, and then he too fell asleep, oblivious to the scratches covering his massive arms.

Chapter Fourteen

Atlanta gasped when she got her first glimpse of the Steele's hometown. Atlanta found the small hamlet outside of Vadsø breathtakingly beautiful, just like the man beside her. And it was bone-numbingly cold to a spoiled Southerner, despite the heater in their Range Rover going full blast and being snuggled against her hot blond Viking. *You know you're not in the South anymore when there's a reindeer walking the shoreline of the beach!* Though it was late fall, she imagined that the beginning of the season in the Varanger region must resemble the opening day at a Latin American carnival.

His family's possible reaction to her concerned Atlanta, although Steele had reiterated that it wouldn't matter.

"Did you tell them that I'm black ... and American?"

"No, but I informed them that you were my choice and left it at that."

"Are you not the least bit concerned about their reaction?"

"No. You will find that my family is full of characters, but they will be to your liking."

"But what if they don't find me to their liking?"

"They will love you just as I do."

The terrible cold preoccupied Atlanta, but she didn't fail to notice when they pulled up to a large house.

"Wow. That is the biggest damn log cabin I've ever seen. Please tell me that the heat is on."

"I assure you that not only is the heat on, but that there is a fire in the fireplace," he said as he scooped her up and carried her into the house.

Yes, blessed warmth, she thought as she ran to the fireplace that dominated the room.

"Is there some reason why your family needs to live this close to the North Pole? In case you missed it, there are reindeer on your beaches, which is always a sign that it's cold as fuck."

"I never fuck you," Steele replied. "I always make love to you, and it is always hot as hell every time I do."

"You're such a nut."

"Do you wish to go upstairs and refresh yourself?"

"Will you come with me?"

"I generally wait for you to find your pleasure before finding my own," he teased.

"And I appreciate that. So are you coming?" She waggled her eyebrows.

"Definitely, but only after you scream out my name -- several times." He hoisted her over his shoulder and marched upstairs.

"I like it when you go Viking on me, but I *really* like it when you go berserker on me."

"I like it when you go helpless female on me," he replied as he tossed her onto a bed and began undressing.

"Well, that's the only time you can handle me, so I do that to soothe your ego," Atlanta said as she licked her lips, appreciating his maleness. He was so damn beautiful.

"Why are you still dressed?"

"Because I'm waiting for you to finish going berserker on me," she replied.

"That can be arranged," he growled, reaching for her.

Instead of manhandling her like she wanted, Steele tortured her with finesse. He laid her across the bed, and slowly divested her of all of her clothing save the two scraps of lace masquerading as a bra and panties. The diva in Atlanta purred, knowing she had brought out the beast in such a virile man.

"Like what you see, Viking?"

"Did you doubt it?" he rasped. "What happened to White Boy?"

"You're only White Boy when you're annoying me or when your ego has grown out of control. When you're naked and holding me in your arms or looking like you're about to pillage me, then you're Viking," she said as she slowly stroked her sex.

"Perhaps I should pillage you often then. And remove your hand from *my* cunt," he demanded, eying the stickiness on her fingers, jealous even of her own hand.

Ignoring his demands to remove her hand, she continued to stroke herself. "You can direct me only if you're naked and getting ready to bring it, White Boy."

And then he brought it. Steele ripped off her lingerie and pressed his weight into her, evidently planning to dominate her. Atlanta submitted immediately, not because she was weak but to show him that she planned to allow it ... for now.

"You know, tearing my lingerie off is not the only way to remove it," she told him.

“No, but it is the most efficient way to remove it” He stroked her.

“Please, Steele,” she moaned.

“At my leisure, Sweetheart. Recall that you tortured me for nearly six hellacious months.”

“Yeah, but I suffered, too. It wouldn’t have been dignified to give in to my hormones and fuck you in the lobby while I was on the verge of passing out from blood loss.”

“No, but it would have been pleasurable.”

“You’re such a freak.”

“I do my best, Sweetheart. Now turn over and present that lovely ass to me,” he demanded.

“Why?”

“Because it is mine, and I want it.”

Whenever he went into alpha mode, her pussy went into overdrive. Turning over, she waited while Steele arranged her on all fours. Enjoying the delicious feel of him mounting her, she gasped as he wrapped her braids around his fist.

“Hey, careful of the hair, White Boy.”

“Like you are careful of mine?”

“A lot more carefully than that because my hair is way cooler than yours,” she sassied. She knew that she had a tendency to use his hair as a handhold, but he didn’t complain. Steele gently pulled her hair to one side and placed soft kisses there as he teased her cunt with quick feels of his thick cock.

“Steele,” she moaned.

“Yes, my voluptuous cock-tease?”

“Fuck me ... now.”

“And if I do not?” He continued his tantalizing.

“Then I might be forced to find another man to ...” She began only to be silenced when Steele rammed his hard cock into her wet cunt. “Ahhh.”

“Mine,” Steele growled. “Only mine.”

“Hmm, oh goodness.”

Continuing to thrust into her ready sex, Steele demanded, “Say it.”

“What?” she asked, sensing Steele closer and closer to the edge.

“Tell me who you belong to,” he demanded again.

“Myself,” she moaned.

“Atlanta, you belong to me,” he shouted as he drove into her.

“Only as long as I allow it,” she gasped as Steele fucked her so furiously she could barely catch her breath.

"You will be allowing it forever," he proclaimed, "because I will kill any other male who thinks to touch what is mine!"

"Hmm hmm," she purred, almost beyond words.

"Atlanta. Who. Do. You. Belong. To?" he asked, each word punctuated with thrusts so hard that he nearly drove her off of the bed.

"You, Steele. Only you." she answered as the first orgasm overtook her.

Steele continued to thrust into her as her hot, wet cunt gripped him with the force of her climax. "This is mine," he said as he thrust harder. "You are mine. Your body is mine to command. Mine. Mine. Only mine. Do you understand me? Mine!" He spent himself in her.

Rolling over onto his back, he dragged her on top of him and kissed her gently. "This is where you belong," he declared as he laid her head over his heart. "This is where I keep you."

Still breathing hard from their lovemaking, Atlanta replied, "And this is where I want to be kept."

"I love you," he declared fervently.

"You better love me," she replied, "and while you're over there gloating, you better remember who you belong to, too."

"I shall never forget it, Atlanta. My mind knows, my heart knows, and my body knows who it belongs to."

"Great answer," she said and for the next forty minutes, she showed him how much she liked the answer. She went to sleep with his moans in her ears.

* * * * *

Showering together proved a waste of time because they rarely managed to shower. Atlanta always needed a bath afterwards, and Steele always needed another shower. The shower became just a place where Steele used the smallness of the space as an excuse for feeling her up -- not that he needed an excuse. She was always willing to be felt up by him.

"Come down at your leisure," he said as he knelt to taste her already kiss-swollen lips before adding more hot water to her bath.

"Suppose I want to hide up here for the remainder of the evening?"

"Then I will have to come up here and show you how a Viking lays down the law to his wayward woman."

"That is so cute when you get all alpha, especially when all you're wearing is that hot, golden skin."

"I am wearing a towel."

Eyeing the precarious fit of his almost-there towel, she remarked, "So you wouldn't mind if I waltzed downstairs wearing my clothes like you're almost wearing that towel?"

Steele merely growled at her in response.

She responded by sticking out her tongue.

Atlanta always felt good after Steele fucked her senseless. Her lengthy soak only added to the feeling of completion. Wearing her second-favorite scent (her absolute favorite scent was Steele) and a black lace bra and a sheer pair of black boy shorts, she felt sensuous. Donning a new throwback jersey, she swooped her braids up in a large clip and went in search of her man. Skipping down the stairs, she noticed the noise of the fight before she saw the fight and immediately went into Defcon One. There were six guys attacking Steele. Oh, fuck that.

Atlanta launched herself at the nearest guy, taking him down with a foot to the solar plexus. She fought like a woman possessed because her man was in trouble. She pulled out every move in her repertoire. She might not be an expert in any accepted fighting style, like preying mantis or tiger claw, but then again, she had pissed-off black woman style, and only another pissed-off black woman could counter it. Fortunately for Atlanta, she was the only black woman in the vicinity, and she had six years of kickboxing lessons to go with that. She got in a couple of good hits before taking an elbow to the jaw and a hard shot to the ribs.

Already pissed off that these thugs had dared to jump on her man, noticing the blood on her jersey pushed Atlanta into a new zone. Spotting a sword, her scream of outrage rent the air as she yanked it from the wall. Breathing hard, she held it to the neck of the nearest assailant.

"Move and I dig into your carotid artery, and you'll have about a minute to make your peace with the Lord before you bleed out. Call your thugs off of my man, or you're going to die quickly."

So far gone into fight mode, Atlanta didn't realize that her nose was bleeding or that the room had gone silent. She didn't notice the crazed look in Steele's glowing eyes. She didn't hear the curses that Steele spat every which way. She didn't notice the path of destruction that he cut to get to her. She didn't notice anything until Steele approached and requested, as gently as an enraged male on the verge of full *berserker* could, "Sweetheart, remove the sword from his neck. Carefully, please. I wouldn't want my cousin to die at your hand when I am so looking forward to the honor of killing him myself."

Atlanta ignored his plea, instead asking, "You okay, Steele?"

"I'm okay. Please give me the sword."

"You sure you're okay, or are you just saying that? You just used a contraction." She didn't dare take her eyes off of the giant, as big as Steele, in front of her.

"I am okay."

Stepping back, tired, sore, and hungry, she gave Steele the sword before slumping on the nearest hard surface. Her new jersey was ruined. She caught a glimpse of Steele leveling the guy with a punch before throwing the sword to the ground and approaching her.

"Sweetheart, you are bleeding," he remarked, wiping blood from her lip. He sounded as if his heart would break.

"Yeah, but you should see the other guy," she joked.

"I saw the other guy, and I will see him again later. Come, while I put you in the bath. I need to see where else you are hurt." He picked her up and began to carry her upstairs.

"What about those guys?" She indicated the six guys in various states of fucked-up.

"Those gentlemen are my brothers and cousins who have a lot of explaining and apologizing to do."

"Oh, damn, that's your family? Why were they attacking you?"

"It is merely our way of greeting each other after lengthy absences," he explained. "It's a demonstration of affection."

"Steele, that doesn't look like a simple demonstration of affection. It looks like Jack has been in here. And why are you so upset. You just used another contraction."

"I am upset because you are hurt. I am upset because they dared to put their hands on you. I am upset for failing to protect you from harm! I am upset because you walked into what you considered a dangerous situation, and instead of fleeing, you jumped right in! Did I not tell you that there would be no more fighting?" Steele's voice rose with each statement until his blue eyes glowed, and he was yelling.

Atlanta had had enough. Jumping out of his arms, she yelled back to the obvious amusement of the onlookers. "Dude, you better stop yelling at me. I'm not one of your minions or a member of your adoring fan club batting my eyes and agreeing with every word that falls from your mouth. I'm your woman. If I walk into a room and see that you're in danger, I'm jumping in. I am *not* leaving you to die while I run for help, and if you have a problem with that, you can just catalogue that under the subheading of 'too fucking bad.' You can get over it, or maybe you need to get yourself a milquetoast woman who will be happy to indulge your every whim and allow you to run her life because I'm not having it. And if you find a woman like that, I'm beating her ass because you belong to me, and that's how a southern black woman gets down over her man!" She punctuated her last sentence with a poke to his chest.

Turning to face the men laid out on the floor, she lit into them. "What the hell is wrong with y'all? Did you attend a school for psychopaths? Why is there a need to concoct some weirdo greeting ritual when a simple fist knock or 'what up' will do? That's just like men. If it weren't for women, scurvy would still be a primary health concern, and you would die out from doing stupid shit. I hope you guys are okay, but if you're not, too damn bad. It's your fault. And one of you owes me a new jersey. Do you realize how cool this jersey was?"

Turning to Steele, she announced, "I'm going to shower and change." She flounced from the room after raising a single brow that seemed to inquire, *Whatcha going to do about that, White Boy?*

Recalling her manners, Atlanta stopped on the first step and turned once again strewn about the floor. “By the way, I’m Atlanta. Pleased to make your acquaintance.” Looking away again, she stomped up the stairs.

Steele turned away from Atlanta in time to see his parents, aunt, and Dr. Randolph enter the hall.

Seeing the bodies in various states of injury littering the floor, Steele’s father inquired, “What happened?”

Looking in the direction of the departing and obviously angry woman, his mother inquired, “Is that *her*?”

It took over ten minutes of explanation to find out just what had occurred. “So let me get this straight, you nearly beat the hell out of your brothers and cousins because they defended themselves against an unknown threat that just happened to be your fiancée?” His father’s voice held a trace of admiration.

“Yes, though I cannot take credit for all of the injuries. You can thank Atlanta for at least half of them.”

“Good for her,” his mother stated. “I think that I’m going to like my new daughter-in-law.”

Dr. Randolph examined the wounded assembly of his in-laws. “Well, let me take a look and see if any of those injuries require a trip to the hospital,” he said.

Chapter Fifteen

Glancing around at his felled relatives, Steele could not help but notice the blood spilt upon the floor. He started to grow angry all over again. His rational mind knew that most of the blood belonged to his kin, but his heart cried for revenge for the blood offense against his woman. Steele's glowing blue eyes served as a warning that he was ready to reengage. How dare they touch his woman, regardless of the fact that she had delivered impressive injuries to two of his brothers and had come close to laying waste to his cousin?

Seeming to sense that Steele had a difficult time between deciding whether to beat his brothers and cousins senseless or see to his woman, his mother inserted herself between him and the objects of his wrath. Although she approached him cautiously, Steele would not harm her, even in full *berserker*gang. Rarely did a berserker harm a female, and never a female of close kin or his mate. The men in the room wisely kept their distance; they knew that once a male entered *berserker*gang, he was pure destruction to everyone else.

"Steele, go and see to your lady," she softly directed.

Giving the men strewn about the floor a look that promised further retribution, Steele bounded for the stairs, but was stopped by his father's warning.

"Remember that she is a lady, son, even though she fights and curses like a seasoned warrior. Be gentle with her."

Steele vowed to be gentle with Atlanta, right after he throttled her for putting herself in harm's way. He went to enter the room but discovered the door locked. Knowing Atlanta, he suspected that she had also barricaded it with something as well. Normally, he appreciated her obstinacy, but not when directed against him. Undeterred and still in the lesser stages of *berserker*gang, he simply ripped the door from the hinges and tossed it down the stairs before kicking the nightstand out of the way.

The noise of the door being ripped from its hinges had Atlanta scrambling from the adjoining to bath to see why.

"Steele, what the hell is wrong with you? If I wanted you in here with me, I would've left the door unlocked."

"Atlanta, you are mine! Never will I allow you to lock yourself away from me!"

"Oh yeah, well let me tell you something, Steele ..."

Steele lost whatever Atlanta said as his parents came rushing up the stairs. While Steele's father confronted Steele, his mother, Danièle, attempted to deal with Atlanta.

"Atlanta," Danièle pleaded. "Please don't antagonize Steele. A male in any stage of *berserker*gang is not thinking clearly. He merely feels and reacts. You do not realize how dangerous he can be."

"Oh yeah, and obviously, you guys don't know how dangerous a southern black woman is when in full pissed-off mode. And unlike him, I think clearly even when pissed off so that makes me even more dangerous."

"Atlanta, please. Just calm down and listen to Steele."

"I am calm, and I'm not about to sit around and listen to Steele berate me as if I was a child. I'm a grown woman, dammit. If the rest of y'all want to kowtow to him, so be it, but that's a habit I don't plan on developing."

After a brief but hard-fought battle, Steele broke away from his father and stalked toward Atlanta.

"Atlanta!" he roared.

Instead of backing up like his mother advised, Atlanta stomped toward him. "Steele, you better check your tone when you're talking to me." She had a hand on her hip and a gleam in her eye.

"You are my woman!" he yelled.

"Damn right -- your woman," she shouted. "Not your fucking whore, not your damn dog, not your homey. Your woman, and you better remember that if you don't remember shit, or you're going to have all kinds of problems!"

"Come to me," he demanded.

"You can kiss my ass, Steele."

"If you keep yourself away from me, I will --"

"You will what?" she interrupted, getting in his face. "You'll hit me? Well then, go ahead Steele. I think that I need to know the things that you are capable of, and if you would dare hit me even while wilding out because you're a berserker, then I guess that I need to know that now, don't I?"

Atlanta's words stunned Steele. Most of the rage went out of him. Taking a step back, he looked at her with pain in his eyes. "Atlanta, I will never harm you, ever."

Taking a deep breath, she said, "Steele, get out. I don't believe in domestic violence, but right now, I'm about one more incorrect word out of your mouth from whipping your ass. I

need some time alone. I'm going to bathe, and when I come out, we can talk -- if you still want to. If you don't, I'll take the next flight out."

"You can't leave me, Atlanta," he told her, but he let her go, knowing that she needed time, but he was not about to let her leave the house without him. He shook off his father's overtures and asked his mother to see if Atlanta was alright before stalking downstairs to calm down and stand guard. He did not put an escape plan past Atlanta.

* * * * *

Steele's father made his way outside after a few minutes and stood guard with him.

"Is Atlanta okay?"

"Since she keeps parrying your mother's attempts to see to her with refrains of 'I'm fine,' I would say so. But how are you, son?"

"I am fine."

"Being that you're out here in the cold, worrying over your woman, I would argue that point."

"What took you so long to come out here?"

"I had to deal with the door."

"So you fixed it?"

"You cannot fix what is destroyed, son. You can only start all over."

Steele knew that his father was discussing more than the door. "So what did you do?"

"Replaced it with a door from another room."

"I will not replace Atlanta, father."

"No one is asking you to, son. I'm merely warning you to be careful. She knows nothing of our ways, and if you continue to go about it as you have, you risk losing her."

"What should I tell her other than I am berserker?"

"Everything."

Steele contemplated his father's words but said nothing more.

"So why are we out here when there is a warm fire inside?" his father asked.

"You just want to get back to Mother's side."

"This is true."

"You have always indulged her every whim."

"It is my duty and my privilege to indulge her every whim. She is my wife. Allow me to warn you, Steele, you are treading on dangerous territory."

"I am only making an observation."

“Your mother and I have been married close to forty years, Steele. Try accomplishing one minute of marriage to that hellion laying curses upon your head before you begin to make observations about my marriage.”

Properly chastised, Steele offered his apologies. “Forgive me, Father. I spoke in anger. However, I take exception to you calling Atlanta a hellion.”

“What else would you have me call her?”

“Daughter-in-law, but if you cannot find it in your heart to accept her, then you may call her Mrs. Magnussen.”

“You are sure that she will still consent to marry you?”

“I am sure that I will not allow her to do otherwise, even if I have to accomplish that feat by escorting her down the aisle at the point of a sword.”

“Hmm, I can see that you will enjoy an interesting marriage,” Eifíkr grunted. “You never did tell me why we’re having this discussion, standing out in the cold, instead of in the comfort of the great room.”

“I am making sure that Atlanta does not attempt an escape. She is hurt, and I would rather not spend the rest of the evening hunting her down. She is a trouble magnet, and I do not need for her to acquire additional injuries, as I intend to marry her as soon as possible. Then I can start on the first half of those forty years and will be able to remark how thoroughly under her thumb Mother has you.”

“When I have a grandson or two on my knee, I might even listen to what you have to say. Come inside, son. Your lady won’t escape from you. She doesn’t appreciate the cold weather. She might be contrary, but she isn’t about to risk freezing to death to prove a point.”

* * * * *

Steele took his father’s advice and came in out of the cold. After sitting idle for five minutes, he decided that Atlanta had had enough time to sulk. He entered their room just as she exited the bathroom. His breath caught as he glimpsed her wearing nothing but a camisole and a see-through pair of boy shorts. For once, her hair was down, a rare occasion. It was an even rarer occasion to find her dressed in something other than jeans and jerseys. Generally Steele preferred women to wear feminine attire, but after all the cursing-outs of which he had been the beneficiary, he learned not to suggest that Atlanta change her wardrobe. Although as of late, she tended to dress a bit more provocatively on their outings. Before they had become intimate, the most he had seen of her were her forearms. Recalling the first time that he saw her dressed in something form-fitting, he doubted that he would ever allow her out of his sight if she decided to adopt that style of dress. Besides, he did not want other males to know what she hid under those ridiculous jerseys and jeans.

The look Atlanta gave him showed that she was still pissed. “If you’re here to start with me, don’t.”

"I am here to check you over"

"Don't. Why are you still here?"

"Because you are in here. Let me see if you are hurt."

"No, dude. Get out."

"If you didn't want me in here, you would have locked and barricaded the door again."

"I would've, but the last time I tried that, the door ended up lying at the bottom of the staircase."

"Forgive me. I was --"

"Acting like a fucking lunatic?"

"Yes. Now let me see if you are injured."

"Your mom already came in here, asking if I wanted to see Dr. Randolph."

"And I bet you did not let either of them see to you."

"Since you're not going to get out, I will." She attempted to stalk past him, only to have him intercept her and gently place her on the bed. "Atlanta, don't fight me. I need to see how badly you are injured."

"I don't want you touching me when you're acting like an ass."

"I am being unfailingly civil. Notice that I haven't threatened to lock you in this room for placing yourself in danger. I haven't taken you over my knee and spanked that beautiful ass until you submit to me. I have even allowed my brothers and cousins to live. See how civilized I am?"

"Dude, you're so not acting civil. You're virtually pulsing with anger. You're contracting your words left and right, and you look like you're spoiling for a fight. I'm not going to indulge you."

Steele silenced Atlanta by pulling her into his arms. "Atlanta, how do you think I should feel after watching a man hit you in the face? Do you think that I should be okay with that? Well, I am not. I see pain in your eyes. Your jaw is bruised. Your lip is split. I do not know what else is injured on you. Do you know how I felt when I saw Roald punch you?"

"He hit me under extraordinary circumstances."

"I don't give a damn if he hit you to save his life! He hit you; I just cannot have that. Atlanta. I am full-blood berserker. If I were not adept at controlling my *berserker*gang, every man in that room would have died at my hand! Baby, I need to see if you are okay. I need to see where you are hurt, and I need to make it better."

She finally allowed Steele to inspect her for further damage. Lightly caressing her ribs, he asked, "Do you hurt here?" Steele watched as she flinched, her face betraying her pain.

"A little bit," she admitted.

"Where else?"

"That's it."

Not satisfied with her assessment, Steele inspected every last inch of her body. "You need a doctor to check you over."

"I told you that it doesn't hurt that bad."

"Nevertheless, you hurt. I am getting my uncle. And this time, you will let him inspect you. Cover up."

"Steele --"

Sensing that Atlanta would start arguing, he shot her a look and called his uncle from downstairs. "Atlanta, I trust my uncle to take care of your medical concerns."

Two minutes later, Dr. Randolph knocked politely and cautiously popped his head around the door. "Willing to see me, Atlanta? Are you decent?"

"No, but I'm covered. Come in, Dr. Randolph."

"I saw the aftermath of what happened downstairs," Dr. Randolph told her as he pulled up a chair nearby. "What exactly happened?"

"A fight, and then a hockey game broke out," she joked. "I told Steele I was okay, but he won't listen to reason. You know how he is." Atlanta paused. "Sorry I acted rudely earlier. You know how *I* am. So, when did you get here?"

"I arrived just in time to see you set Steele straight. It looks like I missed a hell of a fight." Gently checking her jaw and ribs, Dr. Randolph stated, "Nothing appears to be broken. You don't require any stitching, so if you'll excuse me. There are others that need me."

"You didn't have to leave them to check on me."

"Oh, yes, I did, dear. Remember how Steele is?"

"Thanks, Dr. Randolph. I apologize for the inconvenience."

"You could never be an inconvenience. I would, however, like for you to lie down for an hour or so and take it easy for the next couple of days. Steele, get her a glass of water so that I can give her something for pain."

* * * * *

Atlanta took the painkiller Dr. Randolph offered and slept soundly for the next three hours. Waking up, she realized that she lay in Steele's arms. Attempting to get out of bed without waking him proved futile.

"How do you feel, and where do you think you are going?" he asked sleepily.

"Fine and wherever the hell I want to."

Now that she had some painkillers in her and had slept, Steele had no qualms about giving her a piece of his mind. "You can go wherever you want, as long as it is in this house."

“Wow, you obviously have lost your mind somewhere between three hours ago and now. You aren’t my momma, Steele.”

“No, but I am your man. Do not try to leave me, Atlanta.”

“Whatever, Steele. When I am ready to go, I’m gone and ain’t nothing you can do about that. You might own me in that bed, but that’s the only damn place that you own me.”

Before she realized it, all 260 some pounds of determined Viking covered her. Somehow managing to avoid her injured ribs, Steele glared into her eyes. “Atlanta, I am beginning to understand how black women feel about white men. I know that sometimes I say the wrong thing. I press a button that triggers your ‘look, mother fucker’ response. But with us, there is no black, there is no white. You are simply my woman just as I am your man. You do not seem to understand what it means to be my woman, but you had best learn it.”

“Or what?” she asked sassily, even though a part of her reveled in his possessiveness.

“You will not like the consequences. Perhaps I will withhold sexual favors.” He placed soft kisses along her jaw.

“I have a box of toys under the bed at home that can get me off just as well.” Her moans of appreciation diminished some of her acrimony.

“Not anymore,” he answered smugly, using his heavy, muscular leg to part her thighs.

“What do you mean?”

“I confiscated those items. You do not need those things since you have me to see to your sexual pleasure.”

“You had no right to take my personal belongings,” she began before Steele cut off her rant by taking her mouth in a deep kiss.

He took his time in her mouth as if she wasn’t two seconds away from kicking his ass, as if she wasn’t contemplating leaving him. Still, Atlanta had to acknowledge that he was an expert at the art of seduction and a master at pleasing her. “I have every right. You are my woman, and I will not share you with anyone, not even a rubber cock!”

“It’s called a dildo, Steele. I’m not asking you to share me, but those things were in a box under my bed. You had no right to snoop through my things. I don’t go through your stuff.”

“You are welcome to go through any thing that I have. However, I did not snoop through your stuff. You left it out in plain view -- right on the nightstand on my side of the bed, which I took as a challenge.”

“I’m not going to fight with you, but you need to respect the fact that I’m a grown damn woman.”

“Believe me, I cannot help but recognize and appreciate that,” he remarked as he inserted two fingers in her cunt. “But you need to recognize that I am possessive, especially

when it comes to my woman. I take very seriously anyone or anything that threatens to come between us.”

Sighing, Atlanta recognized that neither would give in, and with the way he stroked her pussy, she was close to not giving a damn about the argument. Still, she couldn't back down just because he was ... oh, hell. How did he get her leg over his shoulder without her realizing it?

“You can't ... oh, damn.” She breathed hard as her orgasm washed over her. “You know what? I'm busting you down from Cro-Magnon to Neanderthal.”

“Hmm mmm,” he murmured as he inserted the head of his cock in her hot and very wet cunt.

“I know English is your second language,” she began.

“Third,” Steele interrupted before plunging in to the hilt.

“Ahhh. As I was saying, that was an insult.”

“I will be insulted later,” he said. “Right now, I need to please you so that I can find my release.”

Anything else she might've said would've been drowned out by the symphony of Steele's grunts and her moans, so she concentrated on rocking Steele's world.

Sprawled in a boneless heap on top of Steele, Atlanta was close to dozing off when Steele began talking. “I am a berserker.”

“You already told me that.”

“But I did not tell you what it means. I am berserker, and when I am moved to extreme anger I go into *berserkergang*.”

“Yeah, I saw that.”

“That was not full *berserkergang*.”

“Then what the hell was with the whole ‘about to kill everybody and ripping the door off its hinges’ thing?”

“That was fear. I feared that you were hurt, and then I feared that you would leave me.”

“Why would you think that?”

“I was scared that you would not want to handle what you had just seen.”

“I was scared that you were going to hit me,” Atlanta admitted. “I'm pretty sure you would win in a fight, but even if I could win, I don't want to fight you.”

“I would never hit you,” he said as tears escaped his eyes.

“I know that now. Do you still want me after seeing me in full pissed-off mode?”

“I would want you any way that I could get you.”

“Then we're good. And now that I know that, don't think that I'm letting you go.”

“Atlanta, any male children we have will be berserkers.”

“What about female children?”

“Historically, there have never been any female berserkers.”

“Have any berserkers been married to southern black woman?”

Steele laughed before answering. “Not that I recall.”

“I won’t tell you ‘I told you so’ the first time our daughter wilds out when we tell her ‘no’.”

“I do not envision telling our daughter ‘no’ about much. Except boys, of course.”

“That’s why she’s going to be spoiled.”

“She is supposed to be.”

“Wait, are we arguing about a child we don’t even have yet?”

“I am not arguing. I am pointing out one or two things about our future progeny. I will, however, do my best to impregnate you in my spare time.”

“Practice all you want, but right now, all of our progeny are safe in my ovaries.”

“You act as if I do not have a part in the conception.”

“You’re just a walking bag of fertilizer, so be quiet and hold me. And tell you how much you love me.”

* * * * *

Atlanta walked downstairs in might-have-to-kick-some-ass mode; the possible reception below made her apprehensive. Plus, she didn’t really feel like fighting any more of Steele’s family members, at least not without Jack on her side. Damn, her jaw and ribs hurt like hell, although she wouldn’t admit as much to Steele.

Steele’s mother, Danièle, and his aunt Véréne immediately pounced on Atlanta and ushered her into the library, where the men waited. Each one stood when the women entered, making it obvious from where Steele acquired his manners. Although Atlanta was taken aback, she didn’t feel threatened. She knew Steele had her back and most of the occupants of the room wore friendly looks. No one seemed particularly concerned about the fact that she was black or American or had engaged in a battle royal in their home.

Before she could gather her wits about her, Steele gathered her in his arms and introduced her. “Mother, Father, everyone, this is my wife, Atlanta.”

“Are you already married, then?” one of his brothers asked.

Although Atlanta felt the same rush whenever Steele demonstrated any type of possessiveness, she felt compelled to chime in, “Yeah, because I missed the whole ‘til death do us part’ festivities and the honeymoon ... and the cake.”

“We are married in every way that counts. As you would say, it is all over except for the shouting,” he said as he took a seat on a couch and settled her next to him.

“Actually, I would’ve contracted some of those words.”

Steele's mother broke in. "I am told that you have captured my son's heart."

"This is true," Atlanta said, throwing a look of love in Steele's direction. Atlanta found herself comparing Steele's mother with her own mother.

Before she could respond, Steele's father introduced himself. "Daughter, I am Eifíkr, but you may call me Erik." Evidently, Steele acquired his size and looks from his father. Damn, he was a good-looking man. Despite his age, he didn't have frail written anywhere on him. This man not only looked like he could hold his own in a bar fight, he looked like he started and finished them.

"I am Steele's aunt, Vérène," the other woman said. "I believe that you've met my husband." She cast a quick glance in Dr. Randolph's direction.

Winking at her, Dr. Randolph smiled and told her to call him 'James' before leaning down to whisper, "One day we'll meet when you don't require medical attention."

Steele's brothers and cousins then lined up and introduced themselves. His brothers -- Egil, Haakon, and Håvard, and his cousins -- Njord, Roald, and Sigurd, were all hulking giants (and handsome), but she noticed that they tip-toed around Steele. They needed to tip toe around her -- not Steele.

* * * * *

Atlanta soon sat in front of a cozy fire next to Steele. The combination of the warmth of the room and the comfort of the soft leather chair relaxed her. Steele placed his arm around her and pulled her nearer to him. If she got any nearer, she'd be in his lap.

Regardless of how welcoming his family seemed to be, Atlanta suspected that they had reservations about her person. An expert at playing the waiting game, she waited.

"So, Atlanta, what would you do if Steele decided that he fancied another woman?" Danièle asked.

Was she fucking kidding? Was this a trick question? "Steele wouldn't," Atlanta answered with conviction, "because he already has the best woman available."

"Hypothetically speaking, then?" she prompted.

"Well then, hypothetically speaking, I'd let him go if he could walk away on the two broken legs that he'd have. Then I'd call my momma, and she'd beat his ass. And we'd sort of pass his ass-whipping down the line until all of my family and my friends got a piece. Then I'd have him deported."

"You would have me deported?" Steele asked.

"Damn skippy."

"On what grounds?"

"On the grounds of you being stupid enough to think that I would gracefully bow out and let another woman have what is mine. And consider that if there are grounds to be found, my best friends could find them."

“That’s kind of harsh,” one of his brothers stated.

“Yeah, but not as harsh as the alternative.”

Being familiar with Atlanta’s *or death* choices, Steele knew that whatever came next would not be good. His family would soon learn that.

“And what would that be?”

“My friends and I could kill him, then dispose of the remains.”

“Nice friends you have,” one of Steele’s cousins commented.

“The best,” Atlanta agreed, wondering what the hell kind of half-ass interrogation this was. Momentarily forgetting her apprehension, she watched as Steele, his brothers and cousins were summarily shooed from the room. Though his brothers and cousins went immediately, Steele lingered.

“Out,” his mother ordered.

Steele looked as if he wanted to object, but his mother raised a single brow in challenge.

“Do I at least get to kiss her before I am thrown out?” a sulking Steele inquired.

“You’ve done enough kissing on her,” Danièle said, “and everything else from the screams we heard coming from upstairs. Now remove yourself from this room before I have your father remove you.”

Atlanta wished she could sink through the floor. His parents probably thought that she was a slut. Great. She planned to beat Steele’s ass, then fuck him senseless, since his parents already thought her easy.

Steele’s father didn’t appear like he wanted to move himself from his comfortable position on the sofa; he shot Steele a look that, to Atlanta, screamed, *Do as your mother asked so that I can rest*.

Regardless of being embarrassed, Danièle’s demeanor impressed Atlanta. Mom had just punked Steele in grand style. Though Atlanta occasionally got punked by her own momma, she sure as hell wouldn’t let Steele live this down. Regardless of his mother’s threat, Steele caught Atlanta’s eyes and mouthed that he loved her. She mouthed back that he’d better. Throwing her a look that promised that she’d be screaming out his name later, he finally quit the room. *Damn, he was hot*.

Waiting for the first question, Danièle placed a thick blanket on Atlanta’s lap and prompted her to rest. “Go ahead and close your eyes for a bit. It’s obvious that you are tired from fighting ... and other things.” She smiled mischievously.

Though tired, Atlanta felt compelled to engage in preemptive interrogation questioning. “Aren’t you going to ask me how I feel about Steele?”

“Not when it’s already obvious how you feel about him.”

“Aren’t you concerned that I’m after his money?”

“No -- it seems as if you’re after his body more than his money,” she replied. “Erik and I make beautiful children, so I’m not surprised.”

“Don’t you have any concerns about me?”

“No, and it wouldn’t matter if we did,” Erik said. “Steele won’t allow anyone to come between you. The men in the Magnussen clan are like that with their women. You had better accustom yourself to that, daughter.”

* * * * *

Much later that evening, a well-sated Atlanta found herself once again ensconced in Steele’s arms. Each day that she spent seemed to end the same way. The evening had turned out to be rather enjoyable despite its inauspicious beginning. She had enjoyed his family, who reminded her of the Posse. The women were like older versions of Silana while the men were like less intense versions of Jack.

Before the week had ended, Atlanta made fast friends with his brothers and cousins. They were unfailingly polite to her, which would’ve been fine if they were merely acquaintances, but she would be family. She made it her personal mission to whip them into shape. By week’s end, not only did she have them catering to her every ridiculous whim, she had them fully indoctrinated to her way of seeing things. They could’ve objected, but they realized that they, like Steele, couldn’t win an argument against her; they just let her have her way, just like her own brothers did.

They ordered her a new jersey and a few hockey jerseys as well. She hated hockey; nevertheless, the jerseys rocked. She had successfully converted them to Carolina fans. She had to get to them before they came into contact with Imax, who would attempt to bring them over to the dark side and have them cheering for Duke. She solicited promises that they would visit her in Atlanta because, despite its beauty, Norway was just too damn cold.

Chapter Sixteen

The wedding was a simple five-minute affair officiated by Indy. Though autumn, they held the ceremony in the Fuqua Orchid Center at the Atlanta Botanical Gardens since the gardens were a special place for them. It was as rare to glimpse Indy in her collar and robes as it was to see Atlanta in a dress and Aloha in something not neon. Nevertheless, miracles occurred. Atlanta and Steele married in the morning so Atlanta could catch the game in the afternoon.

Though Steele was familiar with the terrain of Atlanta's body, he was nearly struck stupid at his first glimpse of her in a gown. For a moment, he could not breathe. He felt as if someone had driven a fist into his chest. *Damn, she was beautiful.* He looked his fill as his future literally skipped toward him. Her braids were held back with a tiara. She wore a spaghetti-strapped Carolina blue dress, held up by her bountiful breasts and the grace of God. Though her dress was long, Steele felt sure she wore tennis shoes beneath it. Not that he cared, because she would not be wearing her wedding ensemble for long.

When Atlanta reached his side, instead of waiting for her to stand next to him, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. He did not cease until she shook with need, and he felt on the verge of exploding. Finally, he placed her in front of him, concealing his massive erection, where he kept her for the duration of their brief ceremony. Steele would not let her go until Indy pronounced Atlanta his wife. He held her there as they exchanged rings. When Indy officially granted license to kiss the bride, he did such a thorough job that those in attendance fanned themselves in an attempt to put out the flames.

"Steele, you're crushing my bouquet," Atlanta breathed, "and the stems are sticking into me."

"Get rid of them now, because I am not stopping," he answered between kisses.

Knowing that Steele was on the edge, Atlanta carelessly tossed her arrangement to Aloha and Steele snatched her into his arms; he carried her in the direction of the cars.

"Steele, where are you taking me?"

"To the nearest bed," Steele insisted. "Atlanta, I need you now."

"Steele, we have to take pictures, or my mother will hunt us down and drag us back."

Knowing she was right, he conceded the point, but not until he finished kissing her. Steele finally noticed the photographer who had rushed out and started snapping pictures as soon as he caught up with them, and barked, "You have five minutes, and then regardless of whether you are finished or not, I am taking my woman, and I am leaving."

* * * * *

Atlanta didn't remember much of the picture taking, the drive to Steele's house -- which she had taken over since it had a pool -- or the dizzying sprint to their room. Hell, she wasn't sure whose fucking car they drove there. She wasn't sure where she lost her shoes, garters, and stockings or where Steele had lost his jacket and tie. She wasn't sure of anything except that the male standing over her, ripping off the remainder of his suit, burned for her with a passion that would not be denied or extinguished.

She wanted him, even though she had no clue how to get out of her wedding gown. Still, she didn't care. Steele had honored her in so many ways. His unabashed desire and love for her brought tears to her eyes and contentment to her soul. She loved him. She ached for him. She needed him. Holding out her arms, she beckoned him with three words. "Steele, come home."

Steele felt close to *berserker*gang. His mate made him wild, and now that he had her, it still was not enough. He had never understood addiction until that moment. Addiction meant craving more of something while you indulged in the best of what you craved. He had Atlanta, yet he continued to want more and more of her and worried that forever would not be enough time to indulge in her.

His glowing blue eyes rested on his wife, so beautiful, and more importantly, all his. He would keep her, and God have mercy on anyone who attempted to take her from him. Hearing her call him home and witnessing the passion in her eyes only served to heighten his arousal. He did not know where to start or how to stop. He only knew that he had to have her, right this second, then for the rest of the day ... and then the next day, and everyday, for the rest of their lives.

Now fully undressed, Steele yanked Atlanta to him. Hiking up her dress, he ripped off her panties and impaled her on his throbbing cock. Heedless of the fact that he may have lost part of his hearing when she screamed out her first climax, he slammed into her over and over, demonstrating great strength and the legendary Magnussen stamina.

Atlanta had no words. Feeling Steele's cock embedded within her tight cunt had driven her immediately to orgasm. Every time he impaled her, she felt lost in the maelstrom of an unbelievable orgasm. She came without pause. She had already screamed down the house, yet she gave as good as she got. She rode Steele with one goal in mind: not to get bucked off. Pulling him in for a kiss, she took his breath and returned it to him. Taking one hard nipple between her index finger and thumb, she pinched it until she heard his moans increase in volume.

Growling, Steele proceeded to fuck her harder. She felt sure that he reached somewhere up in her ribcage. Kneading her ass, he continued to slam into her until he pushed her over the brink of sanity. She clawed at him in an attempt to bring him closer. She grabbed his shoulders, trying to push him further in.

"Steele, Steele, Steele," she chanted in time to his thrusts.

"Come for me ... again." Atlanta bathed the sensitive places in his mouth with her tongue and attempted to fill him with her essence, to become part of him that he could never again do without. Though she didn't think she had anything left to give, she came again only moments later. Her climax was so intense that, for a second, she felt like she was either lost in a bad sixties album cover or Aloha's closet. There were colors everywhere. Blinding in their intensity, they danced, wavering and exploding at various intervals. Sound faded, and the last thing that Atlanta heard before the world went black was her keening, reaching an octave that came close to shattering glass, and Steele's roar of completion that did break glass. She had made him come.

Atlanta came to slowly. Moaning, she attempted to sit up, but a strong hand held her.

"Baby, are you okay?"

Opening her eyes, she found Steele anxiously hovering above her. Reaching up and wrapping her arms around him, she replied, "I am now." Sensing something amiss, but not quite understanding what it was she asked, "What happened?"

"You passed out."

"Damn, so that's how a Viking puts it down, huh?"

"No, that is how the man who loves you puts it down for you and only for you. Are you okay?"

"Yes, Steele, I'm okay," she said as she smoothed his hair back from his face. She noticed then that he was bleeding. Pushing him over, she rose to inspect the damage to his shoulder. Blood flowed from an obvious bite mark. "Oh, Steele. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Pulling her down toward him, he remarked, "You did not hurt me. You honor me. First, you bite me; then you pass out. I think that that is proof enough that I am definitely *the* Man. Would you not agree?" If he had the energy, he would have had his secretary organize him a ticker tape parade, but since he did not feel like doing anything that would take him from his woman's side, he smirked instead.

Recalling an earlier conversation when she had informed him that he was a man, but not *the* Man, she sighed. Trust him to bring that up. But still, he did put it down. She hated it when guys smirked. "Yes, Steele, I admit that you are *the* Man, but more importantly, you are *my* man."

"Always," he promised.

"Since, you are *the* Man, perhaps you can get me out of this dress so I can show you why I'm *the* Woman."

He unhooked her dress and alternately kissed every inch of skin as he exposed it. Steele lingered over her throat, her lips, and the shell of her ear. It took him half an hour to remove her dress, and she enjoyed every moment. Laying her face down, Steele kissed a path down her spine. Shivering as he did so, she arched into his lips.

"Steele," she begged. "I need you."

"As I do you, Sweetheart," he promised, and for the first time, he made excruciatingly slow love to his wife -- liking the sound of that and loving her -- for the rest of the night, completely forgetting about the reception.

* * * * *

There are moments in life incapable of description.

This was one of those moments, Atlanta thought as she sat in her living room being teased to no end by her soon-to-be-former friends. Atlanta knew that she would be the subject of a lot of razzing, but this was beyond ridiculous. The Posse had actually made a tape entitled, "Why Atlanta's Momma is Going to Kill Steele." Infuriating male that Steele was, he merely continued to smile in between bites of the reception leftovers that Tina had warmed up for him, completely unrepentant.

If Atlanta hadn't been stuffing her face full of wedding cake, she might've said something. This was her house, dammit. She should call the police and have them arrested for trespassing. She didn't appreciate getting dragged out of bed at the crack of noon by the group of heathens making themselves at home in her house, talking straight smack. When she had inquired why the hell they were in her house in the first place, everyone was chock-full of explanations.

Though Atlanta and Steele had missed the reception, no one was alarmed after witnessing the way Steele couldn't keep his hands off of her.

"We figured that Steele had to have gotten his fill of you by noon, so we came over to fill with food. We didn't become alarmed until we found the front door ajar." Silana explained.

"Yeah and then we spotted the trail of clothes leading to the bedroom. Steele's blood-stained dress shirt and your shredded veil had us concerned." Aloha snickered.

Yeah, whatever, Atlanta thought. They were still going to die after she finished eating.

It was embarrassing enough that her mother and mother-in-law had witnessed the fallout that used to be a bedroom, but now everyone could witness it thanks to Aloha, who had ventured into the room along with them. While her mother and mother-in-law had immediately retreated after ascertaining that neither Atlanta nor Steele were victims of foul play, Aloha had traipsed through like a guide on a fieldtrip. The little pervert had whipped out a recorder and started taping.

Aloha was currently playing the film for the benefit of their family and the Posse who didn't get to witness the fallout firsthand. Not only did she add her own color commentary, she also circled things Madden-style. Aloha would be so dead if even one inch of Steele's ass was on that tape. On second thought, she was going to be so dead on general principle.

Broken glass covered a portion of the nightstand. Everyone discussed how the bottles of champagne had come to be shattered *in* the ice bucket. The divan, tipped over, had one half of Atlanta's bra wedged beneath it. The remains of Atlanta's panties hung among the window treatments, themselves half off the window. The mattress and virtually all of the bedding littered the floor, which explained why the couple was sprawled out on the carpet wrapped in each other and the remains of Atlanta's wedding dress.

"What the hell happened in there?" Zuri asked with awe.

"Where's the other half of your bra?" Reign inquired. "It looks like you filmed a wrestling pay per view."

"Damn, Steele," Zuri said. "What half of your heritage is responsible for that, the French half or the Viking half?"

"It was both," he replied.

"You know what this means, don't you?" Aloha asked.

"Field trip to France and Norway!" Zuri exclaimed.

"Or you could save the field trip and just kick it with his brothers and cousins," Jack threw in sagaciously.

"All of them?" Aloha inquired sweetly. "Do you think that they could handle Zuri?"

"Probably not, but I might be willing to give it a try for purely scientific purposes, mind you." Zuri winked in the direction of Steele's brothers, who winked right back.

"We chant your name," the guys had hailed while his father merely smiled.

Though they were talking to Steele, Zuri -- universal flirt that she was -- responded. "Not yet, but you will."

Atlanta felt as if she would die of embarrassment, right after she killed the entire Posse ... slowly. But first she had to finish eating; Steele had worked her all day and all night long. Plus, she guessed that engaging in a killing spree would really burn off the calories, so she could afford to indulge.

"It's a good thing you guys are already married, because if you weren't, I could envision a shotgun wedding in your future," Aloha piped in.

“You’d think that they had been separated for years,” Aloha threw in. “You just saw her on the prior evening, and everyday before that.”

“Yeah, but they had that lengthy wait through the actual wedding ceremony,” Indy joked. “I can’t believe that you couldn’t even wait five minutes until I instructed you to kiss the bride.”

“Well, you saw what happened when you actually gave him leave to kiss the bride,” Zuri added. “I was waiting for someone to hose them down.”

“I needed to be hosed down just watching them,” Aloha concluded.

“So why exactly did you keep Atlanta in front of you for the duration of the wedding?” Victorious asked.

“Because that is where she wanted to be,” Steele replied.

“That’s a good answer,” Reign said. “It’s bullshit, but still a good answer.”

“So, would you guys like to know how the reception went?” Silana inquired.

“Considering that half of you appear hung over,” Atlanta said with a nod to the crowd, “I’m guessing it was good, and I’ll bet that Jack and Silana drank everyone under the table.”

“It was better than good,” Zuri stated boldly. “It was unbelievable. And while Jack and Silana were busy drinking the guys under the table, we took bets on whether you and Steele actually made it to your room before you got it on.”

“And whether or not you got your dress all the way off beforehand,” Aloha said.

“And whether you even realized that you missed the reception,” Victorious told them.

“And whether or not you gave a damn,” the rarely talkative Jack added.

Seeing her mother enter the room with another plate of cake, Atlanta turned and inquired, “Are you going to say anything or just sit there and let them malign my character?”

“Oh, I’m going to sit here and reflect on the reason why I won’t have any pictures of your first dance,” her mother announced silkily, “or of you cutting the wedding cake, or why you were almost half-naked during the photo session.”

“You can put in an insert that says,” Zuri suggested, “‘Pictures missing because my daughter and her husband are sluts.’”

Atlanta sensed her mother would not help; she turned to Steele. “Are you going to say anything?”

“I love you.”

“And I love you, but that’s not the point.”

“Yes, it is,” he said before taking her lips in a thorough kiss.

“Steele, telling Atlanta that you love her may get you out of trouble with her, but don’t you think you need to work on getting out of trouble with me?” Atlanta’s mother asked.

Steele rose and hugged Tina before proclaiming, “I cannot say that I am sorry, because I would not mean it. I am sorry that you did not get all of the pictures that you desire,

however when I present you with a grandchild, I am sure that it will be water under the bridge.”

“Oh, he’s smooth,” Indy remarked.

“And he’s right,” Tina added. “Steele, I know you love my baby, and there’ll be lots more pictures to take.”

* * * * *

The afternoon slipped into an evening of straight-out fun. How could it not? After all, the thick of football season meant that teams were playing somewhere. And with the stash of leftover food from the reception and a house full of Southerners, the food and drink were plentiful. Any event that had the Posse in attendance resulted in non-stop laughter. The merrymaking went on for several hours before Atlanta’s momma hustled everyone out of the house.

“Y’all need your privacy,” Tina told Steele and Atlanta as everyone left.

Steele and Atlanta barely noticed their company depart. Steele was too busy kissing his wife who straddled his lap and moaned out her pleasure.

“I love you, Atlanta.” Steele said when they finally came up for air.

“And I love you right back, Steele,” she breathed. “You know, although I’ve never been one to spend a lot of time in church, I have to admit that my favorite part of the ceremony was when Indy declared that no man should tear asunder that which God has joined together.”

“Let that serve as our mantra then, what we say before we are separated by sleep or day-to-day tasks.”

“I will never leave you, Steele,” Atlanta promised.

“And I will never allow such foolishness,” Steele fervently declared.

Atlanta knew that what he said was true, not just because his eyes began glowing, but because Steele had said it.

Intertwining their right hands, Atlanta began, “What God has joined together ...”

“... let no man tear asunder,” Steele finished.

 THE END 

Jayha Leigh

Jayha Leigh uses her actual name as a pseudonym just in case she ever wilds out. She needs her ego stroked several times a day due to a mild case of megalomania. Her hobbies include: indulging her delusions of grandeur; plotting the destruction of all who oppose her. Her favorite color is Carolina blue, her favorite song is the MNF Jingle, her favorite season is football season, and her favorite food is dessert. She loathes luxury boxes at football stadiums, under wire in bras, diet anything, single-ply toilet paper, and people who refer to themselves in the third person.