

Beautiful Trouble Publishing

The Wild, Wild Nothing Less:

Victorious

Jayha Leigh

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CAVEAT

This work of erotica contains adult language and sexually-explicit scenes, which are smoking hot. This book is intended only for adults, as it is defined by the laws of the country in which the purchase is made. Keep this book out of the hands of under-aged readers.

Shout Outs

For every man who has ever loved a woman like Ephesians 5:25 and for every man who is trying to love his woman like that. For every woman who has been blessed with a man like that ... and knows it. For me and Mr. Me, for Kilisimasi and Jeanie, for Samisoni and Mariana, for Tyler and Moira, for Sven and Antoinette, and for RRM who has loved every woman like that – I hope you get the woman of your heart. Division Red, I hope the wait was worth it.

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.

Prelude I

See that beautiful woman over there—the mocha-colored woman wearing beautiful like she owns it ... *and make no mistake about it; that woman does indeed own beautiful* ... that's *my* woman. Nothing in this world (not even my own body) has ever been mine in the way that Mrs. Victorious Jefferson-Banks is mine. Though she's mine, the truth is that that woman owns me. Always on my mind, she's in every thought; she's in my blood; she's in my soul – tucked right up next to Jesus.

Some of you may be reading this smirking at how whipped I am, and that's okay because I am whipped ... and I don't care. Some of you may be reading and remarking on what an arrogant bastard I sound and that too is okay because having Victorious as my woman has made me a bit of a bragging bastard. Some of you may be wondering who is this cat that sounds borderline stalkerish about his woman. And just for the record, I'm not borderline stalkerish about Victorious. I am one-hundred percent crazy white boy over that woman. Note that, because I'll fight everybody in this world to keep that woman by my side. We're yoked, and as it was the Man Upstairs who did the yoking, I'm sure He wouldn't mind me going Old Testament God on anyone who tried to unyoke us. Excuse me while I pause to give him thanks one more time. Thank you, God.

Anyway, now that I've probably given y'all cause to doubt my sanity, let me introduce myself. I'm Iain Banks, the laid back southern boy who is the husband of Victorious. Most people who know me refer to me as Iain: husband of Victorious although my Victorious refers to me as the lucky SOB who has her as a wife. I can't even contradict her assessment because it's so damn true. Not only is it true, it was and is my biggest dream, my deepest hope, my greatest gift, and absolutely my privilege. My friends rag on me asking me about the whereabouts of my pride but I simply smile and tell them that my pride is in the heart and smile of the woman who is rocking my last name next to hers. They laugh but one day they'll learn that there ain't no room for pride when you love a woman so hard that you can't imagine loving any other way.

Courting Victorious was the most difficult challenge I've ever undertaken. It was also the most gratifying experience of my life. It taught me patience; it taught me humility; it taught me how to persevere; it taught me how to fight. Ultimately, it taught me about myself – what I wanted, what I couldn't live with, what I couldn't live without, and what I'd give up to have it.

I might've been a good catch in the opinion of every momma in town (well before I became enraptured with my Victorious), I might've had all of

the things that made me successful (the “good” family, the education, the clean criminal record, the white maleness, which for many born and bred southerners was the keys to society) but I still felt that none of those things came close to being enough for that woman. And it wasn’t because Victorious is greedy - for the record Victorious is one of the most giving people I know – it was because I simply feared not being enough. Oh, I was more than enough for everyone else but a woman like Victorious deserved all of the best things in life.

Victorious is the kind of woman that makes you want to be more. Not only do you want to reach your full potential; you want to exceed it. Being white, well-off, and educated was nice but those things in themselves wouldn’t even make Victorious turn her head for a second look. She was difficult to impress as a girl; as a woman, she has grown even more discerning. Having her own education, her own money, and her own goals, she didn’t need some man swooping in to rescue her; she needed a man with substance. I don’t know if I had substance but I know I had a love for her that wasn’t about to quit.

I know people - especially card-carrying heterosexual males – get the stink face about what they coin my greeting card way I talk about my woman, but fuck ’em because dammit that’s how I love Victorious and I

ain't ashamed of that ... and I ain't never going to be ashamed of that. They should be on their knees night and day asking the Good Lord to deliver them a woman like my Victorious. And yes, I do mean deliver. Being gifted with Victorious was my Exodus 12:51 moment, for surely, He brought me out of the land of darkness.

Every time Victorious smiles at me it's like sunrise over the Atlantic, it's like autumn in the Blue Ridge Mountains; it's like the break in a song. I look at that woman and I forget all of my troubles and most of my good sense. I feel her presence and want to surround her with all two hundred thirty pounds of man who loves her. Her beauty draws me in and before I know it I'm lost in her adventure, her passion, her righteousness.

Today was no different. As always, I was drawn into her. I was a thirsty man, a wanderer in the desert and she was my oasis. I wasn't immune to everything but my desire to be near her, in her, with her. My desire distracted me from my troubles; it also distracted me from the gleam in Victorious' eye.

You know the gleam that a woman gets right before she metaphorically (or literally in Jack's case) rips out a man's entrails? Yeah, she had that look (but I had to go back to hindsight to recall any damn thing). Although Victorious could think circles around me in her sleep and

didn't normally lean towards physical violence, I should've heeded that look for it hinted at her actions. Either Victorious was planning my demise or my post-demise expedition – both which promised bad things for me. Considering her eye for detail and her privileged rearing, I knew that my demise would be one of those watershed events in Posse lore. Considering Jack was an integral part of their Posse, I couldn't help but shudder.

Under that veneer of privilege and the layers upon layers of beauty and the cloak of intellect, lays a take-no-shit woman. I love every inch of her from the top of her intricately-braided hair to the bottoms of her feet that could kick through two layers of concrete thanks to the *kajukenbo* training she received under the tutelage of Master Morrison and the 'kick some freaking ass' training she received from Jack.

Despite her deadliness in the class room, in the court room, and in the bedroom (oh yeah, especially the bedroom), Victorious is soft, giving ... and mine. Or as she constantly corrects me, I'm all hers - until she says otherwise. It's so cute the way Victorious thinks I'd ever let her give me up. Though I'd give her the world, one thing I'll never give her is a divorce. That's why I'm here even though her hands can be considered a lethal weapon, even though she has a concealed weapons permit - and dead on

aim, even though she rolls with the kind of Posse that other posse's call for backup.

I'm a man, which means that I have some stupid in me. More importantly, I'm her man and I aim to stay her man. There ain't no quit anywhere in this body. Along with the no quit in me is a love that knows no bounds – physical or mental. So here I am, with an apology on my lips, determination in my stride, and repentance in my soul. I love that woman and just like God didn't give up on humanity, I'm not letting Victorious give up on us. Can't do it; won't do it. I'm a southern boy and we just ain't wired that way.

Prelude II: The Oh Damn

Somewhere between exiting my truck and walking to my front door, something went awry – and not just kind of awry or somewhat awry – but Custer’s Last Stand awry. That’s the only reason I can explain why my forehead seems to be throbbing in time to my heartbeat. If my heartbeat is the drums well then my head is the cymbals crashing in time with the steady thrum.

After taking a quick inventory and making sure everything worked, I focused on the indignity of having been leveled by a garden gnome. My sense of self-preservation had me focusing on the fact that my beautiful and livid wife had more garden sculptures at her disposal. Having been laid out by a garden gnome was the kind of thing that might put lesser males in therapy, and though I was lying flat on my ass being mocked by the remains of a toothy gnome and blanketed with invectives my wife hurled at me, I was not a lesser man. I was Victorious’ man. Right now my wife was being held back by her sisters ... well, *some* of her sisters. Though my vision was real hazy, I could clearly see Jack’s anger ... and that’s why I kept my ass put. Jack looked like she was contemplating kicking my ass, which is one of the reasons that I stayed put. Hey, I needed my intestines to remain *inside*

my body. I didn't think that Jack would kick a man when he was down, but being that Jack was the sort of woman who always had lime and a shovel in her trunk, I wasn't taking any chances.

Yep, I was going to stay put ... and relatively safe. Besides, the ground was so much more comfortable than a shallow grave. Plus, it was the one thing I could see clearly considering the throbbing pain in my head. As I lay there stunned and in pain, I thought back to the day when I informed Victorious' parents that I was going to marry their daughter. I don't remember every word we exchanged but I will never forget her father's caveat or her momma's rejoinder. Her father had asked me not to make him have to kill me, which was scary enough in itself, but her momma's rejoinder gave me the straight heebie-jeebies and if you don't know what heebie-jeebies are, trust me you don't want to know. *'Don't make me find a rogue scientist to reincarnate you so that I can kill you some more until I run out of ways to end your life.'*

I wasn't ready to experience the Inquisition of Victorious' momma. I could live for all eternity and never be ready for that. I had to make this right. No matter what else I did in my sorry life, I had to make this right ... not simply because I was scared of Victorious' momma but because I loved Victorious too much to do ought else but make it right.

Feeling wetness trickle down my face, I touched my forehead in an effort to figure out what was wrong. The pain was subsiding but it still hurt like hell. Even through the pain all I could think about was how much I loved that woman and how I was going to usher in sunset and sunrise by making love to her ... right after I regained consciousness.

Book I: In the Beginning

Though I've only known her for eleven years, four months, ten days, six hours, five minutes and forty-three seconds, I have loved Victorious Jefferson all of my life. I believe that with every fiber of my being. I was created in His image to love, cherish and honor that woman. God is good ... all the time.

The first time that I laid eyes on her was on that Sunday morning in the sanctuary of Alcira Presbyterian Church that I attended. Being that I was going to be introduced to my bride, you would've thought that I would've felt different that morning, but I didn't. Part of it could've been the monotony of Sunday mornings and part of it could be chalked up to the fact that I was a teenage boy full of testosterone and easily bored.

Though I didn't feel different that morning, the atmosphere in church was different. There was only one topic of conversation on everyone's lips – and ironically, it wasn't the Man Upstairs but the new family. After all, football season wasn't due to start up until fall and we didn't have much excitement in a town that boasted one church, a downtown that didn't have a single building taller than two stories and a storied history that revolved mostly around America back when it was referred to as the New World and

Division 4-A high school football. The only reason that our school boasted lacrosse and soccer teams was due to our proximity to the nation's capital. It wasn't particularly close, but it was close enough.

Having espied a fleet of tractor trailers at the house, we suspected that they'd soon arrive – if not to stay, then at least to check out their new digs. Being that their staff had been busy around town seeing to the delivery of food and the Washington Post, we were sure we'd see them soon enough. Rumor had it that their maid had inquired about the start time of the service, however the reverend would neither confirm or deny such a conversation took place, probably because he counted on curiosity leading to a larger-than-normal turnout. Not to be derailed, the congregation had very conspicuously left a vacant row at the very front ... just in case. When my mom discovered that little tidbit of information, she whipped up her famous strawberry shortcake and packed it in the truck. She was big on being neighborly.

You know what they say about wishes and prayers - be careful what you ask for because you just might get it. The new family had indeed arrived, and they were attending church. To this day, I still can't call which was the more interesting sight to behold when they stepped into the sanctuary at 10:55 am – the look of incredulity on the faces of the

congregation or the subtle fist pump the Reverend Rice gave when they came in.

Their arrival was met with a chorus of gasps followed by complete and utter silence. Their entire family could have stepped from the pages of fashion magazines. They were a right regal-looking family and that wouldn't change even if they were standing next to the Queen of England and her family.

They all wore a deep, abiding dignity and strength. The men all wore three-piece suits and the women all wore fanciful hats. And then there was *her*. She was beautiful. She had some kind of braid thing going on which fell down her back in curls.

I don't know much about hair other than I think that females should have plenty of it and guys should have a lot less. That's not terribly politically correct of me, but then I've never been accused of being politically correct. Besides it's just my opinion and the Constitution says that that's alright.

Now let me get back to her being beautiful. She had the blackest eyes I've ever encountered set in a face that belonged on billboards. She wore a blue pant suit to church with what my mama whispered were Christian Louboutin shoes. I had no idea who the French-sounding guy was but

apparently he was important in the world of ladies shoes. If the girls didn't already envy her for walking in and becoming the undisputed, best-looking girl there, her neat hair, her designer shoes, and her daring to wear pants to church made her even more envied, and thus hated.

The only reason that the other girls didn't spend the entire service glaring holes in her back was the fact that they were surreptitiously sneaking glances at her brothers - all who looked like they played defensive end for some big time college program. They snuck glances because regardless of how close we were to the nation's capital, we were still in the south, and white women still liked to pretend that they weren't interested in black men. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to pretend that I wasn't interested in black women but it didn't matter because I was. Actually, I was only interested in one particular black woman: her.

It was customary for visitors to stand and introduce themselves. Their mother did the honors. We didn't know what they did to afford that house, that helicopter, or that yacht but a lot of the adults had 'doctor' preceding their names. That really pissed off a lot of people, especially the handful of doctors who resided in our town. It seems the whole town had a lot to be pissed off about and I found myself wondering if my mama would give them that cake. It wasn't that my mama wasn't nice; it was that we

owned a bakery and people had short tempers and long memories. We may be residents of an upscale area but we were not members of the elite club.

I waited through the introductions with the same kind of anxiousness that little kids waited for Christmas morning. I was sure that I'd need to know her parents name for when I asked them for her hand in marriage but right now I just needed to find out her name. And then I heard it. I'm sure it was heralded by trumpets playing and angels singing but I didn't hear anything except her name winging its way to my ear. Her name was Victorious. That was a beautiful name but she was going to have to move that to her middle name because her first name was 'My'. My Victorious. My soul liked the sound of that.

I looked at her ... and I haven't stopped looking since. Raised to act like I had some sense in church, I should've paid attention to the reverend, but truthfully, the reverend didn't have Victorious' panache, style, or beauty ... and after I got to know her I could add articulation to that list. Words were created for Victorious. She didn't simply speak them from her mouth; she birthed them from her soul. Words did not die in her mouth; they became the foundation of possibilities, big dreams, and the manifestation of long-held hopes.

There was just no way that the reverend, as learned, dedicated, and kind as he was, could compete with my Victorious. She was something to look at. Beautiful on the outside, something about her commanded my attention – and it wasn't simply her graceful curves.

Her family had moved into the neighborhood overnight ... or so it seemed. One evening we went to bed in our quiet, upscale enclave of Alcira and the next morning we woke up to full on integration. In one fell swoop we had African-Americans in our town, Baptists in the Presbyterian Church, and Democrats in the white house. Not that white house, but Lillian House, which was the only white house on Alcira's waterfront. For that matter, it was the *only* house on the waterfront.

The Jefferson family now owned Lillian House, which used to be the grandest home in Alcira. Though it had fallen into a state of what southerner's refer to as genteel ruin, it was still the gem of our town if not the gem of the entirety of the whole of the Virginia coast. Sitting on twenty acres of prime real estate, it was what the house in *Gone with the Wind* wanted to be when it grew up.

And now it'd gone and got itself some new owners and a makeover. Gone were all traces of genteel ruin. In the neighborhood of nine-thousand

square feet, the home was a mix of stained glass windows and stately columns that ran from the roof to the ground.

If the house itself wasn't enough, then there was the landscaping. Brimming to overflowing with crepe myrtles, dogwood trees, gardenias, tulips, and all manner of foliage, their yard looked like springtime began and ended there. The lawn itself made the back nine at Augusta look like crabgrass.

Though the house itself stayed true to its historic roots, modernity had tagged along for the ride. There was a tennis court, a helicopter pad, and a dock for their yacht. Nestled in the backyard was a pool complete with waterfall and hot tub. There was even a grilling area that was the envy of many a tailgater.

This fairytale wasn't even surrounded by a gate. That was because Lillian House could only be accessed by private bridge. Later, I'd learn to appreciate that because that bridge kept the riffraff away from my Victorious.

The town didn't quite know how to react ... to any of it. And by 'it' I mean the Jefferson's blackness (*which was obvious by their skin color*), their richness (*which was obvious from their helicopter pad*), their intelligence (*which was obvious by their titles of 'Dr.'*), and their 'we don't

give a damn-ness' (*which was obvious by the way that they eschewed society's attempt at hierarchy*). This was a black family that was comfortable with whom they were and didn't care whether or not white America (or at least Alcira, Virginia) took the time to get to know them. They knew themselves ... and nothing we (the powers that be) said, declared, or intimated was going to make them see themselves as society wanted them to be seen.

As civilized as we pretended to be, our perceptions of African-Americans, Democrats, and northerners made liars of us all. Not only did we believe in stereotypes, we considered them in the same way we did the canonical Gospels. We quoted them (or at least believed in them) chapter and verse so much so that one would think the order of our New Testament was Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Stereotype.

The Jefferson's threw us for a loop. If the Jefferson's had had any mercy on us they would've subscribed to at least the tried-and-true stereotypes, but they didn't live life by the mercy rule. They lived life by the Jeremiah 22:3 rule. They weren't anything like the African-American people on rap videos, although they did drive a Bentley (or rather their chauffeur drove them in the Bentley).

They might not have been anything like the prescribed stereotype but the residents of Alcira were. We did WASP like we invented it – and considering the fact that we were one of the first towns in the New World, our ancestors just might have. Regardless of what we wanted or were prepared for, we had our first African-American family. Oh, we had African-American people in our town, but they worked here; they didn't live here.

The Jefferson's didn't simply live here; they mostly played here. Lillian House was their 'other' house in the same way that my feet were my 'other' mode of transportation. They weren't merely well off. Hell, they weren't merely stinking rich; the Jefferson's were filthy, stinking, disgustingly, you ought to be ashamed of yourself rich ... and so were their friends. Families like the Carrington's of Jupiter Island, Florida; the Jamison's of Denver; the McDyess' of Annapolis; and, the Bishop's of Atlanta were regulars at Lillian House.

Their bling isn't what alerted us to their wealth. They didn't wear bling or labels on their clothing. We knew they were wealthy from the way they looked at the richest families in town. Though their smiles reached their eyes, I always imagined them saying, *'oh you're worth two million dollars – how quaint.'* If the town of Alcira were a plantation (and parts of

it used to be); than the Jefferson's were undoubtedly the new slave masters. Irony of ironies, they had the house that was the perfect backdrop.

The house was no longer just a house. As Luther crooned, it was a home. And that home made a statement about the people who lived there: we have endured. I didn't know how prophetic that was until I came to know the occupants of that house.

Chapter Two

While the Jefferson's were regularly spotted in the society pages, they kept to themselves when in Alcira. They usually only ventured into town for church every other Sunday. Rumor had it that they weren't even Presbyterian, but Baptists and attended a predominantly African-American church in the nation's capital on alternate Sundays. Since they rarely ventured into town, I rarely saw Victorious. I did however catch occasional glances of her ... and I fell a little bit deeper every time. I don't care how many people try to chalk it up as infatuation; they're all wrong. I loved her ... and I knew it way back then.

Since she was home-schooled, church was the only place that I saw her. I wondered if I would ever get to see her for more than an hour at church every other week - and I do mean an hour. Not fifty-nine minutes, not one hour and one minute, but one hour. The hour-long service is a staple of the white church-going community. I would later discover that's why Victorious and her brothers enjoyed attending our church.

I finally got my chance to see more of her at Vacation Bible School. Not only did I see her, it was the first time I saw her in casual attire. Despite the fact that many churches encouraged their congregants to wear

casual attire, the Jefferson's weren't playing that. Casual attire was for attending sporting events or having a cookout, not going to God's house. The men in her family always wore a jacket and tie regardless of how hot it was, and the women always wore something that looked expensive.

Even their casual wear wasn't all that casual. For once, I was glad that my mom was so particular about some things. My parents weren't strict, but they were funny about certain things like being neighborly (by the way my mom did give them that cake ... and I gave her a big hug) and looking presentable. My friends often teased me about being so neat. I didn't go out of the house in anything that had a hole in it, wasn't the correct size, or wasn't pressed to within an inch of its life, even when I went out to play pick up basketball or softball. That's why I was dressed similarly to her brothers. That is, we had on crisp polo shirts - neatly tucked in of course - khaki shorts, and tennis shoes. She wore denim Capri pants, a sleeveless v-neck shirt that showed off what I guessed were D-cups, and sandals that showed off her pretty feet. Pretty from two pews away, Victorious was even prettier right next to me.

We held Vacation Bible School in the high school because of the number of kids that came out for it. That was probably the only time that Victorious and her brothers had ever stepped foot in a public school. I

realized that they probably had no idea where to head and I walked up to assist.

I approached her most massive brother rather than approach her like my body encouraged. My mind overrode my body letting it know that it didn't think a good beating was the best way to start the day although being able to withstand a good beating might impress her.

"Hi, I'm Iain. Would you like some help?"

"Thank you, Iain. I'm Nat. These are my brothers Gabriel and Denmark and our sister Victorious. And yes, we would appreciate your assistance."

I showed them to their classroom, surprised that they were in my group. I noticed that there was never a time when Victorious was not flanked by one – if not all - of her brothers. Her brothers served as her impromptu security detail, and it was obvious that Nat was the head of security. They would've sat her next to a wall, but from the looks of things she strongly objected. Instead she sat front and center and they surrounded her on all sides. Denmark and Gabriel even scooted their chairs closer to her. The warning was clear. For that matter it should've been clear when people caught wind of their names. They protected what was theirs ... at all costs. Victorious was theirs and she was off limits.

No one spoke to them and they returned the favor. They merely sat and listened attentively, turning in their Bibles when instructed to and scribbled a few notations. At lunch, they retreated to a table by themselves and ate. That was the routine they stuck with for the first two days. When I went home my mom asked me how Vacation Bible School was. I replied with the standard teen reply to virtually every question, ‘fine’.

“Rumor has it that the Jefferson children are attending.”

“They are.”

“Did you speak to them?”

“I showed them where their class was.”

“And?”

“And that was pretty much it. They kind of keep to themselves.”

“Hmm. Is anyone else speaking to them?”

“No.” *And had I been paying attention rather than participating in every high school boy’s first love - snacking - I would’ve realized that I was being set up ... or maybe not being that from what I’ve seen guys don’t really outgrow that.*

“But you’re not letting that deter you from being neighborly are you?”

“I don’t think that they...” I began only to be cut off by my mom.

“Young man, you were not raised in a barn.”

My mom might've lived in the south for most of her life, but she went to school up north - with Yankees and attended college at Oberlin, which made her a card-carrying tree-hugging hippy.

“You better start acting neighborly or else. They are decent people. They even sent a thank you card for the dessert - handwritten, on heavy stationary.”

* * *

Experience had already taught me that I didn't want to find out what came after 'or else' so the next day I walked over to Nat and offered up the boxed up shortcake.

“Uh, my mom sent this. You don't have to eat it, but she spent a long time making it so even if you don't like me...” I began.

I was stumbling, trying not to piss them off, but my mom is my mom, you know.

Before I could finish, Victorious snatched the box and asked, “Is this more strawberry shortcake?”

“Ah, yes.”

“Thank you.”

“Well, uh. I'm glad that you liked it,” I said as I went to my seat.

At lunch I was in the process of finding the best seat to covertly sneak peeks at Victorious when Nat asked me if I would like to eat lunch with them.

“Sure,” I said as I walked with him to their table.

After settling into my seat, Nat asked if he needed to make introductions again.

“I know you’re Nat and she’s Victorious, but I’m not sure which of you is Gabriel and which is Denmark,” I admitted.

“Gabriel is on your left; Denmark’s on your right,” he said.

“You can tell Denmark apart from the others because he’s the better-looking one being that he’s my twin,” Victorious piped in.

“Ah, you’re really twins?” I asked surprised because Denmark towered over her, as did all of the males in her family and that was saying something being that she wasn’t exactly short.

“Absolutely,” she assured me before bombarding me with the first question. “Did you spit in this or do something nasty to it?” She asked pointing to the strawberry shortcake.

“No! My mom would kill me if I did something nasty like that - especially to something she baked.”

“Okay,” she said before digging into it.

“You ate the first one?” I asked.

“Hell yeah, I ate it.”

“Language, Victorious,” Nat reminded her.

“And when she says that she ate it, she means that she literally ate the entire thing,” Gabriel added.

“Actually, it was more of an inhaling,” Denmark offered.

“I offered you guys some and you turned it down so stop whining.”

“So strawberry shortcake is your favorite dessert?” I asked.

“It is now,” she beamed at me. “Is sitting with us going to get you in trouble with your friends?” Victorious asked around a mouthful of cake.

“It’s my mom that I worry about - not my friends,” I answered.

“Then you should sit with us everyday,” Victorious said although it didn’t sound like I was going to get a chance to decline if I wanted to - not that I wanted to.

Chapter Three

I understand why envy is one of the seven deadly sins. Envy makes you act the damn fool. Vacation Bible School would've gone off without a hitch if Victorious could just look a little less beautiful, if she could've been just a little less stylish, if she wasn't the center of attention so much. But she was Victorious which made her the most beautiful and stylish female in the place ... and I wasn't the only guy noticing that. I would've been a little bit more pissed off about that fact if her brothers hadn't been present. It was obvious that her brothers were present to insure her wellbeing. I bet that was their daddy's doing because the mere thought of having a daughter makes me shudder. I'd need a minimum of four sons for every daughter to see to her safety. And if I didn't have a private bridge separating my property from the rest of the town, I'd need to build her a castle tower ... surrounded by a moat ... filled with man-eating sharks.

Apparently, some of the girls got tired of all of the attention that Victorious received. Meghan, who was being groomed to be future First lady of Alcira, walked up and boldly committed what was the worst social mishap of if not her life, her high school career. I learned many things that day. Chief amongst them was that one did not nick Victorious' name.

Second, Victorious had a temper. And though it might take a lot to stir it up, once it was roused, someone was going to get a full dose of it, which meant that someone was going to have a very bad day.

“Hi, um Vickie?” Meghan asked.

“My name is Victorious,” she immediately corrected.

“Yeah, okay. Well, um, the other girls and I were wondering something.”

At first Victorious didn’t say anything; she simply looked at Meghan with a look that said *‘wow, you’re actually smart enough to wonder.’*

“And you might be?” Victorious asked.

Normally, that question wouldn’t have been an insult but this was Meghan that was being asked it and Meghan wasn’t just any other girl at school; Meghan was homecoming queen *every* year.

“I’m Meghan,” she answered as if it was the *‘once upon a time’* and the *‘and they lived happily ever after’* in a story. “Anyway, we were wondering how many kids you had.”

I was floored. I knew girls could be catty, but damn. No matter how much I disliked a dude, I wouldn’t go up to him and ask something so disrespectful without expecting to kick off some type of brawl. I was about to jump in and defend Victorious’ honor but Denmark subtly shook his

head. Taking his cue, I sat back and waited for the train wreck to go down. Oh, at the time I didn't know it was going to be a train wreck but that was because I didn't know how to read Victorious. *Notta Bene*: when Victorious stops eating her favorite dessert and speaks in a deceptively calm voice – it's getting ready to be so on.

“So let me get this straight,” Victorious said as she carefully placed her fork on a napkin. “After extensive collaboration, *that's* the question that you all came up with?”

Meghan apparently didn't get the insult but her cluelessness didn't deter Victorious from continuing her line of questioning. “Why would you think that I had any children?”

“Well, you are um,” she began.

“Oh, I see,” Victorious said. “Well, let me appease your curiosity. I do not have any children, but let me ask you a question, Meghan.” *Man, she said Meghan's name like a curse word. I knew right then that I never wanted Victorious to ever say my name like that.*

“Okay,” Meghan agreed as she flipped her shampoo-ad hair.

“Well,” Victorious paused.

In the pause, I easily heard Gabriel's soft curse. The silence was loud. It was like those old EF Hutton commercials. You know the ones that went, '*when EF Hutton talks, everybody listens.*'

"When was the last time that your head was bobbing up and down in some guy's lap? I just ask because you know, you're..." She let the sentence trail off.

"Oh, damn!" My exclamation shattered the silence. Meghan's face drained of all color as did the faces of the troupe of girls who'd accompanied her. Recovering from her shock, Meghan took a step forward and Victorious was there to meet her. I was worried that Meghan might slap Victorious, but considering the look on Victorious' face, that would've kicked off a *New Jack City* moment.

Though she acted all casual, I knew that Victorious was ready for something to pop off ... and from her stance, I knew that this was not the first fight she'd been in. Unfortunately, it also wouldn't be the last fight she'd be involved in. Victorious might be high society but something in her demeanor said that she was no stranger to mixing it up.

A crowd had gathered and leading the pack was Meghan's boyfriend. I didn't like the way this was unfolding. Scooting closer to Victorious, I looked around at the crowd. It was then that I realized how quickly a crowd

could turn into a mob. No one was wielding any torches but they clearly had a *'let's get the tar and feathers ready'* look about them. There was no telling what might've happened next had Nat not sprung into action. He went all secret service mode and had Victorious safely behind a wall of Jefferson males ... and one Banks man. Nobody told me to get involved but no one was going to put their hands on Victorious while I was present.

Luckily, the staff had finally decided to make an appearance. I learned many things that day - chief amongst them was that one can get expelled from Vacation Bible School. Instead of trying to figure out what had happened (as if they hadn't been watching the whole thing) the adults merely marched over and informed a mad as hell Victorious that she would not be allowed to return. And surprise of surprises, I was given the same speech - probably for having the gall to sit at a table with four black kids.

I didn't think that Victorious really gave a damn about being expelled. As I watched all 6'6" of Nat try to reason with Victorious, I kind of got the feeling that being expelled was not a unique experience for her. She tried to stomp off but not even her determination was a match for Nat's strength.

"Iain, you don't have to speak to us anymore if we're going to make you lose all of your friends," she said.

Victorious was giving me an out, but I wasn't taking it. There are times in a person's life where you stumble upon a fork in the road. This was my time. My friends were all walking down one fork, and Victorious was on the other. And there was no choice. I was going with Victorious.

"Victorious, I thought that you liked me or at least my mom's strawberry shortcake," I joked.

"I do like you and I love your mom's strawberry shortcake but you have to go to school here," she said.

"Yeah, I do have to live here right now but I have to live with me forever," I said as I took her hand. The disapproving glares on the faces of my classmates faded away as I basked in the smile on her face. Hand-in-hand we stood in front of the school waiting. I wasn't sure what we were waiting for, but I was sure that I was going to be by Victorious' side. We made an odd-looking group: three large black guys, their beautiful sister, and me – one gangly-looking white boy.

I made to let go of her hand when I spied their driver pulling up to the curb but Victorious had other ideas. Holding on tighter, she dragged me into the luxury automobile with her. Let me just say one thing. I'm a truck man but damn I couldn't help but be impressed by that Bentley. Being that Nat commandeered the front seat, it left the back seat to the rest of us. If

you ever have to be wedged tightly in a vehicle, I highly recommend that vehicle be a Bentley and that the person you're sitting next to is as beautiful as my Victorious.

Ah, yes Victorious was beautiful. And angry. As soon as the car stopped, Victorious crawled over me and ran into the house.

"Is she going to be okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, she'll be okay – in a day or two. She's probably in there trying to plead her case."

From experience I knew that pleading one's case to one's parents never actually did any good. It just got you yelled at longer. I didn't want to witness Victorious getting yelled at so I excused myself. I planned to walk home; after all it wasn't like it was all that far away being that Alcira wasn't all that big. I didn't get three feet before Mr. James cleared his throat.

"Dr. Mrs. is going to want to speak to you too so you might as well go on in there."

Victorious' mom was waiting at the door. She asked, or rather she demanded, an explanation in what I learned was the *'cross-examining a witness that she wished she could beat the truth out of* tone. After hearing everyone's side she grounded Victorious for a month and her brothers for

the remainder of the week. I felt bad for Victorious because it really wasn't her fault that Meghan was, well Meghan. I didn't have the stomach to watch someone voice displeasure with Victorious. At least Victorious was grounded like she did everything else - in grand style.

I learned something else that day (it was an enlightening day). Victorious' parents had no problem punishing children that didn't belong to them.

"Iain, I might not be your mother but you're grounded."

"But," I said.

"Don't talk back, sweetheart. Now, I'm giving you an assignment due by the end of the week. I want you to write a paper on why one should refrain from cussing in public. You should also include a list of laws that were violated and the penalty for those laws. The paper should be five pages, double-spaced, using the Chicago documentation style. And if I don't have it, I will double the page requirement everyday until I do have it. Now you can always opt not to do it, but until it's done, you won't be able to see Victorious. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Good, hold on while I call your mother and let her know that Mr. James is bringing you home."

* * *

I heard that though Meghan didn't get expelled from Vacation Bible School, she didn't attend the rest of the week. Well, saying that I heard isn't quite true. I could barely hear anything out of my left ear by the time my mom finished yelling at me. I didn't get yelled at for getting expelled from Vacation Bible School. I got yelled at for acting like I didn't have any home training. They hate it when you cuss out loud at a church function. I didn't particularly mind my expulsion from Vacation Bible School; I just considered it ironic.

Second chances might be what church-religion was all about but we didn't violate church religion so much as we violated the religion of Alcira, Virginia. We had not only sinned, we'd committed the unforgiveable sin of blasphemy. We took the name of Alcira in vain and make no mistake about it, Meghan was Alcira, Virginia.

Other than the temporary deafness, the rest of the week was pretty good. Since Victorious and I were the only ones expelled, we spent that time on the phone. I learned a lot about her. First and foremost, she was a Carolina fanatic. And when I say Carolina I mean the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and not the university located in Colombia, South Carolina. Of all the laws that Victorious recognized, chief among them was

that there is only one Carolina and it was in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Second, she knew a lot of words. Third, she knew how to use them. No one talked like Victorious talked ... well except for her momma. Having heard her momma talk, I knew that Victorious had been groomed from birth to be the kind of orator that made the likes of Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and John C. Calhoun seem like the character 'Champ' from the movie *Harlem Nights*.

I also learned why she was the only one in her family who was home-schooled. School simply wasn't enough of a challenge to keep her interested and a bored Victorious was a Victorious on the verge of some kind of felony. So while her brothers attended a prestigious school outside of D.C., she attended the school of Dr. Mrs. Jefferson and you can better believe that she was the star pupil.

Having been warned about her momma's stringent rules, I put every ounce of intellect into my paper. That was a bit tricky with all of the extra hours that my mom made me put in at the bakery. I really didn't really mind working in the bakery but I wasn't offering up that information to my momma.

At week's end, I scooped up my paper and boxed up a strawberry shortcake and headed to Victorious' house. Walking up to her door, I was

somewhat intimidated as it was my first solo trip across the private bridge that led to their estate. Despite being intimidated and also awed by the sheer magnificence of the grounds, nothing was going to keep me from going to see my Victorious ... even if it was for a second or two. Taking a deep breath, I rang the doorbell. I was surprised that Victorious answered.

“Hey, Iain.”

“Hey, I just wanted to drop this off.”

“Why?”

Yeah, why? Because I'm totally in love with you.

That's what I wanted to say, but I settled for, “Because.”

She smiled and took the shortcake.

“Tell me that you have my mother's assignment somewhere in this bag because it's going to be hard being friends with someone that I'm not allowed to see,” she said.

“It's in the bag, under the cake.”

“Iain, you know that my mom's an attorney. You didn't write a bullshit paper for her did you?” She asked.

“Yes, to the first question; No, to the second.”

“Good, well come in. I'll proof it before she marks it up.”

“Uh, aren't you grounded?”

“Yeah, and?”

“Should you have company while you’re grounded?”

“Oh, you don’t think that I’m worth the risk?” She taunted.

“Yeah, but it’s going to be kind of hard being friends with someone that I’m not allowed to see,” I threw back. *Yeah, score one for me, my ego shouted.*

Smiling she said, “I’m forbidden to leave the premises; I’m not forbidden to have company. So are you coming in?”

“I want to but I don’t want to get you in trouble,” I said.

“Iain, my mom’s an attorney. She’s quite specific when she speaks.”

“Okay,” I conceded as I kicked off my shoes and entered.

“I’m glad you’re not one of those guys who wears shoes without socks. I don’t know why guys think that women are interested in looking at their nasty ass feet.”

“Okay, so note to self: throw away all sandals,” I joked.

“You don’t have to toss them away. You can keep them as examples of a misspent youth,” she said as she headed to the kitchen.

“Ah, is someone here besides us?” I asked nervously.

“Yes, Iain,” she sighed. “I might push the envelope but I have no desire to fight my mother being that I’m rather fond of breathing. My

mother is alpha and her word is law,” she revealed as she called her brothers.

“What’s up, Iain?” They chorused.

“Don’t tell me that you brought her more cake,” Gabriel asked.

“Yeah.”

“Dude, you’re so whipped,” Denmark said.

“Did you do mom’s assignment?” Nat inquired.

“I did. Victorious is proof-reading it now.”

“Well, come watch TV with us while little Ms. Teacher’s Helper reads it,” he teased.

Victorious merely gave him the one-finger salute as we headed to a room with the biggest TV I had ever seen. If I hadn’t seen Victorious first I would’ve courted that TV with the intentions of making it Mrs. Iain Banks. I settled down in the living room trying not to stare at the opulence of the room. It was hard to get comfortable knowing that the contents of this one room probably cost more than my parents’ home.

Though I was nervous, her brothers didn’t give me a chance to be more than superficially nervous. They immediately drew me into conversation. The conversation made me realize that regardless of social

location, guys were guys. Though they were better-educated, I held my own with them. Soon the room was filled with male laughter and junk talking.

Victorious walked in just as her brother remarked how bossy she was.

“I’m not bossy. I merely have to keep repeating myself when I’m speaking to anyone with a y-chromosome,” she said as she sauntered in.

“Nice paper, Iain, but mom’s going to make you correct all of your mistakes and resubmit it.”

“If she’s going to make me do it again then how can it be a nice paper?”

“Because you’re submitting it to my mom and she’s all about her ducks being in order. Besides if it was a bad paper, she’d simply toss it in the fireplace and mock you unmercifully.”

“Have you ever been mocked unmercifully?” I asked.

“Not since I was ten,” she said.

“Now let’s talk about other stuff, like playing Monopoly,” she said.

“Iain before you say yes to Victorious’ proposition, you might want to know that she’s quite conniving,” Denmark said.

“And hateful,” Nat threw in.

She turned to me and asked, “Are you going to allow them to malign my character?”

“Uh, yes,” I immediately answered.

“Why?”

“Because if push comes to shove, I think I can take you in a fight, but I don’t really want to fight all three of them,” I said.

“Ah, you are so cute.”

She thinks we’re cute, my ego preened.

“You seriously think that you can take me in a fight?” She asked.

Okay, maybe not. Still, she was talking to me and looking at me ... and smiling at me. Maybe she doesn’t think I’m cute – yet, but perhaps one day she will. But before ‘one day’ could get here, first I had to give her an excuse to keep being my friend.

“Maybe if you had one hand tied behind your back, and stood on one foot and I saved up enough money to become genetically-enhanced,” I replied.

“For that comeback, I might allow you to end this game with your dignity intact,” she promised.

“Lies!” Gabriel threw out. “Why do you think that the rest of us refuse to be suckered into playing with her?”

While I didn’t get suckered into playing with her, I did play with her knowing full well that I would’ve paid for the privilege.

Chapter Four

Victorious didn't bankrupt me. She left me with exactly one dollar, which - Gabriel assured me was quite a showing on my behalf. Preening, I helped her put away the game.

Being that her thrashing didn't take long, Victorious and I sat in the window seat and ... talked. Since I wasn't trying to stave off bankruptcy, and she wasn't in robber-baron mode, conversation was easy. I know that talking with a woman usually involves agreeing in appropriate places and assurances that their butt doesn't look big, but it was different with Victorious. I hoped that she never asked me that butt question because I'd be tempted to go Sir-Mix-A Lot on her and something told me that she wouldn't appreciate that.

Though we talked, in hindsight I realized that she asked questions and I answered them. I really didn't think that I was all that interesting, but then I'd never had an extensive conversation with her before. Someone should've told me that Victorious had mastered advanced interrogation. In ten minutes flat, she learned all of my dirty, little secrets - okay she didn't really learn that because if she had any idea the dreams that I had about her she would've run screaming from the room as her brothers beat me to a

quick death ... not that she was a dirty, little secret. On second thought she might have helped them. Anyway, she learned my secret dreams - well besides her marrying me - but then again I'm not so sure that dream was all that secret.

* * *

Just as it became routine for me to take a beating in Monopoly, it became routine for Victorious and me to talk. It was a rare thing for a girl to show so much interest in me being that our town was filled with 'it' guys, of which I wasn't one. Still, for everything I wasn't; she was still interested in me. That's how she learned my passion for playing the guitar and lacrosse.

"Ah, Iain, you play the guitar, you play little brother of war, and you play by the rules my mother laid out for you, obviously, you were made for me."

What did you say to that? I was too choked up to do anything except stare at this woman but her brothers just shook their heads.

"You shouldn't have told her you play lacrosse, Iain. Victorious really crushes on that sport."

"Well, that's a good thing, right?" I asked.

“Perhaps you don’t understand. When we say Victorious crushes on it, we don’t simply mean that she likes the sport; we mean that she should be in some sort of support group.”

“Shut up before I tell dad,” Victorious said. “Don’t hate on me just because y’all don’t have the decency to play a *real* sport.”

“We play golf,” Denmark threw out.

“Note that I said ‘real’ sport. Golf is not a real sport; golf is just a reason to where really shitty clothes and drink a lot of beer. Besides why wouldn’t I like any sport where hot, athletic men in shorts are basically fighting?”

Turning back to me, she grabbed both of my hands and laced her fingers with mine. “Since you play, you have to swing the sticks with me some time. I’ll even go easy on you.”

Victorious’ passion for the game is how trekking to her house became a twice a week ritual –not that I was complaining mind you. Though girl’s lacrosse is nowhere near as violent as boy’s lacrosse, I couldn’t resist swinging the sticks with her. I learned two things about her. One, her brothers weren’t exaggerating when they said that she had a passion for lacrosse. Two, she didn’t play girl-style lacrosse. Victorious played the game like the Native Americans intended it to be played ... and I had the

bruises to prove it. Of course I could've avoided collisions but then I wouldn't have had a reason to be touched by her. Being the master lacrosse player that I am, I managed to give Victorious a great game and she left the field of play with nothing more than ruffled hair.

I was already in love with her but my time playing lacrosse with her made me love her even more. I learned a lot about her between scoring goals. She wasn't simply beautiful, intelligent, and mine; she was also a competitor in every sense of the word. She loved sports – and when I said she loved sports, she even watched sports competitively.

As much as she enjoyed lacrosse, she liked football just as much, but what she loved more than both sports was the fine art of road-tripping. She had a book of maps and plans to use them all. Maybe I'd get to go with her. I'd been to all the obligatory tourist spots in America and had even gone to Scotland a time or two. I'd always had fun traveling but the thought of discovering the world with Victorious filled me with possibilities. Who was I kidding? Just thinking of Victorious filled me with possibilities.

Our time together wasn't limited to playing Monopoly, lacrosse or talking. I spent a lot of time greasing her hair. How did I get roped into that activity? *What had happened was.* I came over one day while her brothers were in the midst of doing it. Never having been party to such a

thing all I could do was to sit in open-mouthed fascination and watch ... at first. Never having seen the like I had a lot of questions and after I got over my initial shock they came tumbling out of my mouth. Next thing I knew, three guys were showing me the proper way to grease hair. After a shaky start, I soon got the hang of it ... and I also learned what tender-headed meant. Victorious was some kind of tender-headed so much so that it took her several years to find a hairdresser. That meant something because for a black woman going to the hairdresser was second only to going to church.

Victorious was tender-headed but apparently I had the magic touch. When I gathered her hair up and applied grease to her scalp, she lay back against my legs and sighed. It was a good thing that I was sitting down because that sigh almost broke me. My tenderness with Victorious was the key to me getting the job and I'm not exaggerating. It was literally my job and said so on the chore schedule that Dr. Mrs. posted on the fridge. Hey, everyone else might complain but no way in hell was I going to utter a single peep. There was something on Victorious that I could touch without worrying about the men in my family whipping my ass.

We had a lot of conversations while I greased her hair. Translation: I spent a lot of time talking about me. I was constantly opening my heart to her. It was as if my 'spill my guts' switch was pulled whenever I was in her

presence. It wasn't long before I blabbed that I thought that she was the most beautiful girl that I'd ever laid eyes on. I thought that she'd laugh it off like she did a lot of things but she surprised me. Turning to look at me, she breathlessly asked.

“Really?”

I breathlessly responded.

“Yes.”

And then she smiled at me in a way that pierced my chest, went straight to my soul and lit it up with its brilliance ... and the beginnings of a song formed.

* * *

We weren't old enough to marry and then there was the fact that I hadn't asked her yet, but we were old enough to be good friends. We were more than good friends; we were best friends. Truthfully, I didn't understand why Victorious wanted to hang around me when she had so many other people to choose from that had the same kind of education, the same kind of money, and the same kind of life as Victorious did. We may've both lived in Alcira but the truth was that Victorious inhabited a whole different world than I did. Still, I wasn't going anywhere until she forcibly kicked me out of her life. Hell, half the residents in Alcira lived in a

different world than I did. My parents might've made white collar money but we were definitely blue-collar people.

As high-society as Victorious was, I'd met few people as down to earth as she was. It wasn't hard to see why I was in love with Victorious but I'm sure that many a person wondered what she saw in that lacrosse-playing, guitar-picking, dumb, country boy. I wasn't sure exactly what she saw; I only knew that I was happy to be with her. Victorious didn't care that I was John Q. Public; she cared that I cared about her ... not who she was associated with, not how many millions she was worth. And she cared about me the same way.

Perhaps I should've been offended that no one thought for one second that I was anything but her friend, but it was hard to be offended when you were so damn happy just to be in her presence. Her family gave us plenty of space. They didn't leave us alone or anything, but it was customary for them to leave us to ourselves. If we weren't outside soaking up some sunshine we took over the library. As much as her parents trusted us together, they made sure that I understood where they stood. I still remember the day that Dr. Mrs. gave me her one and only warning about how she expected me to behave around her daughter.

“Iain, my daughter isn’t pregnant, and that’s the state that she better remain in until there’s a Mrs. in front of her name. Do we understand each other?”

Hearing the word ‘pregnant’ and knowing that the Dr. Mrs. was talking about me getting Victorious in that condition threw my mind into chaos. All I could think about was what our baby would look like. I looked at Victorious to see what she was thinking but she was busy counting out the bills that I’d just handed her. After insuring that I’d handed over every last dollar, she looked up at her momma and tested her.

“Now that we’ve had *‘the talk’* can I have boy company in my room?” She asked without missing a beat.

Her mother didn’t miss a beat when she responded. Dr. Mrs. simply laughed in our faces. When she’d recovered enough to speak, she pinned me with a look. She didn’t speak but she didn’t have to. I knew that look. That look prompted one to answer with all due haste. I’d been so caught up in fantasies about me and Victorious’ progeny that I’d neglected to answer her question. Regardless of what else had caught her attention, Dr. Mrs. nothing ever distracted Dr. Mrs. from her goal especially when that goal involved her daughter. She was hard on Victorious but any fool could see that Victorious was the apple of her momma’s eye.

“I’m not trying to go to her room,” I croaked.

I was also a little bit proud that she thought I was worthy of *the talk*, however I was a little bit embarrassed that Victorious’ momma was inadvertently talking to me about sex. This kind of open talk obviously didn’t faze Victorious but I just wasn’t used to such discussions even though my own parents had recently given me the sex talk. Thinking about that little slice of hell caused me to shudder. I’m just going to say whenever a woman begins a speech with, ‘*son, you’re almost a man*’ and has a phallus-shaped vegetable in her hand; it only gets worse from there.

After her mom exited the room Victorious spent the a few minutes mocking me about my customary defeat in Monopoly. After that, she moved into a whole ‘nother level of mocking.

“So, you’re not interested in being allowed up to my room, huh?”

“Didn’t you hear your mother? I’m not interested in going to your room until there’s a Mrs. in front of your name and when you do have a Mrs. in front of your name, it would technically be *our* room.”

Later, I’d congratulate myself on my boldness, but right then I had to contend with Victorious. Damn, that girl had a mind like a steal trap and it took everything I had not to become ensnared.

“So you don’t think that I’m pretty anymore?” She asked softly.

Man why didn't I see the set-up coming.

“Being that I already told you that I think you’re beautiful, saying that you were pretty would be an insult. Nothing has changed with that. What could change is the state of my health if I even thought about making a trek up to your room. I’m kind of interested in keeping my testicles attached to my person and life in my body and both would be in jeopardy if I ever thought about testing your momma.”

That might not have been the answer that Victorious wanted to hear but that was the answer she was going to get. I was glad that I said that because a few seconds later, her father poked his head around the corner.

“Good answer, son,” he said.

“And you’re right, Iain. My daughter is beautiful,” her mother threw in from a couple of rooms away. *Obviously, Victorious’ momma was a super hero. I wondered where she kept her cape.*

Chapter Five

Many afternoons we simply did our homework together. Her mother always had something to keep her busy. Victorious was smart – and I don't mean kind of smart; I mean somewhere around eighth grade they realized that high school had nothing to offer her kind of smart. Because her momma didn't believe in kids being rushed out of childhood, her momma got her involved in various groups where she went on field trips with kids her own age. Being home-schooled, her momma concocted creative assignments to engage her mind (translation: keep her out of trouble).

Regardless of what kind of assignment she had, Victorious always finished it early. When she finished with her work, she helped me with my homework. I didn't want to look stupid in front of Victorious but I still let her help me with my homework – not that she would've given me a choice about accepting my help. She was all into my work, probably because she didn't have enough to occupy her mind but since I was the subject of her attention I was all for it. Doing my homework with Victorious meant that I actually spent more time on my homework. That's probably why my GPA shot up from a C+ to damn near an A.

Out of the blue one day Victorious asked me where I was going to college.

“I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Well, think about it now,” she demanded while she poured over my math assignment.

“I hadn’t made up my mind to go,” I said sheepishly.

“What the hell does that mean? Your parents are going to simply allow you to run amok?”

“As long as I act like I have some sense my parents tend to give me space,” I said.

“What do you plan on doing with all of that space?”

“I was thinking about heading to Nashville.”

“And doing *what*?”

“My music.”

“You know I keep hearing all about your music but I’ve never heard one note from you.”

“I don’t let anyone hear it,” I said.

“So let me get his straight. You want to be a country and western singer, but you’re too scared to let anyone hear what you’ve got?”

“First, country music and western music are technically two separate musical genres. I want to be a country singer. And second, I never let anyone hear me play.”

“I don’t give a shit about how you treat everyone else. I’m not just anyone; I’m your best friend,” she pointed out.

“I don’t have my guitar with me and even if I did you never even *asked* me to play for you before today,” I countered.

“Well in that case, I’m not going to ask you now; I’m telling you. The next time that you bring your ass over here you need to bring that guitar and play for me. And you need to correct your mistake on line six,” she pointed out.

She was a whiz with anything that involved numbers.

Saturday afternoon, I packed up my guitar and headed over the bridge. Taking a seat, I handed her my corrected math assignment to peruse. She insisted that just knowing something was wrong was useless; you had to know *why* it was wrong.

After taking a few minutes tuning my guitar I launched straight into playing. I started with some Hendrix, because just as you started a prayer with ‘*Dear God*’, you started a guitar session with Hendrix. I then transitioned into some classical songs. Hey, my instructor was a classical

guitarist and she taught me everything she knew. After that, I played some Spanish love songs followed by *Unchained Melody* by the Righteous Brothers, *Wicked Games* by Chris Isaack, *Angel* by Aerosmith, and then I went country.

I may be classically trained but there was something about country music that called to me – much to everyone who knew me’s chagrin. That music was in my blood so I played it with everything I had. I played them all – a little Willie, a little George Strait, and some George Jones and then I played songs that weren’t country and made them country. My favorite was *I go Crazy* by Paul Davis. Though I didn’t sing as I played, I heard the words in my head ... and I rearranged them. I liked country but I wanted to get the woman in the end and in my version of the songs, I always did.

Though I didn’t look at her face; I didn’t have to look at it to know that she liked what she heard. There are three things that I know without conceit and they involve things that I am good at. They are playing guitar, baking, and playing lacrosse - in that order. To put it in perspective, let me tell you how good I am at the other two activities.

How good am I at baking? I’m so good at it that my momma often allows me to make the desserts for the bakery and my momma’s bakery was

so good that it brought in six figures every year. People called and had those desserts over-nighted to them.

How good was I at lacrosse? Not only am I the top scorer on our lacrosse team, I went to the All-Star game every year in high school and was the top scorer there also. And then there was college and let's just say, that my nickname was legend-killer because that's what our teams did to the legendary programs in the nation.

Saying all of that, still guitar is what I do best. When I finished playing, Victorious was crying.

"That was like the first sunrise I saw in Africa, Iain. It was breathtaking."

Well damn, I knew I was good and today, I'd played better than I ever had but damn. What can you say to that kind of compliment? I couldn't say shit so I bowed my head. And Victorious lifted it back up and kissed me full on the mouth.

"Victorious," I breathed.

"Iain," she breathed back.

"Victorious, you have to stop," I said. My body was reacting but my brain was reminding me that her mother was two rooms away and I really,

really was attached to my testicles. I almost threw her off of me in my haste to save my life.

“Did you just push me?” A breathless Victorious asked.

“Yes, I’m sorry but recall that caveat your mother gave me about you being pregnant?”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m sorry, I just got caught up.”

“Well, I am a handsome guy, baker-extraordinaire, top scorer on the lacrosse team, and I always keep my nasty ass feet covered,” I joked.

“You are all that and you know what?” She asked.

I never saw the set up coming.

“What?”

“You’re going to college because you need to be able to convince my mother that you are good husband material.”

Her statement robbed me of speech. She left the room to give me a few minutes of privacy. She was tactful like that. I used that time to pack up my guitar and to convince my body that it was best to calm down. In order to get it to listen to me I had to promise it that we could dream about her tonight. I’d just got myself back together when her mother popped her head around the corner.

“Good decision, Iain. Just because you can’t see me doesn’t mean that I can’t see you. And Victorious is right - you *are* going to college. I’ll talk to your mother about that later in the week.”

* * *

After that first afternoon I played for Victorious, she made me play for her all of the time. She never knew that every note I played was for her. Playing for her made me consider just how important my hands were. Sure they were important in my day-to-day life but they were instrumental in my interactions with her. I used my hands to grease her hair, to bake her favorite strawberry shortcake, and to play her favorite songs. And one day, I’d use my hands to slide her engagement ring and then her wedding band on her finger. I’d use my hands to play her body. I’d use my hands to hold our babies. Knowing that these hands would hold my future, I started to really take care of my hands after that.

* * *

I couldn’t think of the future without thinking of Victorious. I just couldn’t consider a future without Victorious in it. She was mine, she was mine, she was mine. And then one day she told me she was leaving me. Okay, she wasn’t technically leaving me; she was simply going off to her beloved Carolina.

I died a little when she told me. My heart was not happy about the separation but I loved her too much to beg her not to go. She had to go to college as she had a destiny that was bigger than being the pampered daughter of an elite family.

Being that Victorious was a year older than me, I knew that she'd be going off to college at some point, but I wasn't ready for her to leave. She went to D.C. on a regular basis but that was only a hop, skip and jump away. Carolina was a whole state away. Granted that it wasn't that far away since the invention of the combustible engine but still, it was too far for me to walk to.

"Iain, what's wrong?" She asked when I didn't say anything.

"I'm going to miss you so much."

"You better miss me because I'll be missing you like hell," she replied.

"You know that I'm going to call, email, and write."

I really wanted to believe that she would keep in touch with me but college offered so many things that a simple country boy like me simply couldn't. I should've known that Victorious was true to her word. I don't know when she had time to do her homework in between going to football games, lacrosse games and the like. Carolina was in the midst of a bunch of colleges and most of them had football teams.

I didn't talk too much about Victorious when she was in college; then again I'd never made a habit of talking too much about her with others. I wasn't ashamed of what we had; I simply didn't want to share her with people who didn't deserve to know her. The town of Alcira had long ago realized that nothing they said or threatened was going to get me to stay away from Victorious. They made snide remarks, some people no longer talked to me but I brushed it off. I didn't need them when I had Victorious on my side willing to fight the world and everybody in it for me.

Even though Victorious should've been busy having the time of her life at college she kept in constant contact with me. I treasured every email, every call, every single letter, every visit, and I treasured every thought of her. Those things were parts of her but I didn't want a part of her. I wanted all of her and I wanted to see her all of the time – not just at breaks and on the rare weekend.

I was sitting on her porch waiting for her with a strawberry shortcake the day that she came home. I stood as soon as the Bentley crossed the bridge. It may have made me seem anxious but I didn't care; I was anxious. Before the car came to a complete stop she'd already jumped from the car. Sprinting up the porch she jumped into my arms.

"Iain!" she screamed. "I missed you."

“You just saw me last month,” I teased.

“So, that was a whole month ago. I missed you so shut up,” she instructed.

Well damn, she missed me. Tightening my embrace I hugged her like my life depended on it ... and it did. Victorious was part of me, and not just any part but a vital part.

“I missed you too, Victorious,” I rasped.

“How much?”

I thought about joking but instead I told her what was in my heart.

“With everything I have,” I answered honestly.

Chapter Six

Victorious and I resumed our routine as if we had never stopped. We had the best summer ever and I mean that even though I'd made the same declaration every summer for the past three years. I still didn't go to her room, which meant that my testicles were still firmly attached to my body.

Being that Victorious had declared that I was going to college I'd spent the whole of her freshman year thinking about where I was going to go. Having been to her beloved North Carolina on two occasions to visit her, I was tempted to attend being that it had everything I needed: Victorious, a lacrosse squad, and a major in music. I was even tempted to attend Duke – but her reaction to my casual comment about the beauty of Duke's campus had moved her to near violence.

Hearing my comment, she'd grabbed a fistful of my shirt, dragged me down to her and told me in no uncertain terms to not even think about joining the ranks of the enemy.

"I don't know why you're acting new. You know good and damn well that Duke is our archenemy. You don't have to wear the Carolina blue and white, but you definitely aren't dressing in Duke blue and white. Do you know how bad it would look for my boyfriend to be the one responsible for

garnering Duke more NCAA titles? It's not done; it simply isn't done so get that thought out of your head."

Though she might date a white boy, she didn't believe in mixed-dating and a Carolina alum and a Duke alum definitely constituted a mixed relationship in her book. Victorious hadn't taken me to any more athletic events on Duke's campus after that. She'd even not so surreptitiously looked for evidence of Duke paraphernalia on my person after that, prompting me to toss anything that was royal blue. She needn't have worried; I had no intentions of doing anything that would cause division between us.

I'd been floored hearing her mention 'dating'. Never before had either of us labeled what we had but now that she'd voiced it ... or rather screamed it in the middle of Duke's quad (which she only allowed me on to give me a history lesson about Julian Abele- the African-American architect who'd designed much of Duke's campus), I couldn't help but stand taller. Maybe she was simply tossing words around, but I didn't care; I was going to cherish those words ... and hold her to them.

Though she was vociferous in telling me where I couldn't go to college, I was surprised when she stayed mum on where I should go. Time and time again she simply said to go where my heart leads me.

“Choosing the university that you want hitting you up for money is a personal decision. Once the chancellor announces that, ‘*Tain Banks has been awarded the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Music*,’ the next words out of his or her mouth will be, ‘*Would you like to donate to the general alumni fund?*’”

So I looked at Syracuse (because they were like the Hank Williams, Sr. of college lacrosse), Johns Hopkins and Vanderbilt (because thanks to her tutelage I now had the GPA to make it a possibility), North Carolina (because Victorious was there), and Virginia. Though all were nice schools, eventually I settled on Virginia. Syracuse and Johns Hopkins were in the north and though I’m not one of those southern males who refers to the Civil War as the War of Northern Aggression, the north just didn’t sit well with me. They might be all welcoming but they didn’t sweeten their iced tea and that just wasn’t right in my book. Vanderbilt was in Tennessee, where I wanted to be but the Commodores didn’t have a men’s lacrosse team. North Carolina had everything I wanted but Victorious and I both needed our own space. I didn’t want to admit that but I knew it was true. I wouldn’t get a thing done if I was right up under her ... and there was a good chance that she’d be pregnant with my children long before I could support her.

That left Virginia – the public archenemy of North Carolina - but in no way was Virginia a default choice. I'd always considered Virginia one of the most beautiful campuses in the nation, but until I really thought about my future, I'd never considered that I could one day be a student there. Hell, I'd never considered most possibilities until I'd met Victorious. Having gone to many Cavalier football games and lacrosse matches, I'd always felt at home there. And if I couldn't yet officially make Victorious my home, Virginia would have to suffice.

When I told Victorious my choice she applauded my decision... after she bemoaned the fact that I was joining the ranks of the enemy.

"Even though you have to choose one of our rivals, at least you didn't pick Duke," she said.

"I might've been born at night, but it wasn't last night," I said in response.

"I'm glad you picked them, Iain even though I don't know why it took you so long to realize that you were always meant to be a Cavalier."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Dude, almost every t-shirt and sweatshirt you own has Virginia scrawled across the front."

"I just..." I began.

“Were always meant to go there,” she finished.

“For a while there I thought that you didn’t care where I went ... so long as it wasn’t Duke.”

“Iain, are you doing one of those stupid guy things like sniffing glue?”

“Why would you ask something like that?”

“Why would you ever think that I wouldn’t care about anything that affected you?”

I didn’t know what to say to that but she started speaking again before I could come up with a decent response.

“Even though you’re not right across campus from me, at least you’re only three hours away,” she sighed.

“I was only four hours away all of last year.”

“Yeah, but that extra hour is a long time when you miss someone as hard as I missed you,” she admitted.

Excuse me while I go all Sally Field for a moment. *She’d missed me. She’d really missed me.*

“How much?” I asked needing my ego stroked a little bit.

“More then I missed your strawberry shortcake.”

Being that no one loved strawberry shortcake like Victorious did I knew that was indeed a whole lot of missing happening on her part. Wait a

minute ... she'd said 'my' strawberry shortcake – not my momma's strawberry shortcake. Damn, she knew.

"How'd you know?" I asked needing to know if my momma had told the tale or if Victorious had figured it out on her own.

"How could I not know? A, you bake better than your mother and I mean no offense by that. Your mother is a damn fine baker after all I totally crushed on that debut strawberry shortcake she gave us. B, you held that cake with such tenderness and handed it over like you were handing over a piece of yourself. And I know that you were. Whenever I indulged I couldn't help but think of that book *Like Water for Chocolate* because it was obvious that you baked with your whole heart. Even though my brothers act all nonchalant about that cake, I had to straight fight them about it."

She didn't seem to require an answer, not that I could have given one for at that moment my heart exploded with love. Lazily swinging in the hammock that we shared, I could do nothing more than drag her closer to my side tucking her face into my chest as I kissed the top of her head. I kept her there for a few minutes not wanting her to see the tears that had filled my eyes. She unmanned me ... with the truth, with her trust, with her

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belief in me. And I loved her more every time I touched her, looked at her,
thought about her.

Chapter Seven

When I was settling into my dorm, I was overwhelmed by the number of people gathered in one place. Hearing yet another group of guys being too damn loud for no damn reason, I realized that I'd grown accustomed to a certain amount of quiet being an only child. I preferred my space and some quiet to go along with that. Even though Victorious was loud, always laughing, we shared a lot of quiet and I'd come to appreciate that.

My dorm was anything but quiet. Constant streams of cacophony played in the background but I expected no less being that it housed 18-23 year old co-eds. In that moment I was so damn glad that I'd taken Victorious' advice and dropped the extra money for my own room. School hadn't officially started yet but you'd be hard-pressed to realize that being that the dorm was over-flowing with women. I guess that was only to be expected being that most of the athletes lived here.

There were plenty of good-looking women and I hadn't met Victorious they would've been the kind of women that I'd be acting the damn fool over ... but I had met Victorious so I hardly paid them a bit of attention. Though good-looking and smart (being that they were students at Virginia) many of them wore too much makeup and too little clothes.

The guys were similarly situated. Many of them had too much ego and too little sense.

With such an eclectic mix of people, the atmosphere couldn't be anything but amped. For most of us this was our first big step into adulthood. For others, it was their last hurrah before 'real life' saddled them with 'real life' responsibilities and they were making the most of it.

Regardless of where people were in their individual lives, it seemed that everyone else was so much more sophisticated, so much cooler ... so much more than I'd ever be. I was seriously considering packing up and attending a smaller college, maybe a division III where I could retreat back to my comfort zone. I thought about it but I stayed because I didn't want to be a lesser man when I had Victorious as a woman. She was a Jefferson and the Jefferson's endured. How could I do any less, especially when I wasn't enduring anything close to a hardship? I was a white American male attending one of the most prestigious universities in the nation, with the most wonderful woman in the world as my destiny.

Walking to the commons area for a dorm meeting, I admit I was somewhat anxious. I was a pretty big guy and a big deal in the sport of lacrosse but in the God-fearing south, football reigned as king and men's and women's hoops was next in the sports hierarchy. Lacrosse, though

popular in some areas, didn't even merit conversation most of the time. There I was in the midst of Blue Chip athletes and the sons and daughters of some of the most elite families in the state. They might've been more sophisticated than me but I knew that I could hang with them all academically ... and athletically. Damn, who would've thunk it? Victorious thunk it and that's why I was here.

I deserved to be here, I thought as I stood in the line to get my mail key. My thoughts and plans were interrupted by someone calling my name.

"So you're Iain Banks," the RA asked in a booming voice.

"Yes," I answered wondering what he meant by his statement.

"Whoever Victorious is, that chick is sure enough in love with you," he said as he handed me a tub full to overflowing with mail.

I didn't know what had prompted his comments but everybody seemed to be interested. Overwhelmed by the evidence of Victorious' caring, I lapsed into silence. I wasn't being rude; I just didn't know what to say. Frankly, I was at a loss. I could only stare at the tub and its contents. Inside there was an assortment of packages, postcards and letters—all addressed to me. *Victorious didn't forget me*. Knowing me like she did, she probably knew that I'd be pining for my quiet ... and for her. And being sophisticated like she was, she probably knew how much of a stud this

would make me appear. I couldn't stop the idiotic grin that spread over my face and I couldn't to get back to my room so I could look over my bounty and dream of Victorious.

Being an only child, I didn't realize how interested the other guys would be in my mail ... and I always had a lot of mail because Victorious enjoyed the art of writing letters. And from her letters she also enjoyed me. All the guys wanted to know all about Victorious but I wasn't saying anything except that she was mine.

I had lots of pictures of Victorious and she was smiling in all of them. Her smile was her second- best feature (her best feature was her righteousness) and I say that noting that she had an endless list of beautiful features.

No matter what she wore she looked good in it (jeans, shorts, designer gowns, footy pajamas). My favorite picture featured Victorious wearing jeans and a mock turtleneck. It was a simple picture and she was beautiful as always, but something about the look on her face really got to me. I fancied that she was thinking about our future and that's why that picture was my favorite. I wanted to put it up in the room, but I was uncertain how the guys would react to a southern white boy with a picture of a beautiful black woman in his room.

* * *

Victorious called and informed me that she was coming to see me. I was both surprised and thrilled about that. Knowing that she was a spontaneous woman, we decided that she would just come to my dorm, and we'd take it from there. Since she was a football fanatic and hadn't seen any real football lately, I decided to take her to the game. *Her college had a football team in theory, but in reality, it was a good thing that the residents of Tobacco Road were basketball freaks because they weren't hitting on much when it came to tossing around the pigskin.*

I was glad that she was coming but I became more nervous as the day edged closer. On one hand, I wondered what my floor mates would think; on the other hand, I didn't give a damn because Victorious was coming. I *needed* to see her.

Knowing that Victorious was coming I just had to bake her a strawberry shortcake. Having already called my mom to request the ingredients and a box, I borrowed a kitchen and worked my magic. Though it'd been a month since I'd made one, baking was in my soul. I put my foot in it as southerners like to say.

Though I wanted to be low-key about my plans, it's kind of hard to hide the fact that something was up when I arrived back at the dorm with a

dessert box. Sneaking any kind of food stuff in a dorm full of hungry guys was damn near impossible, so I didn't sneak. Instead, I boldly waltzed through the building like I didn't have a care in the world – and that's because I didn't. The reason that I didn't was because I had the number one offensive tackle in the nation blocking for me. Allan Knight was 6'7 1/2 and had the weight and intellect to go with that impressive height. He led the way and I followed. I got all of those impressive services for the price of one chocolate cake. I baked chocolate as well as I did strawberry shortcake.

Victorious was due to arrive at 8:00 am however I figured she'd arrive anytime after sunrise being that she was always excited about a road trip. Knowing that many of the guys would either just be dragging their sorry asses in or still sleeping off their hangovers I slept real lightly.

Six thirty am saw me sitting outside my dorm. I knew Victorious would arrive way before schedule and I didn't want her walking into a horde of grabby, drunk frat boys because I really wasn't up for a killing spree but I'd do that if I had to. Victorious was mine and no one had a right to soil her with their filthy hands. Round about 6:45 am I spotted her luxury SUV. I was up and off the steps way before she even killed the engine. Victorious opened the door and jumped into my arms before I could snatch her up.

“Iain, I missed you so much.” she laughed and started speaking in a rapid mix of French and English.

I hugged her so tightly I thought I might have broken her ribs, but since she wasn’t complaining, I wasn’t letting go.

“Come on, grab my bags,” she instructed.

“Why?”

“Because there are too many for me to carry by myself without it taking forever, that’s why. And because you’re the guy so carrying my stuff is part of your job.”

I was too stunned to remark on her teasing.

“You don’t want me here?” she asked after she realized that I hadn’t responded to her teasing.

“Yeah, I want you here, but you mean to stay in my dorm?” I asked for clarification.

“That’s why I insisted on such an early arrival ... and I’m not staying in your dorm—I’m staying with *you*. You still have your own room, right?”

“Of course I still have my own room.”

“Good.”

“But I’m not supposed to have girl company in my room,” I began.

“I’m not a girl; I’m a woman,” she said with her hands on her curvy hips.

Victorious was definitely a woman. After another few seconds of utter shock, I finally managed to speak. “I can’t argue with that.”

“Well, not and win,” she threw back. “Now grab a bag and let’s go inside. I’m starving.”

I was surprised that we didn’t encounter anyone on the way up to my room then again it was 6:45 am. Victorious looked around my room and started poking into all of my stuff. I was stowing away her cache of bags when I noticed that she had one of my lacrosse jerseys in her possession.

“Nice digs—if you like blue and orange,” she qualified.

“Thanks. I thought about going with a baby blue and white color scheme but I didn’t want to vomit every time I came in here,” I joked.

“A- it’s Carolina blue, not baby blue. B- you better get used to those colors because you know I got you a Carolina sweatshirt,” she said.

“Well that’s good being that I got you a Virginia sweatshirt,” I returned.

“Like I’m ever wearing that,” she sniffed as she turned and went back to poking in my stuff.

“Why do you have all of this stuff?” I inquired.

“Because I need it. Is this your game jersey?” she asked absently as she traced my number.

“No. It’s just one of my practice jerseys.”

“Cool. I’m keeping it,” she stated before slipping it on.

Well, then. She’s keeping it. Cool.

“How is it that you just dig around in my stuff and decide what you want?”

“I’m allowed. Ask my brothers. I have tons of their stuff, and they can’t really do anything about it.”

Inside I was cheesing big time because she thought my stuff was cool enough to commandeer, but still I had to at least attempt an argument.

“Did they try telling on you?”

“Yeah, but then I went crying to my dad who took one look at his darling angel crying and lit into them for half an hour ... while he fed me cake. Now they just give me what I want as they should.”

“Okay then. I guess you can have the jersey,” I said.

“Like there was ever a question of me having it,” she smiled.

“They didn’t try to get you back?” I asked.

“Yeah, they tried that once because they’re guys.”

“I’m sensing a dig at the male species,” I said.

“Way to pick up on a clue. Of course that’s a dig against guys. If it weren’t for women guys would still have to worry about things like scurvy,” she tossed out.

“I really don’t even know what to say about that,” I said.

“Try this: once again you’re absolutely correct, dear. That way it’ll come naturally when we’re married.”

Why did she have to bring up marriage? Didn’t she know that my nightly prayers always ended the same way? First, I asked the Man Upstairs to protect my future wife and then I asked Him to make me worthy of her. And yes I said *man* because that’s how *I* relate to God although I recognize everyone’s right to imagine God as they will.

“So that’s the way our marriage is going to go?” I asked.

“If you want it to be a happy marriage,” she answered.

Chapter Eight

We decided to eat before going to the game. Of course I had to give her time to ‘get ready’. We finally ventured out of the room around eleven, after much primping on her part. She was already beautiful, but you wouldn’t have known it for all the time that she took. When I questioned her about the time she was spending primping, she merely shrugged and stated that she wanted to look her best when she was introduced to my friends. *As if she didn’t always look her best I thought.*

“Are you planning on spending time with them?”

“No, but believe me, when you walk through the dorm with me, they’ll notice, and they’ll ask questions. We’ll be the center of attention whether we want to be or not. Kind of like at home except that my mother’s not here to protect your virtue,” she teased.

She turned to me, suddenly serious and stated, “If it’s going to bother you—tell me now, and I’ll get a hotel.”

“It’s bothering me, not because I’m ashamed of you but because I know every one of them will want you.”

“Well, yeah, your girlfriend’s hot,” she said.

“My future wife is beautiful,” I corrected as I reached out and dragged her against me.

I felt her smile and I closed my eyes and contented myself with her presence.

“Thank you for that, Iain. But know that the future husband of your future wife is a major hottie. I know these girls have been eyeballing you. And just so you know I don’t mind whipping up on some chick to protect my stuff ... and with my mother being such a kickass attorney, I can get away with it.”

“Okay then,” I said surprised to hear Victorious get all possessive over me.

“Glad we’re clear about that now tell me, do these shorts make my butt look big?” She asked as she turned and gave me an unobstructed view of her butt.

“Ah—,” I began. “You are just generously endowed there,” I stuttered. “The shorts just, uh, display your endowment nicely,” I finished.

“Good save, but do you like the way my butt looks in these shorts?” She teased.

“Yes,” I choked out.

“Good. Let’s go.”

* * *

I gave Victorious the grand tour of my campus before kick-off time. It galled her to admit that Virginia was indeed a beautiful campus but she did ... albeit reluctantly. After the game—which we won—we decided to get some take-out and a few video games before crashing. I'd completely forgotten about my floor mates and their possible reaction to Victorious; however it was just as she had predicted. We didn't get three feet before we became the center of attention. About five of my floor mates had gathered around staring in open-mouthed fascination.

I knew why they were staring. I was walking hand-in-hand with one of the most stunning of God's creations. She was woman and her name was Victorious ... and though woman was created for man, I was created for Victorious.

I was accustomed to her beauty; however, these Neanderthals probably couldn't see past her beauty. Sure, she was a woman who looked as if she just stepped from the pages of a magazine called *'Everything a woman should be'* but they didn't see her passion, her goodness, they didn't see her for realness, her truth. And more importantly, they didn't see that she was mine.

Having heard so much about her but never having seen her they probably half thought that I'd made her up. Hell, I couldn't have made her up if I had the combined creative genius of Stan Lee, George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Stevie Wonder and Zora Neale Hurston. If Victorious didn't exist in real life, I wouldn't have the stuff to dream her up.

Blessedly, I didn't have to dream her up. God had created us for each other. She was my woman and I was her man. And these boys better accept that or get the hell on.

Tucking her right under my heart, I stood a little bit taller and made the introductions even though I felt like thrashing all of them and then running off with Victorious.

"Fellas..." I began, "this is my Victorious."

"Nice to meet you," Victorious stated as she snuggled deeper into me.

Before anyone could ask her anything else I grabbed her hand and headed to my room.

"Either slow down or walk ahead of me," she stated breathlessly.

I slowed down. Letting her go was not an option. Once I reached my room, I paused just long enough to scribble a brief warning on my message board: 'BUSY.' Ushering her inside, I slammed the door then reluctantly let her go.

“You know that message looks like Sanskrit,” she pointed out.

“I don’t care. They’ll get the gist of it,” I assured her.

“You might as well invite them in.”

“No.”

“Okay, but they’re just going to hound you with questions when I leave.”

“As long as they’re not taking up your time while you’re here.”

“What are you going to say about us?”

“What do you want me to say?” I countered.

“I want you to give a lengthy description of my numerous attributes,” she joked.

“Like how beautiful, intelligent, and funny you are?” I asked tongue-in-cheek.

“And don’t forget the fact that I have a wicked lacrosse game.”

“You have so many issues.”

“But you like me regardless,” she stated sassily.

“Can’t help it,” I agreed as I bent and gently kissed her.

* * *

It was just like when we were home, except that we didn’t have a pseudo-island to ourselves or her momma in the wings. Still, we were

cocooned in my room having a grand time. Though her momma wasn't there, she didn't need to be. I wasn't going to treat Victorious any less respectfully.

As we dug into our steaks we talked about ... everything. When she'd finished her meal, I dug out the strawberry shortcake that I'd hidden and presented it to her. Victorious' gasp was the sweetest sound I'd heard in a month of Sundays and I treasured it ... just as much as I treasured the way she savored every bite.

"You could've told me you had this from jump. I can't believe you hid this from me," she said around a mouthful of cake."

"Had to otherwise you wouldn't have eaten dinner and though cake is technically a food group in your world, you need more than cake to survive."

She pouted beautifully but she kissed me right after that. Whatever plans I had were shelved because Victorious had other ideas. Pushing me to the bed, she snuggled next to me and asked me to sing her a song. I wanted to sing to her but I was a guitar player first. Singing was a distant second. I wasn't a bad singer but I never sang without my guitar. Without the guitar I felt exposed. Being in a dorm I couldn't exactly bust it out

though. I contemplated denying Victorious' request but then I made the mistake of looking at her and any thought of saying 'no' fled.

Pulling her close I sang to her, trotting out the love songs that Victorious always inspired me to sing. They weren't perfect renditions but they were honest. I loved Victorious and I told her so with my song selection. When I finished, she reached up and kissed my lips before lying back down. She actually had tears in her eyes. I was touched.

* * *

I thought bedtime would prove to be awkward, and it was for me, unbeknownst to Victorious. Victorious almost unmanned me when she walked out of the bathroom wearing nothing but a camisole and some thin boy shorts. Almost, but I held it together long enough to sequester myself in the bathroom and get cleaned up. I thought that I'd done a good job of holding it together but as soon as I walked out of the adjoining bath she patted the bed.

"Get in."

"What?" I nearly choked.

"Get in. I'm sleeping on the outside."

"You can have the bed..." I began to no avail.

“Don’t even think that you’re sleeping on the floor. You’ll be sore and we have plans for tomorrow.”

“I can crash with one of the guys,” I began.

“I’m not staying in here by myself. Something could happen to me and then you would face the wrath of my mother who doesn’t know that I’m here. But I can always call her and let her know where I am and that you plan on abandoning me if you’d like.”

I shivered. I would rather challenge her three brothers than face the wrath of her mother—and she knew it if her superior look was anything to go by. Resigned, I made my way over to the bed.

“I’m sleeping on the outside.”

“Why?”

“Because being the man I should always place myself closest to any potential danger.”

Victorious raised a perfectly arched eyebrow at me before reluctantly scooting over. I didn’t think that I would sleep a bit, with her being four inches away from me.

“You’re not going to catch anything.”

“What?”

“If you get any closer to the edge you’re going to be on the floor.”

“I’m just not used to sharing my bed with anyone.”

“Like I am?” She jumped up ready to do battle.

“Baby, I didn’t mean it like that,” I attempted to soothe her.

“Iain, I’m damn near fully dressed. You’re fully dressed, so what’s the problem?”

I eyed her clothes. What she had on did not constitute fully-dressed, but I wasn’t about to say that out loud.

“Victorious,” I began. “I’m a man – a fully, functional, red-blooded heterosexual male and you’re every dream I’ve ever dreamed. Being this close to you is already testing all of my best intentions; getting closer than that and you’re playing with fire.”

“I’m a woman – a fully, functional, red-blooded heterosexual woman and I hope that you don’t think it’s all that easy for me to be in the same damn city with you being all temptation, much less the same bed. But I am in the same city with you, in the same room, so get your fine ass over here and put your arms around me. Tonight, I plan on falling asleep to the sound of your heartbeat.”

Tossing a pillow between us, I pulled her close to me. Though my body wanted nothing between us, my will wasn’t that strong. I wasn’t sure how she’d feel about the pillow but she didn’t object. She simply snuggled

into me ... like my body was made to be her shelter. I'd just about fallen asleep when her husky voice brought me fully awake.

"Remember our prom, Iain?"

"Victorious, there are things that I might forget in my old age such as my first name, the fact that you have an affinity for strawberry shortcake, or that Carolina and Duke is a rivalry, but I will never, ever forget our prom, how you looked in that dress, and how I felt when you walked down that staircase and smiled at me."

I sighed at the memory right before pressing play on my memories of that night. I nervously awaited her entrance but nothing I conjured up in my wildest dreams came close. She had gone all out just like I was jetting her to an expensive restaurant in the south of France for dinner and flying her to Barcelona to dance. Victorious always looked good but that night she was my own fairytale princess and I was the lowly knight that would do anything for her.

I couldn't afford to do those things for her but I didn't do anything by halves. I'd dipped into my savings and drove into the city to find a decent-priced tailor. The three-thousand dollar hand-tailored tuxes weren't even an option, but after shopping around I found the next best thing: a dark

Hugo Boss suit ... on sale. After having myself fitted and such for the suit, I made my way to a salon.

I felt so gay stepping in there but I reminded myself that this was for Victorious who I'd do anything for. I normally went to a barbershop but I didn't trust the well-meaning people in my town. I could envision them bribing the local barber to do something drastic such as cutting all of my hair off and though some guys looked good bald the neo-Nazi look wasn't what I was going for—not that they knew my plans. The good people of Alcira only knew that that nice Banks boy spent way too much time with that colored girl. I hated when they referred to Victorious as colored; she hated when they referred to her as girl.

I was drawn from my musings when I heard Victorious sigh.

"I still can't get over the fact that you couldn't pin my corsage on."

"There was no way that I could get that close to your breasts and not disgrace myself," I sighed. "That was my fondest memory of high school. I only wished that I could've shown you off to every damn guy in town," I admitted.

"Iain, it was perfect. My favorite part was our picnic dinner in the ballroom. It was nice being held in your arms while you fed me chocolate-dipped strawberries."

“Oh believe me, the pleasure was all mine,” I admitted recalling every sweet moment.

Holding my very own princess in my arms was sweet, sweet torture.

“Every moment with you is like that for me, Iain—the best,” she whispered before giving into sleep.

I held her tighter upon hearing her words. Though she’d given me many compliments, there was no higher compliment than the one I’d just received. And I wasn’t talking about her words, I was talking about the fact that she’d elected to fall asleep in my presence. Victorious trusted me and I’d do nothing to violate that trust.

While watching her sleep I thought back to the day she called in a snit about the prom. I’d just stepped out of the shower when the phone rang. Being the only person in the house I swallowed a mouthful of curses and answered it with as much politeness as I could muster.

“Hello!” I answered somewhat gruffly having spent the last three hours running my ass off at practice.

I was ready to do nothing more than eat and collapse – in that order and the phone was interfering with those plans. A growing boy, I took my eating as seriously as I did my lacrosse game.

“Iain?”

The sound of *that* voice saying my name immediately soothed me.

“Victorious,” I returned, her name a statement in my mouth, not a question.

“Is this a bad time?” She ventured.

“Not when you’re calling,” I answered. “I wasn’t expecting you to call until later,” I admitted.

“Yeah, well, I just thought about something.”

“What is it?”

“Are you going to the prom?”

“There’s only one girl that I’d be interested in taking and she’s kind of out-of-reach,” I replied.

“Is she pretty?” She asked.

“She’s beautiful,” I replied.

“So are you going?”

“Nope.”

“But the prom is a big deal,” she began.

“Who told you that?” I joked.

“Just because I didn’t go to school doesn’t mean that I don’t know about proms,” she snapped. She didn’t like it when I teased her about her make-believe school, which is why I did it every chance that I got.

“So who told you about the prom?”

“People,” she hedged.

“Well, I’m not planning on attending.”

“Are your parents mad?”

“Were your parents mad when you threw that fit and told them that you weren’t going to your cotillion?” I parried. *I learned that word from Victorious.*

“Not really, they don’t waste their time on being mad about small stuff when I have the potential to get into so much more interesting trouble,” she said.

“You should’ve gone,” I said. “That’s a big deal in your social circle,” I said.

“Well, then you should’ve offered to escort me if you were so gung-ho about me going.”

“I wouldn’t have been considered an asset in your social circle,” I said.

“And I’m definitely not considered an asset in yours,” she returned.

“You are my social circle, Victorious,” I said.

“And you’re mine,” she said back.

“So we’re good?” I asked.

“We’re better than good, Iain,” she said.

Damn straight, I thought.

“And one day we’ll be better than good,” I said.

“True that. Still, our parents want pictures so I think that we should have our own prom.”

“Are you going to wear a dress and everything?” I asked.

“If you’ll wear your cowboy hat with your suit,” she said.

“Then I’ll have hat hair,” I complained.

“Don’t care. It’s my fantasy and that’s what I want,” she articulated her demand beautifully.

I imagined that she had her hands on her hips as she made her demand as she was so good at it. I’m pretty sure that she got that from her momma. Luckily, I was good at catering to her demands, which is why she was sleeping next to me. I laughed at the irony. Here I was sharing a bed with the most beautiful woman in the entire known universe—and we weren’t having sex ... and I didn’t mind although my body threw one hell of a temper tantrum. Luckily my brain had things under control. Smiling, I kissed the top of her head and then joined her in slumber where we both proceeded to sleep the sleep of the content.

Chapter Nine

I was spared any embarrassment my body may have portrayed because Victorious was such an early riser. When I awoke, the sun had long crested the sky and she was on the floor working a crossword puzzle from the previous day's paper.

"About time you got up. Hurry up and do your thing in the bathroom and come grease my hair."

"Is that all you want me for?" I asked.

"No, I want you for a whole lot of other things, but first you have to get this greasing my hair thing down. It's like the wax-on/wax-off step in becoming the man of a black woman."

"I'm already the man of a black woman, so don't forget that when you're busy looking all beautiful. I'd hate to have to wipe out all the males in the world," I said only half jokingly before heading to the bathroom.

Finishing in the bathroom, I picked up the hair grease that Victorious had put in a completely conspicuous place. Walking out of the bathroom, I took a moment to towel-dry my still damp hair. Tossing the grease onto the bed, I sat down and gently rearranged Victorious so that she was sitting between my legs. She complained at the interruption, but settled down

once I began my ministrations. Victorious swore out that I had the gentlest touch she had ever encountered. Being tender headed, which meant that she didn't tolerate just anyone messing in her hair. Then again, *I* wasn't just anyone.

She moaned her pleasure. "For a white boy, you're good at greasing hair," she teased.

"I'm only good at greasing *your* hair," I stated.

"Promise?"

"Promise. I'm very selective in whom I choose to pamper."

She laughed and remarked, "Good, I'm just as selective at whom I allow to pamper me."

"You know that I do this only because it is you."

"You're just trying to get in good with my mother," she teased.

"I'm already in good with your momma, so there," I said as we lapsed into a comfortable silence.

I could feel her smiling, which made me smile in turn. That's the way that we greeted the morning—quietly, comfortably, and at our leisure. Victorious worked on a crossword (*with very little help from me*), while I worked on greasing her hair.

That's how Arden and Lanford, my neighbors, found us. When they burst into the room, I immediately bemoaned my failure to check that the door to our shared bathroom was locked, but I was thankful that they didn't burst into the bathroom while Victorious was showering because it would've been a shame if I had to maim the All-Conference shortstop and his best friend, the All-Conference pitcher.

Though Arden and Lanford were usually pretty cool, I wasn't sure how they would react to discovering Victorious in my room. Scratch that. I knew how they'd react because I'd witnessed it before. They'd break out in a chorus of whistles and oohs and ahhs. Before they could get the first whistle out of their mouths, I gave them *the look*. And by *the look*, I meant the universal 'I will set it off up in here' look.

Other guys might not have minded being showered with the good-natured ribbing when being discovered with female company in his room being that it ain't exactly a hardship on a heterosexual male, but I was not other guys and thus, I *did* mind. Victorious wasn't simply some woman nor was she some jock groupie or some random piece of ass; Victorious Jefferson was the most beautiful, the most passionate, and the most righteous woman I knew and they'd treat the future Mrs. Iain Banks with the respect she was due and there wasn't any 'or else' about it.

Feeling her tense at their intrusion, I remembered her state of undress. Dragging my shirt over my head, I draped it over her. Though it was popular for women to show as much skin as possible, Victorious didn't subscribe to that theory and I didn't subscribe to the practice of parading off my half-dressed girlfriend. It was bad enough watching other guys ogle a fully-dressed Victorious; watching them salivate over a half-dressed Victorious wasn't something that I could even stand. We were going to have to move somewhere cold otherwise there were going to be a lot of guys walking around with poked-out eyes.

Rising from the bed, I addressed them. "Give us a few minutes."

Turning to Victorious, I reached down and pulled her up. "I'm sorry. Give me a minute with the guys okay."

"Iain, don't do anything crazy," she began.

There was a good chance that I'd be moved to doing something crazy, therefore I simply smiled instead of responding because I didn't want to lie to her.

"Iain," she called my name as she tugged me down to her. "Don't do anything crazy, please."

Though she didn't raise her voice or resort to hysterics (as that wasn't her style) she did put a little more insistence up in her voice. I knew that

tone ... and it usually spelled trouble for the one who didn't heed her warning.

Pulling her tighter to me, I lifted her chin. "Don't make me do anything crazy, Victorious. Stay in here. I'm just going to talk to the guys. If you come out there in kick-ass and take names mode, I can't tell you what I'll do but I promise you it will be a lot more than simply talking."

Victorious rolled her eyes. I could tell that she didn't like what I'd said but after pouting she gave a cute sigh of disgust.

"Fine, but if I hear even one thump, one shout, or silence that lasts too long, I'm coming out there and fucking shit up," she decreed as she reached into her suitcase and retrieved an aluminum bat.

I couldn't help but smile at that. Victorious didn't like people messing with me ... period. Per her rules that privilege was like the tenth amendment to the Constitution: that is, that right was reserved for her.

"Noted," I said as I kissed away her pout before stepping out into the hall to confront the guys.

"Who is that, Banks?" Arden asked as soon as I closed the door behind me.

"That's Victorious," I replied matter-of-factly.

“That’s *the* Victorious,” they said in unison. “The one that you’re turning down pussy left, right and center for?”

“Yeah, is there a problem?” I asked getting pissed about where this conversation was headed. They had one time to even insinuate that Victorious was less than a lady and I’d set off a massacre.

I must’ve been looking rather crazy because a second later Allan’s voice cut into our “discussion.”

“Okay, crazy white boys in conference at twelve o’clock. What’s going on?”

“Banks has a woman in his room,” Lanford said.

“Not just any woman but Victorious,” Arden added.

“Ah, no wonder you made the cake. When do we get to meet this woman who has you so ensnared that you’ve kept yourself cloistered in your room like a nun in a cell?” Allan smiled.

“She’s black,” Arden inserted before I could answer.

Arden and Lanford turned their attention to Allan and Joaquin waiting for their reaction. I did the same. Though it wasn’t as big a deal for black athletes to have white girlfriends, it wasn’t everyday that a black woman stepped out with a white man – especially in the south where the history of white men and black women was mired in a legacy of blood.

Given that bloody history, I didn't understand why any black woman would take up with a white man, but I wasn't about to question Victorious' presence in my life. I was made for her and anybody who had a problem with that could take it up with the Man Upstairs.

I don't know how long silence reigned but being that Victorious was still ensconced in my room, I knew it wasn't long. Still, a few seconds seemed like a long time when being glared down by Joaquin and Allan. I wasn't sure how they felt about the situation nor was I sure how they'd react but damn if I was going to slink off or drop my head like I was ashamed. Squaring my shoulders, I stood as straight as I could and looked them dead in the eye. I wasn't asking for a fight, but neither was I about to back down from one, especially when it concerned my Victorious.

Seeing movement out of the corner of my eye I realized that our little "discussion" had gathered an audience. Though most of the guys were heading to breakfast or to church, they stopped and openly stared at the five of us. And though no one said anything, I could tell they were already thinking about whose side they were going to take.

"What's going on?" one of the basketball players said.

"Banks has a woman in his room," Arden announced in the fashion of a town crier.

“Not ‘I have a girlfriend so I can’t even look at another woman’, Iain?” he said.

“Yep, and after seeing his woman, I can understand why he wouldn’t look at another woman,” Lanford said. “Victorious is beautiful.”

Damn skippy Victorious is beautiful, I thought. Point one for Lanford.

“Victorious is real? Man, I thought he was making her up to cover up his gayness,” another guy said around a mouthful of laughter.

“I wondered the same thing, but Victorious is real, and she’s definitely a woman and she’s also...”

“My cousin,” Allan interrupted Arden before he incited a riot with his big mouth. “Victorious is my cousin and no one better mess with her ... or her man,” he decreed as he put one of his massive paws on my shoulder in an act of what I’d later identify as brotherhood. I wasn’t gay like apparently some of the fellas had wondered, but damn if I wasn’t grateful for that hand on my shoulder ... and for the brotherhood. I liked Allan and I was glad that I wasn’t going to lose his friendship.

Allan had spoken and that was the end of anybody potentially acting the damn fool. Victorious had once informed me that black people claim people as family on a regular basis but I had never witnessed that

phenomenon until now. I'm sure the guys weren't scared of me, but Allan's threats were like money in the bank.

"Is Victorious up for company?" he inquired.

"Give us a few minutes," I said.

"I'm going to need another one of those cakes, you know," he said.

"Anytime," I said before walking into my room.

When I walked back in the room Victorious was waiting for me, bat in hand. Gently taking the bat from her hand, I pulled her into a hug noting that she'd had slipped on some jeans and thrown my jersey on over her spaghetti-strapped shirt.

"Are we going to have to fight our way out of here?" She asked.

"No and even if we did it'd be me fighting-not you."

"I can fight," she said.

"Irrelevant. You won't be fighting and if I catch you in a fight with a man you're going to have to come visit me in prison because I'm not even playing about some man putting his hands on you."

"Wow, you sound just like my daddy and brothers," she sighed.

"I take that as a compliment."

"And you should. So what's up?"

“The guys all want to meet you and apparently you have a new cousin.”

Stepping back, she looked me square in the eye before asking, “This is your house. You okay with that?”

“How could I not be okay with having the most beautiful woman in the world as my girlfriend?”

Closing the distance between us, she laid her head on my chest and hugged me to her ... and I hugged her back.

“Let the Inquisition begin then,” she said as we knocked fists.

Chapter Ten

The guys came in and made a beeline for the video game console ... or at least they tried to. Once they got a glimpse of Victorious they sort of stumbled across the room in a daze. I couldn't help but smile ... and to hold Victorious tighter to me. I watched the guys watch Victorious ... and I watched her hold them spellbound. I knew that they'd probably never before been in the presence of a woman like my Victorious. I was always proud to be with Victorious but I had to admit in that moment I felt like pounding my chest and letting out a roar or two ... just because I could.

As soon as Allan walked in, my eyes strayed to him. Strong, intelligent, likeable, funny ... and black, he was exactly the kind of boyfriend Victorious should have. If Victorious wasn't my woman, I would've tried to hook them up. Of course there wouldn't be a whole lot of 'try' to it. Allan was a heterosexual male and as such, he'd want her. Whether Victorious would want him or not was a whole different story. And all of that was irrelevant because Victorious already had a man.

Still, I watched Victorious and Allan real hard. Allan, being her cousin and all, was the only one who touched Victorious.

"Long time, Victorious," he said as he gave her a brief hug.

“Long time, Allan,” she said as she returned it before taking a seat on my lap.

Victorious on my lap was a dangerous thing but something in me was soothed when she settled herself there. It was a wordless declaration that I was her man. Lord knows I needed that reassurance, especially as she and Allan chatted it up like they were old chums and all the guys were throwing appreciative looks her way.

Accustomed to stopping traffic with her beauty, Victorious handled the attention like she normally did. That is, she was herself. The guys might’ve been riveted by her beauty, but it was what was within her that ensnared them. Not afraid to voice her opinion (or to throw down on pizza in front of them) she was soon engaged in a rousing debate about sports, religion and politics. Incendiary topics, she handled them with her usual panache. Before long, they all knew what I knew: Victorious was an artist and words were her medium.

In between rousing debates, they all took turns on the video game. I’m not sure whether it was word of Victorious’ presence or the fact that I had the latest football video game but that afternoon my room was Grand Central. A veritable parade of guys happened by. Being that Allan, Joaquin, Arden and Lanford had taken all the available spots, most simply

poked their heads in the room and ogled Victorious. After introducing themselves and getting an eyeful of beauty they were off.

All it all, it was a pretty good morning. Unfortunately, it wasn't asshole free. For some odd reason Channing not only dropped by, but he lingered. A member of the rowing team (like that was a real sport) and a descendent of one of the first families of Virginia, he was accustomed to being the most privileged and the center of attention.

It was clear that something about Victorious got at him on a deep, personal level ... and it was just as clear that Victorious wasn't impressed with him despite the obligatory name-dropping and his regaling us with stories from his many trips to Europe, the Hamptons, and Aspen. I could've told him that he was wasting his time, but I couldn't get a word in edgewise. Even if I could've, I probably wouldn't have bothered. Channing was an asshole and I'm sure he'd be on the phone to his momma inquiring about that Jefferson girl as soon as he exited the premises. I wondered how he'd react when he discovered that Victorious' family was on a first-name basis with people who owned private islands, Fortune 500 companies, and the like.

He was his usual facetious self but Victorious was two steps ahead of him in the intelligence department regardless of his 1600 SAT score. Every

time he spoke, she parried. I think he was peeved that it was obvious that despite his background, he wasn't in her league ... on any kind of level. The only thing he had that she didn't was whiteness, and Victorious didn't want that.

Though he was a prick, I was content to watch him get tangled up in his ego. However, when Channing tried to slide in a dig, the crazy in me came to life. It was ironic that I had discovered my temper as Victorious finally got a hold of hers. I attempted to put her off of my lap but she wasn't budging. That only forced me to set Channing straight around her delectable form.

"Leave, while you can do so on your own power."

The room went silent. I was normally an easy-going guy, but not when it concerned Victorious.

"I'm sick of your ignorant comments. The fact that you have the unmitigated gall to speak to my woman in that manner demonstrates your complete lack of concern for your personal well-being. You sound as if you might have a problem with Victorious being here, and if you do well, that's going to be the least of your problems."

"You think you can take me, Banks?" He challenged.

“There are some things you think; and there are some things you simply know. I think the sun will rise tomorrow, however I know that I can take you in a fight, Channing. If you ever want to test me on that, retrieve your nuts from wherever your boyfriend has them, and then come back but right now, you have to leave.”

“You might want to heed that for real,” Allan added.

Channing left without another word and after a few moments of being stared at by my friends, Allan broke the tension.

“Whew,” he breathed a sigh of relief. “I was worried that you might go crazy white boy mode on us,” he joked as he released the game from pause successfully swinging the mood back to football.

* * *

Victorious turned and looked at me like she’d never seen me before. I didn’t know what she thought about the last few minutes, but I knew that I wasn’t letting her go. I was prepared for an argument. I was not, however prepared for what she did next.

Turning in my lap, she leaned down and whispered in my ear.

“I am so hot for you right now,” she said before turning back to the game.

Perched on my lap, she wiggled her delectable little body and settled that lush behind right atop the most sensitive part of me. Already semi-hard around her, I went instantaneously hard feeling her push against me. Gently pulling a fistful of braids, I tilted her head back and whispered in her ear.

“Stop.”

“Or what?” she whispered back.

“Or we’re going to have to get married a long time before I’m ready to care for you like the way you deserve,” I rasped low enough for only her to hear.

“Why is that?”

“Because you’ll be having my baby nine months to the day if you continue to do that,” I admitted.

“Oh,” she said as she eased off of me ... not all the way, but enough for me to work with.

Before I could congratulate myself on gaining the upper hand the little minx looked at me and winked before turning back to the game. Later, we’d talk about her tempting me but for right now I was content to simply hold this woman and watch her make us all her slaves. By the time

the guys left, I was pretty sure they understood why I didn't mess with any other females. I already had the best one available.

About three hours into the impromptu meet and greet, Allan stood.

"Grab those pizza boxes and the mess and let's clear out fellas. Iain needs to spend some time with his lady," he boomed.

In less than two minutes, all evidence of lunch was gone, the chairs were back in their proper place, and my visitors were gone. Well damn, Allan cleared a room like he cleared a path for the running back. Glad for his thoughtfulness, I made a mental note to make him a cake that week.

Locking the door, I headed for the bed. I watched as Victorious stripped down to her cami and boy shorts and slipped between the covers. Watching her stretch that tempting body, I steeled myself and started counting backwards from a hundred by square roots.

Hearing Victorious pat the bed, I opened my eyes and looked at her.

"Lay down with me," she said.

"Well, you probably beat the sun up and you spent the last three hours holding court. No wonder you're tired," I said as I stripped down to my boxer briefs and climbed in beside her.

"I'm not tired; I just want to lie in your arms."

“This is dangerous, Victorious,” I said as I wrapped my arms around her.

“This is right, Iain,” she countered as she snuggled closer.

“I can’t argue that,” I said.

“Well, you could, but you’d lose. I’m the debater; you’re the musician and the lacrosse player extraordinaire,” she said.

“And the baker,” I said.

“Definitely. So, am I going to have to fight Allan over first rights when it comes to baking?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I heard him tell you that he was going to need another cake.”

“You were listening?” I asked wondering how the hell she’d heard that on the other side of the closed door.

“Damn straight. You’re my man and I got your back regardless of what you say.”

What could I say to that? Pulling her closer, I gently kissed her. Careful not to crush her, I assumed the dominant position and took my time exploring her mouth. Claspings her hands within mine to prevent her from touching me, I breathed a warning.

“Victorious, don’t. I’m not that strong, baby. You can’t touch me. Lie back, and let me touch you.”

Surprisingly, she did. I took my time with her mouth never having kissed her this deeply or this long. I touched her with the gentlest touches I could manage never before having dared such a thing. Even though my touch was intimate, I kept my hands outside of her clothes opting to map her curves with my hands so my body would be familiar with them when the time came for me to unhook her from her wedding gown. I wanted to go further, but I didn’t want to disrespect her. As much as I loved her, all I had to go with the lovemaking that I so desperately wanted to give her was good intentions. Victorious was worth more than good intentions so until I could care for her, this is as far as I would go.

“Iain,” she breathed.

“Victorious,” I responded.

“Wow, just wow. You barely touch me and I fall apart.”

“You look at me and I fall apart,” I admitted before pulling her into my embrace.

We spent a few moments in silence, each of us dealing with the passion between us and the love we had for each other. I wondered how she was faring. Feeling her get up, I thought she might be heading for the

bathroom. I was surprised when she went to her suitcase and pulled out a tape. Sliding it into the VCR she pressed play and climbed back into bed.

I didn't know what to expect so when the tape came on and I saw my Victorious on stage in a flowing thigh-length dance dress and pointe slippers, I sat straight up. Victorious had a beautiful, sculpted body. I thought that body came from her hours of training in hand-to-hand combat, but seeing her on stage, I knew that the combat training might've kept her in shape, but the dancing was responsible for her physique. I was so impressed with how absolutely beautiful and graceful she was in movement that it took me a moment to realize what she was dancing to. Victorious was dancing to my playing. In particular, to my rendition of Paul Davis' hit '*I Go Crazy*.' I knew that Victorious liked that song but I didn't know that she liked it that much.

And I didn't know that she could dance like that. Victorious dance like she talked – like movement was invented for her. I took a moment and thanked the Man Upstairs for my musical gift because her dance deserved a song worthy of her. The dance was only a few minutes long but that's all it took for me to know that I needed to see it again. Reaching for the remote control, I rewound and played it again. And after that, I played it again ...

and again ... and again. I could've watched that for the rest of the day and perhaps I might have had Victorious not spoken up.

"Aren't you tired of watching that yet?" she asked shyly.

What did she have to be shy about, I wondered. Didn't she know how wonderful she was? Turning to her, I picked her up and sat her in my lap enjoying the fact that she automatically responded to my touch. Wrapping her legs around me she tucked her head into the space between my neck and shoulder. For a moment, I simply relished in the feel of her but I needed to look her in the eyes.

"Victorious, oh Victorious," I said as I looked into her eyes. "Why aren't you doubling in dance?"

"Because I'm too much," she said.

"Too much academically?" I asked.

"It's too much physically. I have too much breasts, too much hips, too much ass."

"You're not too much, Victorious. You're just right."

"Just right for you but I'm too heavy for the male dancers to lift," she said.

"Luckily, I'm not a male dancer. You can't stop dancing, baby, not with a gift that amazing."

“Who am I going to dance for?” she asked.

“For me, Victorious. Dance for me,” I said.

Biting her lower lip, she ducked her head. I immediately lifted her chin. “Don’t hide from me, baby.”

“Okay,” she said softly.

“You danced to my song.”

“I danced to *our* song,” she replied.

“That might’ve been our song but we deserve our own song, a song that hasn’t been sung before, a song where every word is a declaration of everything I feel for you.”

* * *

We spent the rest of the day in bed, just holding each other and talking. Victorious left early the next morning. I remember walking through the dorm carting her luggage and holding her hand. Well, actually, Victorious was holding my hand. As was her habit, she grabbed my hand while walking and just sort of dragged me along with her. Of course I was willingly dragged and had been since that first day.

“Thanks for this weekend.”

“Thanks for every day of my life since the day that I met you.”

“Am I going to be a problem for you?”

“Haven’t you been since Vacation Bible School?” I joked.

“Well good. I don’t want to mess up my streak,” she joked right back.

By the way,” she began.

“Yes, Victorious?”

“Don’t forget who you belong to, okay.”

“How could I ever forget such a wonderful gift?”

Smiling, she threw herself into my arms and kissed me. And I backed her against her truck and kissed her back. I kissed her with three and a half years of pent-up passion. When I let her come up for air, she had a dazed look on her face that I was sure matched the one on mine. I rested my forehead against hers, and confessed. “I love you, Victorious.”

“I love you too, Iain,” she said in between breaths. “When I come back I suggest that my picture be properly displayed in a place of honor. Perhaps right by your bed where you can fall asleep with visions of me in your head.”

“Like I’ve fallen asleep any other way in the past three and a half years,” I answered.

Whenever Victorious visited, the guys showed up en masse to pay homage – as they should – but they also gave us plenty of space which I appreciated. We had plenty of opportunities to see each being that she came to a bunch of my games. Besides coming to our games versus Carolina and Duke, she made many of our home games, which was easy for her to do being that she only had Tuesday/Thursday classes and most of our games fell on Friday, Saturday, and the rare Sunday. Though I played good enough in high school to get a full ride lacrosse scholarship, when I took the field as a Cavalier, I played like a man possessed. And I was. Knowing that Victorious was out there wearing my jersey and cheering for me inspired me to leave everything I had on the field. Not only was I named on three consecutive all-ACC squads, our team made the finals every year that I was there and won the title twice.

When lacrosse season wasn't in we took numerous weekenders. Our road trip streak was almost as impressive as her looking beautiful for no damn reason streak. I continued to ride shotgun since she had this control thing and just had to drive. We flew down endless roads arguing with each other about topics we picked out of thin air. I could hang with her now that I had this prestigious education. When I let her know that she merely rolled her eyes and patted my hand.

Bypassing the obligatory tourist places, we went to local festivals celebrating local products (although I had to categorically hell no her idea of attending the moonshine festival), parks of all kinds (amusement, state), and museums ... and I enjoyed every mile we logged. Victorious schooled me on the art of having fun. Either she was a kick-ass teacher or I was an academically-gifted student because I was never happier then when in her presence.

* * *

Victorious and I got into the habit of keeping changes of clothing including one decent set of church clothes at each other's places as we couldn't stay apart for long. Just as we kept personal items at each other's places, we kept each other in our hearts. Though my hands made the trek over the terrain of her curves many, many times, we never consummated our relationship. The ironic thing is that I never felt that we missed out on anything by not becoming intimate. Perhaps it was because I was making love to her with everything I did whether it was gaze upon her beauty, speak her name or recall her smile.

Each night she called and whispered a breathy good night to me and each night I said it back to her ... and meant it more than she ever knew. Each night when sleep claimed me, it took me right to Victorious and I

dreamed of the time when we could exchange good nights and I love yous while rocking the same last name.

* * *

With my perpetual overloaded schedule I managed to graduate in three years - even with a double major. I even graduated with honors. Victorious informed me that she expected no less. Even though we graduated from rival schools it was nice having the same graduation class.

“You just had to be all fast and do it in three, didn’t you?” Victorious asked.

“Had to, so I can make something of myself and make you my wife, sooner rather than later,” I said as I kissed her.

That May turned out to be a busy time for both of our families with three graduation ceremonies. Not only did Victorious graduate, Denmark was graduating from Morehouse (as was the tradition for males in the Jefferson family). I marked that on my schedule. I wanted to be there to celebrate Denmark’s big day, just like I did the year before for Gabriel and the year before that for Nat.

There was no doubt that I was attending Victorious’ graduation – even if that meant that I’d miss my own. And I knew Victorious was coming to mine being that she’d told me no less than fifteen times and

pretty much shook down my fellow alum to acquire additional graduation tickets. What I didn't expect was for my parents to make the trek to Chapel Hill to attend Victorious' graduation and for Victorious' family to make the trek to Charlottesville to attend mine.

I cheered all through Victorious' ceremony pointing out to anyone who would listen that the most stunning valedictorian on the stage was my woman. I was told that she also cheered all throughout my ceremony, in spite of the tears that filled her eyes. I like to attribute her tears to the fact that she was that much closer to getting to be Mrs. Iain Banks, but the tears could've been because I was graduating from Virginia instead of North Carolina.

"Why the tears, baby?" I asked when she jumped into my arms after the ceremony.

"I'm so proud of you, graduating with two degrees and highest honors. I didn't know. Why didn't you tell me you were majoring in my people?" she asked.

I smiled at her unique way of referring to my degree in African-American and African studies.

“I didn’t want you to think I was, ‘biting your style,’” I joked being that she had double majored in Afro and African-American Studies and Economics.

“Like you have someone better than me to emulate,” she joked right back. “Since you decided to bite my style why didn’t you go ahead and major in business also?”

“Economics is a tad less boring,” I answered with a smile knowing that it’d rile her up.

“Why,” she asked later that night while we enjoyed dinner.

I didn’t need to ask her to elaborate. I knew what her ‘why’ was in reference to. She wanted to know why I’d majored in African-American history. Setting down my fork I turned to face her. I had to turn to face her because she’d decided that she wanted to sit next to me rather than across from me. Of course I didn’t mind that. I liked the contact and I liked the feeling of shielding her from any danger. Something would literally have to go through me to get to her ... and nothing was getting to my woman that wasn’t supposed to.

“Before I met you and your family, all I knew about black people were the things that I saw on television, the big screen and music videos. You and your family are nothing like the stereotypes that I grew up seeing and

believing my whole life. Even knowing you all these years, I learn something new every day. To love you, it is important to understand you. I know black Americans might think that it sounds lame when a white guy says that he has to take classes to understand, but for some of us, it's true."

I wasn't sure how Victorious would react to my impassioned speech, but it must've been okay because she slid closer to me in the booth and sighed.

"I love you, Iain."

"And I love you, Victorious," I said, but I don't think that she had any idea how much. Every time I baked for her I was saying '*I love you*'. Each time I sung for her I was promising, '*I take this woman*.'

"Well since you took classes about black people, you might as well take classes about women. I see a Masters in Women's Studies in your future," she teased.

"The only woman that I need to know about is right here in my arms," I said. "So unless Virginia offers a Masters in Victorious Jefferson, than I'm going to have to pass."

Chapter Eleven

Well, you know how they say that things never remain the same? That's true ... and it's a good thing. Though I'd officially been an adult since I'd turned eighteen, somewhere along the way I started to become a man. And there's a big difference between being grown and being a man. Being a man, I started to do man things because I had a man pursuit—Victorious. I took an overload each semester even taking some summer school one year so that I could hurry school along. I didn't need to drag it out because I already knew what I wanted for the rest of my life. I wanted Victorious. And though I wanted Victorious anyway that I could get her (because every way was the best way), I didn't want Victorious to get me any old kind of way. I wanted her to get the best of Iain Banks and thus I worked my ass off to make sure that that's what she got.

Knowing that I was going to go to grad school but needing a break from so much studying, I decided to take a year off and work. After going on yet another interview for a job that I wasn't about to get and didn't want in the first place, I ditched the shirt and tie and applied for jobs in the blue collar sector. Considering my lack of experience and my over-qualifications I narrowed it down to some kind of factory work. There was always

construction work and farm work but I'd grown up in the south and call me lazy, but that wasn't happening. It wasn't that I was afraid of the work; it was the fact that I was afraid of the heat. You know that stereotype about white people not liking to be hot – yeah, they were talking about my family when they made that one up. There just simply wasn't any reason to be out and about in what Victorious called 'Black Church hot' unless you were practicing for an extended stay in hell.

After kicking around possibilities I got the brilliant idea to go to Alaska and fish for crabs because it paid so much money. I didn't tell Victorious or my parents what I was doing. I simply told them that I had a work thing out west. Victorious understood but she didn't like it as she'd planned on us getting in at least two good road trips before she trekked off to New Haven to attend law school. I wanted to go on those trips with her but I also needed to do this.

"It's for us, baby," I said when she pouted about it.

"Fine," she said in that way that let me know it really didn't like it but wouldn't throw too much of a fit about it.

Never having been a commercial fisherman and never having gone to Alaska, I had no idea what I was in for. Let's just say that I'm damn glad that I could swim, could stand the smell of fish without heaving up my guts,

and didn't mind the constant state of being soaked to the bones. It also helped that I was able to push that '*almost about to die*' feeling to the side as I went about my work.

I had it all figured out, I'd work the whole of the year fishing as the Eff U and the Horse U Rode in on (the boat that I'd got hired on) was almost always in the water. They fished for opilio Snow crab in January-February; they tendered herring in April-May; salmon in June-July; they did halibut longlining in August-September; and finished with red king crab in October-November. I'd have the months of March and December to chill.

I didn't realize that opportunities to call Victorious were going to be all but nonexistent. Though I was busy damn near every waking moment, and damn near every waking moment was filled with back-breaking work, I did manage to sneak in calls on my satellite phone. I even went home for a week in early August so I could see Victorious before she went off to Yale.

I told her I'd call and dammit, I did even though it wasn't all that frequent. It wasn't that I didn't want to call; it was the matter of getting an opportunity to call. Fall in Alaska is like winter everywhere else. Fishing was already rough but when coupled with cold weather it became a whole different beast. I barely had strength to close my fingers around the phone

much less breath to form words but I used the little bit of breath I had to call Victorious.

Though I'd done a good job in summer, the real test was winter fishing. Captain Vig Snerra was a first rate captain but he was also a first rate asshole. In fact, I'd never met a man who was more of asshole and that was saying something considering the people I knew. Being the greenhorn, I expected to get more than my fair share of shit jobs but somehow Andreas Tomaschett (the other greenhorn) and I got *all* the shit jobs ... and all of the crew's shit. I was sure that Captain invented shit jobs just for our pleasure.

Despite the shit jobs, the lack of sleep, the lack of sustenance, and the lack of being treated with anything that remotely resembled dignity, I was determined to stick it out. I might not have shit in experience compared to the other guys but I was southern and my daddy didn't raise a boy with any quit in him. I girded my loins and did as I was told.

I thought I was going to die every day during October and November. Man, I was never so glad to see December. I slept damn near the whole of the month, waking only for Christmas. January second saw me back in Alaska much to the surprise of everyone on the crew and that included Andreas, who was fast becoming my best friend. Andreas was surprised that I was back, but he was also surprised that he was back too.

If I thought I was going to die all during the months of October and November, I was pretty sure that I spent the month of January partially dead. I didn't call, I didn't do anything but haul crab and repeat Victorious' name through my head. Damn, I'd never been so fucking whooped in all of my life. If I was close enough to shore I would've jumped and swam back to it totally ignoring the fact that I'd freeze to death in the frigid arctic waters long before I made it to land.

I was hurting. There wasn't a spot on my body that didn't feel like it hadn't been worked over. It'd been three, four days since I'd had more than half an hour of sleep, I couldn't remember when I'd consumed anything more than swill that masqueraded as coffee. Sure, the captain gave us more time to sleep but damn if I was going to spend much time with my eyes closed around those dickheads.

I already had a black eye from a fight with a crabbing cage and bruised ribs from a fight with two of the crewmen. If Andreas hadn't jumped in to even the odds I might've had a bruised everything, but he had jumped in and the Italian-Swiss economist and the good old boy from the south showed the crew one thing: we might not be the world's best fisherman but we weren't about to be anybody's bitches either.

I don't know how the rest of January would've gone if not for Victorious' being pissed off. I'd seen Victorious mad; I'd seen Victorious angry; hell, I'd even seen Victorious pissed off but whatever she was feeling had escalated way past pissed off. And when Victorious got pissed, attorneys were needed. My not calling had pissed Victorious off, but my not calling wasn't the final straw. The final straw was putting myself in danger and keeping that little fact from her.

Let me just let you in on a little secret. When a black woman claims you – you're claimed. That claiming doesn't end until time ends ... and that's all there is to it. I'd been claimed by Victorious, which meant that I was her stuff. Being claimed by Victorious meant that I was also claimed by her momma. Whereas my Victorious is dangerous all by herself, when she's tagging with her momma, someone somewhere is going to get hurt. Dr. Mrs. didn't play. When I say she didn't play, I mean she didn't play. I wondered if she even played as a child because that woman was scary without even trying. If I was picking teams for fucking someone up, Dr. Mrs. would be my first choice. My second choice would be the mixed martial arts champion.

You might be wondering why I just told you all of that. I told you all of that because it helps to explain what happens next. One moment

Ändreas and I were on the deck catching our breath after hauling in cages of crab. The next moment, we were busy backing up and being impressed. Picture this: the Bering Sea, January. It's minus one Fahrenheit, which means it's a warm day. The Eff U is the only thing around for miles. The waters of the Sea are rough, icy, but relatively calm being that the sun (well not so much the sun as light) has just crested the sky. Though the deck is full of crew, not much is being said as most of us are too tired to talk. Hell, even the veterans are too tired to sling insults at me and Ändreas.

The calm of the day is broken by the whirring of a helicopter – and not simply any helicopter but a civilian variant of the Aerospatiale Dauphine. For those of you who don't know what that is (because I didn't until I was told), that is the civilian equivalent of the type of chopper the US Coast Guard uses in air-sea rescues. An impressive piece of machinery, the fact that it was black on black made it all the more so. Before I got the chance to wonder what in the hell a chopper was doing in the middle of nowhere, I heard my name being called.

“Iain Banks, present yourself.”

Folks, let me tell you something. When a black helicopter shows up out of nowhere and you are summoned, oh you're going to answer that summons ... and the people around you will see to that if you're feeling shy.

Wondering what I'd done to warrant a black helicopter, I didn't move. One part of me wanted to run (like there was anywhere to run to out on the Bering Sea) and the other part wondered if I'd see Victorious again. I didn't get to finish my thought because I was being summoned again. I backed up a step before realization hit me. I knew that voice. Despite the cold menace in it, that voice was familiar and it belonged to the one and only Dr. Mrs.

"Iain Banks, get your ass over here and I mean now," she decreed as a basket was lowered to the deck.

"Iain?" Andreas asked.

"It's okay," I assured Andreas.

"You sure? I don't think we can win, but I'll fight with you," Andreas said.

"I appreciate it more than you know, but it's okay. I know her."

"And who is 'her'?"

"My future mother-in-law," I answered as I climbed into the basket.

"Tell me that you did not act ungentlemanly with her daughter and then run off to Alaska," he said.

"I wouldn't be alive if I'd even thought such a stupid thing. When Victorious is pregnant with my baby you can better believe that the only place I'll be is at her side."

“Good then I won’t have to toss you into the ocean then,” he said.

“If you wait right here I’ll let you know if she’s going to kill me or simply maim me,” I said as the basket was hauled up.

Dr. Mrs. was in my face as soon as I was hauled into the chopper.

“What the hell is wrong with you? I should beat your ass right now, boy. You don’t run off to the middle of no damn where and not tell anybody. Do you know how worried we were?”

“I just wanted to secure a future for Victorious,” I admitted.

“Well you can’t do that if you’re dead.”

She was right. Sighing, I looked at her. “You’re right. I’ll come with you but I need to go back and...”

Though she didn’t say a word, she cut me off with that look.

“What do you need off of that boat because I sure as hell am not letting you out of my clutches now that I have you?”

“I just need to talk Andreas into coming along.”

“Is he the reason that you only have one black eye instead of two?”

“No ma’am. I earned the black eye fair and square. Andreas is the reason that I don’t have a chest full of broken ribs. He’s a good man even though he threatened to push me overboard when I told him that my future mother-in-law was summoning me.”

“Why is that?”

“He thought I might have done something dishonorable with your daughter.”

“Oh, I like him already. Sit back. I’ll handle your little friend.”

“Ändreas, let’s go.”

That was all she said. Though Ändreas didn’t know her, he too must’ve recognized the ‘don’t mess with me’ in her voice because he got his ass in the basket no questions asked, no delays. As soon as he got on board, Dr. Mrs. hugged him right before telling him off.

“Thank you for being Iain’s friend and when we get home your behind is on restriction right along with him.”

“What?” Ändreas asked.

He looked so confused I couldn’t help but feel sorry for him. “Don’t ask questions. Just go along with it. We can’t win anyway.”

I stopped talking when the pilot began giving us instructions; however I perked up at her warning.

“I’m Grace Ellen Jones. You can call me Captain, Ms. Jones, Aunt Grace, or Yes ma’am. Anything else and you’ll be looking for your lips. I’ll be your pilot for today. Buckle up. Keep every one of your body parts inside the bird unless for some reason you aren’t interested in keeping that

part. Don't act any crazier than y'all already have or when I set this bird on the ground I'll beat your asses. Unlike little girl here, we didn't give children bullshit punishments like restriction; we simply beat their asses. You boys understand me?"

"Yes ma'am," we said in unison.

* * *

Mrs. Jones might've been an older woman – not that you could tell how old black women were – but she was a kickass pilot. And she didn't simply fly choppers; she flew jets, and piloted boats. I wouldn't be surprised if she had credentials to fly the space shuttle.

I woke up this morning on a boat on the Bering Sea. I was cold, hungry, dirty and hurting. That afternoon I was warm, well-fed, clean and comfortable in the backseat of a Bentley on the way to Lillian House ... and to Victorious ... and to retribution.

I had barely stepped in the door before I had an armful of angry, cussing woman on me.

"I am so mad at you. I am not your friend right now, Iain Banks," Victorious said as she looked me over for injury.

"Mom, he's hurt," she narced when she found the sore place on my ribs. "And he's lost weight. See you haven't been taking care of yourself."

“And his behind is on restriction,” Dr. Mrs. said.

“But,” I began futilely.

“Iain Banks! You’ve been raised better than that. You know that you don’t talk back. Now apologize and take your punishment like a man.”

“Mom?” I turned not realizing that she was present.

“Iain,” she returned in a calm tone.

I knew that tone and it usually meant that I was in trouble. Turning back to Dr. Mrs. I apologized.

“I apologize. I was simply trying to,” I started.

“Kill yourself? Cause me to go on a killing spree because I would have,” Victorious yelled.

“No baby, I was simply trying to make money so I could take care of you.”

“How can you take care of me when you’re not taking care of yourself?” Victorious asked. “You are my stuff – mine – Iain Banks so you don’t get the option of doing whatever you want to with yourself. I’m so mad at you. I’m going to go to my room before I’m tempted to beat you,” she said before stomping off.

“I’m going to go with her just to make sure she doesn’t double back and do that,” her momma said giving me a look.

I wasn't worried about her telling me off because she'd already told me off. After seeing to our immediate needs of a hot shower, clean clothes, medical attention and a hot meal, she took the safety off of her temper and proceeded to cuss me and Andreas up one coast of the US and down the other. I felt sorry for Andreas who looked so confused. At least I'd been expecting the cuss out; he was simply blind-sided by it. Still, all we could do was sit there and take it.

"Now that I know you're safe I'm going home. Remember that you were not raised in a barn, young man," my momma said as she kissed my cheek.

Ms. Jones was the only woman in the room who didn't tell me off. Then again, she did make the sound of a cracking whip before laughing and dragging Andreas off with her talking about liking the foreign hotties.

That's how I ended up in the living room alone with Victorious' father. Taking a deep breath I turned to him waiting for him to have a go at me too. I know if anything with a penis had made my beautiful daughter upset, that thing would be lucky to escape with just a cussing out.

"Iain?"

"Yes, Dr. Jefferson?"

"Did I ever tell you how the Dr. Mrs. became my wife?"

“No sir.”

“I am the oldest son of the oldest son from one of the most prominent black families in this country. There are certain prestigious civic organizations for black folk ... certain colleges ... certain churches. My grandparents belonged to those certain organizations, attended those certain colleges, and had membership in those certain churches. My parents followed in their footsteps and I followed in theirs.

I did everything I was supposed to. I had enrolled at Morehouse. I interned at the right places although we didn't refer to it as interning back then. I had connections with individuals who had the same goals. Back then we didn't fool with white people – not because we didn't like them but because we didn't have to. Most white people we came into contact with on a day-to-day basis didn't have what it took to be in our social circle. We were better educated, wealthier, more sophisticated. Most of us had never dirtied our hands in a field or doing someone else's laundry. We worked hard so we would never have to do those things.

A product of that system I had everything I could ever want. I rarely heard the word 'no', not because I was spoiled but because I had learned not to ask for something that I couldn't have. If money could buy it; I could have it. And then I met Aquila Chances.

Aquila wasn't like anyone I'd ever met ... she was better than anyone I'd ever met."

"Did you love her at first sight?" I asked.

Dr. Mr. chuckled before answering. "Absolutely not."

"Oh," I said feeling somewhat disappointed.

After loving Victorious I just sort of felt that everyone should fall in love the same way that I did – immediately. My disappointment must've shown for he chuckled again before finishing his story.

"Don't look so disappointed. When I first saw Aquila I thought she was a boy, being that she was dressed like one. She smelled like one too. Actually she smelled like an entire troupe of grown men."

"Where did you meet her?" I asked not able to imagine Dr. Mrs. as anything other than the sophisticated, beautiful, sweet-smelling woman that she was.

Dr. Mrs. was the kind of woman that made you look a couple of times. She wasn't supermodel beautiful. She wasn't what one would call beautiful but she was definitely striking. Strength poured off of her. You looked at her and immediately felt reassured, like there was nothing beyond her capabilities. Though she wasn't classically beautiful she could hold her own with the women who graced magazine covers, though she probably

wouldn't waste her time posing for stuff like that. Dr. Mrs. was the type of woman you saw on the walls of universities and on the covers of business magazines. She was the type of woman who produced children that went out and saved the world ... like my Victorious.

Dr. Mr.'s voice intruded in my thoughts. "You're thinking about my baby again, Iain and I can understand that but I'm trying to teach you something so pay attention, son."

I couldn't help but smile even though I was being told off. Dr. Mr. wasn't exactly affectionate but he called me son, the same way he did Nat, Denmark and Gabriel.

"I met her at one of those mom and pop shops – you know the kind that sells everything from gasoline to pig feet to fabric. That store wasn't anything like the stores I was accustomed to frequenting in Washington and Atlanta. There wasn't a thing the least upscale about it and they didn't attempt to be being that that was the only hint of civilization in a thirty mile radius and their primary clientele consisted of black farmers and their families. That store was the heart of the local black community – they had to be due to Jim Crow.

I wasn't going to go in, there was no need to, but then it was July in Virginia and the store advertised cold drinks. And not just any cold drinks

but Orange Crush soda – they came in glass bottles back then. Standing in front of the sodas, I was contemplating the sweet potato pie and chocolate cakes on the counter when the door jingled and in walked the dirtiest and worst-dressed person I'd ever seen. Obviously a farmer, he was covered in a medley of sweat and dust from the top of his newsboy cap to his well-worn brogans.

Aside from the smell, I probably wouldn't have paid him any attention, but then he shouldered past me and not only did he grab up an armful of Orange Crush sodas, he scooped up the rest of the sweet potato pie. That was just greedy, and I told him so.

“Did you consider that someone else might want some?”

Though I asked my question in a clear voice he didn't even bother to respond. Instead, he waltzed up to the counter and slapped a handful of the bills on it before exiting. Mad that not only had he got the last of the pie, but that he had the gall to ignore me, I went after him. He'd just stowed his purchase in the passenger side of a truck that was so dusty I couldn't tell you the color. Well, I was determined that he wasn't getting away with that. Some backwoods boy dressed in clothes that wouldn't even make it as a dust rag in our home driving a beat up truck was not about to best or ignore Elon Jefferson. Even if he didn't know who I was, he couldn't ignore the

fact that I was handsome, well-dressed, and driving a 1965 Chrysler 300 convertible.

Marching after him I yelled to get his attention.

“Hey!” I thundered.

Turning, he gave me the meanest look I’d ever seen and that was saying something considering some of the looks I’d had from white people.

“What?!” he yelled back after chugging that Orange Crush.

“Somebody ought to give you a lesson in manners,” I said.

“Possibly, but it won’t be today and it damn sure won’t be you,” he said as he opened the driver’s side door.

Full of righteous indignation, I made the mistake of touching him and took an Orange Crush bottle to the temple for my efforts. And before I could make heads or tails of what had just happened, I found myself looking into the business end of a shotgun ... and getting kicked in the ribs a time or two. I knew three things right then. One, *he* was a *she*. Two, that weapon wasn’t just for show; she knew how to use it. Three, I was going to marry that woman one day, I thought as I watched her jump in that truck and peel off.

It wasn’t until after the owners of the store came out with a towel and some ice that I realized that I was bleeding. Though I should’ve been

concerned about stopping the flow of blood, all I could think about was her. And she was the last thing I should've been thinking about.

"Why? Is it because she was a farmer?"

"No, it was because I was en route to Shawner, which is about an hour and a half outside of D.C. Shawner's a lot like Alcira, except without the waterfront. It's an old money town, which is why I was going. I was scheduled to have lunch with the McDyess family. The venerable Mr. McDyess had a daughter of marriageable age who was everything that a man like me needed in a wife. She was well-educated, cultured and from even older money than my family."

"Did you love her?"

"No, but one did not love Augustina McDyess ... unless she told them too. Even if she had, back then I didn't love anybody but myself and my way of life."

No sooner had I arrived at the McDyess Estate than Counselor McDyess was laughing at me.

"So I hear you had a run-in with Aquila."

"I'd call it more than a run-in," I said wincing.

“Nope, the fact that you’re not being measured for a coffin means you only had a run-in. Last man she had a run-in with is still picking buck-shot out of his hide.”

“That girl’s a menace,” I said.

“That girl’s one of my daughter’s best friends,” he said. “Taught Augustina how to shoot and throw a punch.”

“Well hopefully, that’s all she taught her. That girl is meaner than a snake, has no manners, and cusses like a sailor – and not just one sailor but the whole of the US Navy. And she smells like a man.”

“Ah, you like her,” Counselor McDyess said smiling.

Of course I denied everything. Yet I found myself bypassing the wealthy enclave of Shawner and looking for reasons to travel deep into tobacco country to Varbrad, which consisted primarily of a whole bunch of nothingness with a few fields thrown in. When I couldn’t find any, I went anyway and haunted that mom and pop shop. I was looking, looking, looking ... for Aquila Chances.

On occasion I found her. Most of the time, she completely ignored me. She came in got a bunch of orange Crush soda, a slice of sweet potato pie or chocolate cake and left without sparing me a glance. On the rare occasion, she grunted something that sounded like ‘move’ and graced me

with a look that could wither redwoods. I lived for those days not caring that everyone in the farming community knew that the proper, sophisticated Jefferson young man had it bad for the feisty, highly-improper Aquila Chances ... and they collectively shook their heads and smirked. Except for my parents; they laughed their asses off in that quiet, dignified manner that was their way.

Summer came and went and I went back for my junior year at Morehouse and Aquila returned to Richmond and to Virginia Union. I wrote her every week and if she read my letters she gave no indication. Christmas Break I was back at that mom and pop shop where I left a gift for her and a week later I received a thank you but no thank you card along with the unopened gift.”

“That had to hurt,” I said.

“It did but I didn’t let it deter me. I was back a week later and this time instead of bringing a gift, I bought her a case of orange Crush soda.”

“She had to like that.”

“Well, she didn’t return it so that was a good sign. Easter break I was right back at that mom and pop shop and I bought her another case of orange Crush soda and enough gas money for someone to ride it to Richmond where she was attending college.”

“You didn’t go see her?” I asked.

“I might’ve been reckless, but I wasn’t stupid. I knew better than to go to Richmond and disturb her studies. Black folk took studying real serious. Even if you did well in your studies you still had a better than average chance of spending your working life in the fields, on the factory floor, or cleaning someone else’s house. So I didn’t go to Richmond, but I kept writing her.”

“Did she respond to you?”

“No, but that summer I regularly showed my face at that mom and pop shop.”

“Did you see her?”

“Not for a little while but one day I walked in and saw the most frightening thing I’d ever seen in the whole of my twenty-one years: Prosser Chances. It was clear that he was waiting for me. Girding my loins, I walked up to him and stuck out my hand ... and he ignored it. I almost smiled seeing from whom Aquila inherited her demeanor.”

‘You hurt my baby girl; you disrespect my baby girl; you do anything that I consider unseemly to my baby girl; you die,’ he said before walking out of the store.’

“Did you leave?”

“Had to. I think I’d sweated through my clothes I was so scared. But I came back. And I met Mrs. Frances Ellen Chances and I’ll tell you that woman frightened me more than her husband.

‘I know my husband warned you, boy, but he’s too accommodating so I’m here to warn you. My daughter doesn’t come back pregnant without a ‘Mrs.’ attached to her name. She doesn’t come back with a broken heart or a broken spirit because if she does I’ll do worse to you than what Prosser threatened. And I know he threatened to kill you being that he’s a man of few words, but see I’ll get to you first. Not only will I kill you, I’ll take my time with it ... and enjoy it. You study on that while you’re passing time with my baby.’

“Wow, Dr. Mrs. is just like her.”

“Yes, she is and I’m glad for that.”

“Did you leave that time?” I asked.

“Didn’t get a chance to. Mrs. Frances Ellen told me Aquila would be along shortly and well, I purchased two Orange Crush sodas, a piece of sweet potato pie and waited for her to walk through the door. When Aquila walked in, I walked over to her and asked her to dinner.”

“Did she accept?” I asked.

“No, she countered with lunch ... at her parent’s church.”

“I take it you went.”

“Damn straight I went. I’d have gone anywhere with that girl – even to Richmond to school if I hadn’t been so far along in my studies. We had lunch on the front steps of her parent’s church every other week because it was a second home to her.”

“Dr. Mrs. was very religious?”

“No, but the church might as well have been her home since her daddy and uncles had pretty much built it from the ground up. That church was what people referred to as a tobacco church meaning not only did parishioners plant and harvest tobacco to raise money for the building, some farmers paid their tithes in the leaf. The Chances owned one of the largest tobacco plantations in that area.

We had a lot of good talks on that front porch. We also had a lot of orange Crush sodas, sweet potato pie and ham sandwiches. Every week for one hour I learned all about the woman who was going to be my wife. It was the best summer I ever had. I hated to leave it. Who would have thought that leaving dusty, hot rural Virginia for the upbeat Atlanta would be a hard thing to do? I did though and I continued to write her.”

“Did she write you back?”

“Yes, and I treasured every one of her letters. That woman might be stingy with speech but she composed letters like paper and ink had been invented for her and her alone. That woman could’ve convinced the sky to stop being blue. I’m a religious man, but I wonder what the Scriptures would’ve looked like if she’d had a chance to pen them.

That summer I was back in rural Virginia. Just like the previous summer we wore the steps of that church out and kept the makers of orange Crush in business. I didn’t think that there was much more I could learn about Aquila but I had no idea how deep her waters ran.”

“How come she never took you to her house?”

“I asked her that once and she looked at me and spread her arms wide.

‘Every bit of land around you is owned by my daddy. This is my house. I spend all day in these fields, suckering tobacco, pulling tobacco, fighting snakes for shade, and fighting the leaves for freedom. I hate tobacco but tobacco has sustained our family and made me strong. There ain’t nothing nobody can do to me that is worse than what tobacco has done to me. You got a long time to think about life when you’re in those fields – a long time. Ain’t no man going to turn my head and leave me with a baby and nothing but the choice of spending a life in these fields.

*Ain't no school work going to challenge me like the summer heat out here.
Ain't nothing going to make me make tobacco my life.'*

That's when I realized just how different our lives were. Though I'd never so much as stepped foot in a field, she'd taken me there with her passionate words. If I'd never wanted to work in a field before, I definitely didn't after hearing her speech. More than that, I never wanted her to have to go back. Taking her hand, I looked her in the eye and told her that when we get married she'd never have to see dirt if she didn't want to. And she looked me right back in the eye and told me that she didn't need a man to save her. She simply needed one who believed in her and loved her the same way that Prosser Chances believed in her and loved her.

'I can do that,' I told her. *'I can do that,'* I repeated as I embraced her. And just when I thought the moment couldn't get any better, she returned my embrace. *'I just might let you.'*

Summer was coming to a close and I headed off to law school. She was a junior at Virginia Union and I was a first year law student. We exchanged letters but we both kept our noses to the grindstone. She, because she knew no other way; me, because I was counting down the years before I could marry that girl.

When summer rolled back around though I had an internship, every week I was right back in rural Virginia sitting on those church steps and drinking orange Crush with the future Mrs. Elon Jefferson. I was having the time of my life, but I was having it by myself. Something about Aquila was off. She looked the same; she sounded the same but the fire in her eyes had diminished and she looked ... defeated.

I thought about asking the good people of Varbrad what was going on but I nixed that. Aquila was my woman and as such, it was my job to discover what was wrong. I spent out next two outings surreptitiously looking and listening for what was wrong. The week after that I threw discretion to the wind and flat out asked her.

'What's wrong, Aquila?'

To her credit she met my inquiry the same way she met everything else: fearlessly.

'I'm not going back to school in the fall.'

What the hell? Of all the things I was prepared to hear, that response wasn't among them.

"What did you think you'd hear?" I asked.

"I thought she'd say we should break up or that she found another man. Anything but that."

“What would you have done if she’d said she found another man?” I asked.

“Buried that motherfucker somewhere. Aquila Chances was my woman, no debate, no discussion, no questions.”

This was the first time that I’d ever witnessed Dr. Mr. be anything but reserved, dignified and calm. I was taken aback but I couldn’t help but like how fired up he got over his woman. He’d understand when I got fired up over mine.

“Was it another man?” I asked.

“Yeah, but not in the way I thought. One of her uncle’s had gotten injured and everybody was working overtime. Her daddy had almost driven himself into the ground trying to work both plantations and Aquila being the woman she is, wasn’t about to stand by and let that happen. She took over her daddy’s plantation while her daddy and cousins took over their uncle’s.

I was so angry. In fact, I don’t think I’d ever been angrier than I ever was at that moment. Dragging her onto my lap I carefully lifted her chin so she could see the truth in my eyes.

‘I’m going to D.C., I’m getting my stuff, and I’ll be back here tomorrow.’

'For what?' she asked.

'For you. You need help and you should've asked me being that I'm your man.'

'You might be my man but you've never handled a pack of cigarettes much less raw tobacco.'

'That doesn't matter. I'll do whatever it takes to help you. You're going back to school in fall.'

I drove straight to the mom and pop shop and convinced pops to come to D.C. as I needed help. Securing it, I drove straight to D.C. and resigned my position at my internship. Right after that me and pops went to Sears and got outfitted as I had nothing appropriate to wear in a tobacco field. I drove back to Varbrad with pops. Five a.m. I was in the middle of nowhere going deeper into the middle of nowhere. Five thirty a.m. I pulled up to Aquila's house. I wasn't surprised that the lights were on. I was surprised at the number of women in her family ... and every one of them was surprised to see me.

'What are you doing here?' she asked.

'I'm here to help.'

And I did. Aquila didn't give me any quarter. It was like she was trying to break me. If I hadn't witnessed her working like two grown men

and her sisters working the same way, I would've sworn she was trying to do just that.

I thought I was going to die an hour into it. Two hours into it, I was sure I was dead. By lunchtime, I was hallucinating. I kept imagining that I saw shade and cool water. By the end of the day I couldn't breathe, I could barely move, and all I wanted to do was drop to my knees and die a peaceful death. And then I looked over at Aquila who did this every summer and saw ... the hope of the black race. Regardless of how beaten I felt, I'd never felt more beaten then when I glimpsed that defeat in her eyes.

I wasn't going to let tobacco be her future, not when I was her future. I worked like no human being should ever have to work that summer but it wasn't over. No way in hell was I leaving Aquila to do this on her own. We packed her sister's off to college under their great duress. Though they wanted to stay and help Aquila wasn't having it. She put her foot down and thus, they went to Richmond without her.

I went to D.C. and told my advisor that I needed a semester off and received a hell no in response, albeit more politely worded than that. I was told that I had a choice to make. They had several students who would love to have my spot, students who'd decided that school was the most important thing in their lives. I walked out at that point. There was no

choice. School was important but Aquila was the most important thing in my life. I went back to Varbrad, packed Aquila off to school with the help of her numerous uncles and I helped her daddy and uncles do what needed to be done. And damn, was there a lot to be done on a farm.

It was hard work but it was honest work. By then, I'd moved into her house because we worked from sunup to sundown ... and then a little bit more. I missed school, I missed Aquila but that May when Aquila walked across the stage to receive her degree in accounting, I knew it was worth it. Aquila was the first person in her family to graduate from college and being the woman she was, she graduated with highest honors. I don't know who was crying more: her parents, her or me.

With a lot of prodding from me, Aquila had applied to law school and was accepted at Yale. I was so damn proud of her. My future wife was beautiful, smart, and strong. She also had me as a man. I wasn't sure where I was going to go to law school, I was sure however that I wouldn't be going back to D.C.

Unbeknownst to me, Aquila had decided that I was going to Yale. I think she must've literally willed me into Yale because I got in. I still remember the day that she presented my acceptance letter to me. It was accompanied with an '*I told you so*' and a victory dance.

Two seconds her celebration she announced that she was going to challenge me all the way through law school. And she did. They still talk about the great Jefferson v. Jefferson law school debates. I'm pretty sure that she trounced me in every single one but I was a better debater for it, which in turn led me to being a better man, not simply a better attorney. It took me a while to figure out that Aquila always won because she only argued about things she was passionate about.

It was a proud moment for both of us when we walked across that stage. It was also a frightening moment. I didn't have school to hide behind."

"Did you marry her then?"

"Son, I married that woman before we went off to Yale. I didn't have the one carat diamond solitaire I wanted to present her with. I didn't have the high-paying job, the carefully-mapped out future but I had faith and I had Aquila. Our first house was a room in her parent's home on a tobacco farm in the middle of rural Virginia. Our honeymoon was a trip we took in our minds. Though it wasn't like anything I'd planned I didn't ever have a chance to regret it. Every sacrifice was worth it, especially when I watched her parents' faces when each of their daughters walked across the stage to receive their diplomas. Twenty years later, Aquila is a successful attorney,

the sister under her is a chancellor, the oldest twin is a surgeon, the youngest twin is a colonel in the US Army, and her baby sister is a reverend.”

“Wow,” I said. Dr. Mr. was full of surprises.

“You know why I told you this, Iain?”

“No, but I’m glad you did,” I said truthfully.

“I told you this so you will understand that life rarely works the way we want it to or expect it to. You can plan all you want but there’s always that choice. Don’t wait too long to start living life because life is going to happen regardless of what you want. Just work every day to become a better man, to treat everyone with righteousness and justice. People might ask for more but that’s all that those that love you require. Aquila didn’t require a one-carat diamond solitaire. Years later when I gave her one, she simply looked at it and asked me if the ring was for her or for me because she already had a ring.”

“I owe Victorious an apology,” I said.

“Yes, you do,” he said. “And being that I trust you, I’ll give you permission to go up to her room.”

* * *

Following Dr. Mr.'s directions, I made my way up the winding staircase to her room. Tentatively knocking, I waited for permission to enter. I didn't get it from Victorious but from her mother who gave me the look before departing the room.

"Forgive me, Victorious. I'm just in a hurry to make you my wife," I admitted.

"If your body's floating out in the Bering Sea, you can't do that, Iain."

"You're right."

"I usually am. Iain, if you hadn't come back I would've spent the rest of my life searching for you. If you're so hell bent on going to Alaska to make money and I'm the reason you're trying to make money, I'm going with you. We're a team, dammit and you need to realize that."

Looking in her eyes I knew that she meant every single word and I loved her more. There was no doubt Victorious would hire herself onto a fishing boat to protect me. Considering the rough guys that comprised the crew, the back-breaking work that fishing entailed, and the presence of danger, that was out.

"Don't even try it, baby. If I ever see you on a boat doing anything more demanding than relaxing in a chaise lounge, I will go all crazy, white boy."

I knew that she was going to be alright when she joked with me. “I know that you staged this whole thing just so you could get into my room.”

“Well, rumor has it that you still can’t have boy company in your room unless there’s a Mrs. in front of your name,” I joked.

* * *

Victorious went back to school and I moved back to Charlottesville and convinced Andreas to come with me. We both found factory jobs. It wasn’t my ideal job, but it paid for strawberries. And I needed lots of strawberries to keep Victorious in desserts. I fixed so many strawberry-laden desserts that I was the Bubba Gump of strawberries.

Chapter Twelve

My lacrosse scholarship had covered most of my undergrad expenses, which left me with no student loan debt. Not wanting to pile up a lot of student loan debt by going to a private school when I had a perfectly good state school in my backyard, I did my MBA at Virginia. Because I took fewer classes, I was able to work part time. I quit the factory job and took a job in construction. Having Andreas as a roommate turned out to be a good deal. I couldn't have picked a better roommate if I'd tried. Both frugal, we made a menu and cooked our meals instead of going out. We carpooled and saved on gas. We kept the heat set at low even though we both splurged on the air conditioning being that we hated to be hot. I managed to save most of my money and with his help, invested the money I'd saved.

Even working part-time I managed to graduate two years before Victorious being that she was doing a double degree—a Juris Doctorate and an MBA. I teased her that she was a showoff, but I was so proud of my baby. Even though I graduated *magna cum laude*, I continued to work in the construction industry because it paid well and I really wasn't a sitting behind a desk type of guy.

Being that only four hundred miles (about seven hours) separated us, Victorious and I took up road-tripping again. I think we pretty much wore out the state of Pennsylvania since it was the half-way point. After I finished grad school I decided to take the bulk of the driving because I didn't want Victorious driving those long distances by herself considering her class schedule and the fact that she was a woman. I realize that I should've considered the toll driving long distances was taking on her all through undergrad school, but I wasn't always this mature.

I realize that my old-fashioned thinking wasn't politically-correct but I didn't give a damn. My '*protect my woman*' gene was kicking in. Victorious was my woman and it was my duty to see to her best interests.

I took those two years and finally got my shit together and put Victorious' favorite songs on tape. All her favorites were on it. One day, I'd make her a professional recording but hearing Dr. Mr.'s words in my ear, right now this would do. I played the tape on our next road trip not knowing that that was the only thing we'd be listening to.

Victorious decided that I was going to be a country artist. Making a copy of one of the songs, she gave it to Allan even though he didn't listen to country music.

“He lives in Texas,” she explained before I even got a chance to ask her why.

Texas really was a whole 'nother country and Texans made some of the best friends and some of the most unrelenting enemies. Let me tell you something about beer-guzzling good old boys—they'll tell you when you suck. The south as a whole might still be pissed off about the Civil War but Texans were born with a '*remember the Alamo*' gene ... and they were still pissed about it.

* * *

It was about that time that I met her nine best girlfriends – yes, I said *nine* as in one more than eight and one less than ten. Being that she didn't attend school or frequent the social functions most girls her age had, Victorious didn't have many girlfriends. Although she was acquainted with a few of the women before that time they weren't close ... until after Black Homecoming Weekend at Carolina. Leave it to Victorious to go somewhere and come back with nine best friends. I always knew that women had the unique ability to make friends out of the most ordinary and extraordinary circumstances and since Victorious was involved you know it had to be an extraordinary circumstance. Allow me to direct your attention to exhibit a—the Vacation Bible School incident.

Aloha, Atlanta, Cayleigh, Indy, Jack, Reign, Raven, Silana, and Zuri were all fellow Carolina alum and a veritable variety pack of black womanhood. They were also hell on wheels or anything else that rolled. Intelligent women (like my Victorious knew any other kind of woman), they were the type of women that Harriett Tubman would have welcomed in her army. They were also the kind of women that not only would've been on the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement alongside Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker and Septima Poinsette Clark; they would've also been in the trenches with the boys that stormed Normandy Beach.

The Posse was a revolution just waiting to happen. Victorious was their Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander. Aloha and Atlanta were their Sarah and Caroline Remond. Cayleigh was their Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin. Reign was their Mary Elizabeth Bowser. Raven was their Mary Church Terrell. Zuri was their Maggie Lena Walker. And they were led by Indy who was their Ida B. Wells-Barnett; Silana who was their Charlotte Ray; and, Jack who was their Mary Fields.

They might not have known each other long, but apparently, it didn't take long. Those women were thicker than thieves. Possessing a deep well of integrity, they were the kind of friends that if one of them had a hundred bucks all of them had ten. If Victorious wasn't with me; she was with them

stirring up mayhem because that's what the Posse did best. And of course, they did it with unprecedented style and beautiful results. I enjoyed the Posse and I learned a lot about women in the process. And being that I had no sisters I had a lot to learn.

This was a learning season. Not only did I learn a lot about women from observing the Posse, I also learned a lot about me. First and foremost, I learned that my crazy white boy was real close to the surface.

I didn't like to think too much about that because shortcomings are difficult to swallow. My past was littered with sayings such as '*I'd never do such-and-such*,' but I came to realize that I'd uttered those things in a controlled environment where my white male privilege allowed me to believe in concepts that I took as being universal. I'd always believed in concepts such as justice not only being blind but being dispersed regularly and freely.

* * *

Time flies when you're having fun and I was definitely having fun despite working hard. I'd seen a flyer for cabins in the Adirondacks awhile back. Knowing that I wanted to take Victorious, I'd saved up the money and had simply been waiting for a good time to take her. The following fall, I got the chance as Victorious had a few days off from school. I wanted to

make her break special as she'd been working hard to maintain her grades and thus the legacy of the women from the Chances lineage.

I wasn't much for flying especially when I could drive there just fine so I threw my bag in the truck and headed to New Haven to collect Victorious and after kissing her breathless I pointed the truck towards the Adirondacks, which was just minutes from Lake Placid, New York. I should've known something was up when she didn't insist on driving, but I was just so damned happy to see her that I didn't pay it any mind. That was mistake number one. We enjoyed the drive down filling the four and a half hours with smack-talking, rousing debates and comfortable silences that turned into gasps of awe as we got closer to our destination.

After we checked in we simply threw our gear into the cabin and headed for the restaurant where we filled our stomachs with a hearty beef stew before setting out to indulge our other senses with a leisurely walk where we admired Mother Nature. I felt at peace strolling hand-in-hand with the love of my life, then I always felt at peace when in Victorious' presence.

After our walk, we tucked ourselves up in our cabin. Because we wanted a weekend where we could focus on us, we selected a cabin that had no phone and no television. Normally, having no television would've

bothered me but with Victorious in my arms and an amazing view of the mountains, woods, and the lake, I didn't have time to be bothered.

I had a good time holding Victorious in my arms and feeding her chocolate-dipped strawberries in front of the roaring fire. Holding her was a gift. Men can say what they want about fast cars, faster women, and lots of money, but I would bet everything that all of the stuff in the world couldn't hold a candle to a good woman. Victorious wasn't just a good woman—she was the best woman, the only woman, and most importantly, *my* woman.

That Friday evening was the start of a perfect weekend. I had good company, good food, and was busy having a good time. And then I discovered that Victorious was injured. That discovery made my alpha genes kick in and when they did I could do no less than go completely ape shit.

As our habit, we shared a bed ... and assumed Victorious' favorite sleep position, which was to burrow as close as humanly possible to me. I didn't mind her being that close, but I did keep the air conditioning set at sixty because I was already hot-natured and Victorious radiated heat like there was a sun somewhere in her body. I might've complained a little bit about her being so hot (not that she gave a damn about my complaints) but

there wasn't nothing better than holding her. I was possessive of her, even in my sleep. Whenever she moved, my automatic reflexes had me pulling her in tighter to me. Normally, neither one of us would've paid much attention to this, but sometime during the night when I pulled her closer she cried out in pain.

That sound coming from Victorious was like a knife in my heart. Like mothers wake up when their babies cry, the sound of Victorious' distress brought me instantly awake. Before I had a chance to consider my actions, I had the lights on and was dragging the covers off of Victorious and was in full interrogation mode.

"Where are you hurt?" I asked.

Having been in a deep sleep she was having trouble following me.

"What?" She asked groggily. In her sleep-depraved state, she didn't bother to hide her distress.

"Victorious," I began again, yelling because I was frantic with concern. "Tell me where you're hurt," I demanded.

Victorious finally came fully awake. Pushing her braids out of her eyes, she asked, "Are you yelling at me?"

"Victorious, this is the last time that I'm going to ask you before I haul your ass to the ER. *Where* are you hurt?"

“You can’t make me do anything Iain James Banks, so you better stop threatening...” she began before shrieking.

I wasn’t in the mood to negotiate with her and thus I was already bundling her up in the covers so that I could take her to the ER. I was in the midst of calling myself six kinds of fool for reserving a place without a phone and half hour away from the nearest medical facility. Right now I was not a man to be trifled with, even by the love of my life. And though I would let Victorious have her way in most things, that paradigm was null and void when it came to her health and safety.

“Iain, stop!” She yelled.

I kept walking.

“Iain, put me down!” She demanded.

I stopped to step into some shoes. In a moment of lucidity I recalled a law about driving without shoes.

“Iain, I’m going to kick your ass if you don’t put me down!” She threatened.

I navigated the dark cabin ignoring the fact that Victorious was alternating between threats and yells, only stopping to grab my wallet and keys.

“Iain, I cannot go out of the house dressed like this,” she argued as if that was going to stop my forward progress.

I hoisted her higher in my arms and headed to the door not giving a damn that I wore only boxer briefs and a pair of tennis shoes and that it was a crisp fifty degrees out.

“Iain, please stop. You’re hurting me,” she pleaded.

That got my attention. I could never willingly hurt her. I stopped three feet from the door. “Where do you hurt, baby?”

“My ribs,” she finally admitted. “Can you please take me back to bed so that I can lie down?”

“You need to go to the hospital,” I decreed.

“I already went,” she admitted.

I was steaming mad. Not only had my woman been injured and failed to tell me; she had been injured so badly that it necessitated a trip to the hospital. I would rage at her later but first I needed details.

“What happened?” I demanded.

“My rib is broken,” she admitted.

Sensing that I was about to argue, she repeated her plea. “Iain, please can we go back to bed. I really need to lie down.”

I relented and laid her on the bed. Stepping back, I asked her gruffly, “Do you have a prescription for pain?”

“Yes,” she answered.

“Where is it?” I asked around my anger.

“In my purse,” she answered mutinously.

Stomping to the living room I located her purse and simply dumped the contents out on the coffee table. Finding the bottle of painkillers I got pissed all over again. It was evident that she hadn’t taken any. Quickly scanning the warning stickers that decorated the sides of the bottle, I poured her a small glass of juice and stomped back to the bedroom.

Handing her the juice and two pills I waited for her to take them before lighting into her. “Why haven’t you taken any pills when you’ve had them for damn near two weeks?”

“Because painkillers always make me drowsy, which means that I can’t drive or attend class or basically do anything besides sleep like a newborn,” she admitted.

I scrubbed my hands over my face and counted to a hundred by squares and then by cubes. Neither method worked. I was still mad as hell. “Why didn’t you call me?”

“Iain,” she attempted to calm me down.

“Why?” I asked again.

“Because then I would’ve missed my weekend with you!” She yelled back. “So shut up!”

All of the anger went out of me at that admission. I cut off the light and climbed back into bed with her. Gently pulling her against my chest, I asked if she was comfortable before demanding that she tell me what happened, albeit in a slightly softer yell.

I listened as she told me what happened. She talked for ten minutes but all I heard was, ‘there was a fight.’ And while I listened I revised my list of things I’d never do because in that moment I could have killed the man who dared touch my woman and dismantled the system that didn’t put him to death for such a trespass.

“So some guy broke my rib?” I asked when she was finished.

“Um, no,” she said confusedly. “He broke my rib,” she finished.

“Your rib is my rib, Victorious. God took it from me and formed you,” I finished before kissing her forehead and waiting for her to fall asleep.

I was going to find the police report and find the guy ... and then I was going to learn that motherfucker some manners. Men do not hit women. They especially don’t hit *my* woman. Knowing Victorious and her Posse, I was sure there wasn’t an official trail. I’d have to swallow my thirst for

revenge. I'd bide my time and gather details. Sometime, some place, I'd have all the information I needed and then I'd go crazy white boy. That motherfucker better hoped he left this world before that day came.

* * *

Despite Victorious' numerous protests, I dispensed her pain killers with predictable regularity ignoring her pleas that she didn't want to sleep through the entire weekend. In yet another moment of antiquated ideals, I sent each member of the Posse flowers and a missive in which I included my home, work, and cellular numbers and instructions that they were to call me ANYTIME they were in trouble or in need. I might not have all the accoutrements they had like the Ivy League degrees, the impressive ancestry, the rich daddy's, or the business momma's, but I was a southern boy that descended from Scots stock. I had plenty of crazy and I wouldn't hesitate to bring it with me.

I met the Posse face-to-face a month after my flowers and note were delivered. We met at Silana's home outside of Atlanta. Two things happened there. One, I fell in love with the city of Atlanta; and two, I got to know the Posse a whole lot better. I thought I'd already known them, but that weekend proved that I'd only scratched the surface. I knew what everyone else knew about them: that they were the business.

Despite presenting herself as a little bit flighty, Aloha should be working for NASA being her mind worked so fast. Even though she worked hard at presenting an ‘I don’t give a fuck’ image, Atlanta cared so much it almost hurt her. She should be heading up the SBA somewhere teaching everyday folk the intricacies of starting, owning, and operating a business. Cayleigh was the most giving person I’d ever met despite her primary means of transportation being a 1967 Ford Mustang GT500 and her secondary means of transportation being a private jet. She was also the one who’d give up the most for those she loved. Despite being the soothing balm for the group, Indy was in turmoil. Her eyes flashed emotions hinting at deep-running passions. Jack might’ve worn danger like she wore her boots but that danger went down to the core. A woman only wore warnings like that when she’d experienced some kind of abuse. Knowing Jack, whatever had hurt her was simply a memory, but the memory of the hurt still rested within her. Despite appearing like kid run amok, Reign was like a mini-Jack without the conspicuous danger. Her senses didn’t miss a thing. She took in data and catalogued it like a master librarian. Though Silana was the very embodiment of justice (as it is laid out in the system), she hid a molten lava core, a red-hot temper, and an ‘I’ll bury your ass in the backyard’ kind of retribution. Whereas Jack was openly dangerous;

Silana was stealth dangerous. I would not be fucking with that woman – ever – but if I needed to dispose of a body, I’d give her a call ... and then ask for representation. Zuri wore arrogance like she wore her beauty (effortlessly) but beneath the confidence that exuded from her was a sadness that threatened to spill out every time she blinked. She bled from invisible wounds. By this time, Raven had passed in some kind of mountain climbing accident, although admittedly none of the women seemed to be too broken up about it.

Like the motto of *Transformers*, there was more to these women than met the eye. Most people were just too caught up in the images that they projected to notice the women beneath the success, degrees, money, confidence, apathy, and danger. I’d stopped being most people soon after meeting Victorious.

After hugs were exchanged, we sat down to dinner. In case you’ve never made the acquaintance of southern women, they are big on sitting down to dinner ... and hugging ... and getting you told. My hips had barely hit the seat when the women lit into me. First Silana thanked me and then the more volatile members of the Posse (Atlanta, Aloha, Reign, and Zuri) lit into me. Victorious was among the more vocal members but she’d already lit into me and even if she hadn’t she’d light into me in private. Jack, and

Cayleigh just sat calmly, and Indy waited to see if she would need to play referee. I listened to their fire and brimstone before replying.

“I don’t care if I’m old-fashioned. As much as I’d like it to be different, the world is a dangerous place. Women need special protection because they are subject to special dangers. I know that I’m not your daddy’s and I don’t pretend to know anyone’s daddy except Victorious’, but most daddies I know are real protective of their daughters. I’m not going to apologize for treating you like I expect people to treat my women.”

“Are we your women, Iain?” The normally silent Jack asked.

“Damn straight. Y’all are Victorious’ sisters and when I marry her you’ll all be my sisters-in-law and as the sole male present, I’ll always do all within my power to keep you from danger.”

The room went silent. Jack merely gave a short, hmm, which was apparently high praise. I didn’t get a chance to gauge the looks of the other members because moments later I had an armful of Victorious. No one shanked me and Silana kept plying me with food so I was safe ... for now.

* * *

Even though her physician had pronounced her fit, another full month passed before I felt that Victorious had healed enough to suit me. I

waited for Victorious to settle herself in bed and then I pounced. I had been saving this up for three months.

“Comfortable?” I asked.

“Hmm mmm,” she mumbled.

As soon as she answered she found herself covered with two hundred and thirty-five pounds of angry male.

“There had better never be another time when you ignore your wellbeing,” I decreed.

“I didn’t want to bother you, Iain,” she hissed, obviously still pissed.

“It’s your job to bother me. If you are ever hurt the first call you should make is to 9-1-1; the second call should be to me!” I responded.

Predictably, she refused to answer.

“Do you understand me, Victorious?” I asked

“Fine, Iain,” she returned.

I didn’t push her any further because I knew her well enough to know that her ‘fine, Iain’ was the most that she’d willingly concede. I also knew how difficult it was for her to concede even that much. I wasn’t interested in breaking her pride; I was interested in preserving her wellbeing. As soon as I rolled off of her she scooted to the furthest edge of the bed. I let her scoot and settle herself before scooting up next to her and spooning her.

“Iain, I’m mad at you,” she hissed.

“I understand,” I returned before dropping a soft kiss on the top of her head. “I can only hope that soon you’ll be able to forgive me. You mean too much to me to lose, Victorious.”

Sighing, she snuggled closer to me and linked her hand with mine. I sighed too and thanked God. We’d survived our first fight, which had only taken us ten years to getting around to. More amazingly, we did so without compromising our principles ... or our love for each other.

Chapter Thirteen

Victorious graduated from Yale—with highest honors of course. *I* expected no less. I kept working construction and saving money. Andreas was still my roommate although we'd moved to D.C. because Dr. Mrs. got us swanky (paid) internships. Andreas was working at some big-time finance company and I was working with a small but prestigious outfit. I might've been born at night but it wasn't last night and though I mostly fetched, I was making contacts and getting the kind of experience that money couldn't buy and classrooms couldn't teach. We didn't even have to worry about living arrangements or the high cost of living in the nation's capital because Dr. Mrs. put us up in the brownstone of a good friend of hers – Augustina McDyess.

Andreas and I both protested at the generosity and got our behinds swatted with a ruler for our efforts.

"This isn't anything that I wouldn't do for my own boys. Now I know what you were paying for rent in Charlottesville and you're both responsible for paying that amount to Augustina as well as taking care of the electric, water, and cable bill. I expect you to act like my sons, being that you both belong to me when you're in D.C. Are we clear on that?"

We were clear. And we were touched at her words. All I could do was hug her and thank God for this woman. Though I'd never talked to Andreas about his religious views, I was sure he was saying similar prayers.

I didn't get a big break, but I did get recruited to sing at a couple of clubs and such. Allan had even arranged it so that I could sing the national anthem at one of his games. Allan really was good people for real. Before you knew it, club owners started requesting me to come back. I really learned the ropes during that time. And with the help of Victorious' momma, Andreas' financial expertise and my good southern sense, I was doing alright. I had a good seventy thousand in the bank and a solid education under my belt. I was making money—not exactly hand over fist—but I was adding to the nest egg.

We'd have a good down payment on a house and a little money to start Victorious' own law firm – if that's what she wanted to do. I'd talked to Atlanta about business start up costs and I'd been saving for that. I wanted Victorious to have whatever she needed even if that meant that I did without.

As much as I was ready to marry Victorious, I had to give both of us room to grow because as soon as I put that ring on her finger she wouldn't be able to shake me. Instead of being mad at having to wait, Victorious

held me tight. Yanking me down to her, she kissed me and thanked me all in one breath.

Victorious and I usually spent at least two weekends a month together. Because I didn't want her making road trips after working all week, I made the trek to Atlanta. I flew one weekend, and drove the other. We did quiet things. She settled into her law career and I continued penning songs, playing clubs and saving money.

* * *

I really enjoyed the city of Atlanta. Well, a more correct statement would be that I loved the area surrounding Atlanta. It was an interesting city. A mix of old and new, it had a storied history, professional teams, plenty of universities, and thriving suburbs. And then there was the place that Silana lived. A town called No Trespassing, which was about an hour outside of Atlanta, it had a few houses, but none like Silana's where we enjoyed Sunday get-togethers.

Hanging out with the Posse became as much a part of my routine as spending time with Victorious. Being a man, I'd hung back in an effort to give them privacy but they'd made up their mind that I belonged to them and as such dragged me along with them.

Going out with them was a hoot. I garnered a lot of attention being with them. Some people wondered who I was to be in such stellar company. Others whispered other things. It was those other things that got me all riled up. A group of women had seen me hanging outside of one of those girly stores loaded down with bags and commented on my ass. Most guys might like that but my ass belonged to Victorious.

I must've looked uncomfortable with all of the attention because not two seconds later, Zuri and Reign came and dragged me into the store without nary a glance at my fan club.

"Thanks," I told them in relief.

"We protect each other's stuff," Reign said.

"Even if you weren't Victorious' stuff, you're Posse stuff so them bitches can go find some other man to ogle," Zuri huffed.

Victorious teased me about it later that night.

"So how'd you feel getting catcalls from your fan club?"

"I don't reckon I care for it too much. Out of all the guys in the place, why'd they zero in on me?" I groused.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Victorious asked when I finished my grousing. "Why were they looking at you?"

"I was just standing there minding my own business," I stated.

“You might’ve just been standing there but you were looking all kinds of fine while doing so,” she responded.

Grabbing my hand, she hauled me off to the mirror where she began undressing me.

“Victorious,” I stilled her arms.

“What?”

“What are you doing, baby?”

“Showing you something. Don’t worry, I’m not going to do anything to you,” she stated as she pushed my arms aside and continued unbuttoning my shirt.

“What if I was inclined to do something to you?”

“You won’t,” she stated matter-of-factly.

Thankfully we had that kind of closeness in which she knew that I wouldn’t do anything to her, but I couldn’t resist teasing her.

“What makes you so sure?”

“A—because my mother will fuck you up; b—because the Posse will fuck you up; c – because you love me,” she stated as she pulled my arms free from the sleeves of my serviceable cotton shirt.

I didn’t know what to say to that. I grabbed her gently and looked her square in the eye. “God knows that I do.”

“And I look forward to hearing you say that in front of a preacher,” she said before turning me around.

“You know why those women were ogling you?” She asked. “Because you are fine. Look in the mirror, Iain.”

I did look but all I saw was the same man that always stared back at me.

“I’m the same guy I’ve always been,” I said.

“Yeah, mine so don’t forget that,” she said before launching into an impassioned speech.

“Iain look,” she demanded as she turned me around. “You grew into that body. All those years of lacrosse and working construction has made you a living work of art. Don’t be surprised that women give you catcalls. Only be surprised when they don’t because that means that something is wrong with their vision.”

“Or they could prefer women,” I said.

“I don’t care how much carpet they might munch, fine is fine.”

“You mean it?” I asked hopefully. Not a vain man, I’d always felt like the beast standing next to Victorious.

“I can see that I’m going to have to convince you,” she said. “Let me tell you what breathing women see when they look at you, Iain. They see

one damn fine cowboy.” Stepping behind me in the mirror, she continued. “You’re the kind of man that women daydream about. You’re a big rough cowboy with an ass that blue jeans were invented for, abs that I could wash clothes on, lips that make people wonder if there’s some black in your lineage, eyes that reveal a fierce intelligence, and a smile that is open and honest. I don’t have any stats or generally accepted accounting principles, but if I went to Vegas I’d feel confident putting all of my money on it and I think even Atlanta would say that was a safe bet.

If I was a modeling agent, I’d exploit your good looks for all that they were worth. Every billboard up and down I-95 would feature you bare-chested, wearing nothing but that killer smile, faded blue jeans and some scuffed cowboy boots. That’s what I’d have to settle for since my own personal fantasy would be considered soft porn.”

I had stopped breathing two sentences into her description. Normally I was a smart man, but all of my intelligence was busy reveling in her praise. That’s the only excuse I can give for why I asked my next question.

“Describe your personal fantasy,” I croaked.

Looking me dead in the eye, she did—in graphic detail. “In my personal fantasy, you’re wearing your cowboy hat. All of your buttons on your button fly jeans are undone. Your hand is inside your jeans and you’re

slowly stroking yourself. You're covered in a light sheen of sweat which serves to highlight all of those hard ridges and planes in your chest. You don't say a word, you just look at me with those intense eyes and I come to you. Rubbing my breasts against your muscled chest, I lightly rake my nails over your nipples before pulling you down for a kiss," she said as she stepped back, breathing just as hard as I was.

"Victorious," I croaked.

"You know when I was telling you my three reasons for why I wasn't concerned about you doing anything to me?"

"Yes," I rasped.

"Well, there's reason four."

"And that is?"

"You wouldn't do anything to me because you'd be too busy trying to keep me from doing something to you. I want you, Iain. I've wanted you from the very beginning."

"I'm going for a swim I said," as I hauled ass out of the room before I exploded.

"Iain that water's damn near freezing," she warned.

"That's the appeal," I said as I ran down the stairs as if I was the anchor leg on the men's 4x400m relay team. Quickly stripping, I dove in.

The water did the trick but after Victorious followed me out and informed me that she masturbated to that fantasy every night, I had to do laps for forty minutes to insure that I was too exhausted to throw her on the bed and fuck her like a porn star. That night I had to put all of the pillows between us.

* * *

I made the decision to put together my CD. I was all stealth about it and loaded it into Victorious' CD player and set it to play about two minutes after I left her place. I didn't get more than twenty miles up the road before I saw a flash of black come flying by. For a moment, I thought Victorious was going to ram me off the road. Pulling over, my door was almost yanked off the frame before I had a chance to even turn off my engine. Before I could say the first word I got an armful of woman and a face full of kisses.

"You did it!" she exclaimed.

"Yeah," I said sheepishly.

"Where are my extra copies?" she demanded.

"How many do you need?"

"Enough for the Posse so give me," she said.

"You know you didn't have to run me off the road. You simply could've called my phone."

“Yeah, yeah, give me,” she demanded again while rubbing her hands together.

“You didn’t even have time to listen to the whole thing,” I said.

“Listened to the first note, and that’s all it took.”

I handed over the CDs and hauled her up for a big kiss before heading back to D.C.

The Posse loved the music but they had a problem with the packaging.

“Da hell is this?” Aloha asked. “How are you going to put a voice like that with such plain wrapping?”

“I’m not good at art,” I admitted.

“Neither am I, but I have a friend who is. And since I have all the dirt on Lagi, we’ll get her to do your next album cover.”

Aloha had a friend who she referred to as the Willie Nelson and Johnny Cash of art, which was fitting as I’d covered them on my CD. I’d smiled at her description but after seeing Lagi’s work, I had to agree that Lagi Maea was the business. And like Aloha, she was just the tiniest bit crazy.

My first pressing sold out because the Posse hawked it like monks hawking indulgences back in the day. An artist couldn’t wish for a better

fan club. Zuri made it part of her gift pack for clients she showed property to. Silana would play my CD in her office whenever she had clientele that were into country. Allan gave a bunch of his teammates copies. With a fan club like that I couldn't help but be successful.

People started to know my name. My songs started being requested on the radio. A big time recording studio wanted to pick up my independent project and put it on their label. After having the Posse look over their proposal over Sunday dinner (because they were loaded up with attorneys), I came back with a counter-offer that left me with a nice lump sum in the bank, no mandatory touring and no first rights of refusal for subsequent projects. They didn't like it but I was adamant about not touring being that I enjoyed my privacy, my weekends with Victorious, and Sunday dinners with the Posse too much to give any of them up. I could've lived with the first rights thing but being that Silana was adamant about that issue, I took her advice. It turned out to be a win-win for everyone involved. The record label more than made their investment back and I had enough for Victorious to start up her own business whenever she was ready.

Chapter Fourteen

I was ready to marry Victorious. Let me clarify that. I could've married that woman the moment I first laid eyes on her, but I wasn't man enough to marry a woman like her. For that matter I wasn't even a man. Though I've legally been a man for a good while, like dough, I was now ready to marry Victorious. I had a nice bit of money stashed in savings and I was almost done with my next CD. I was ready, but I had to make sure that she was ready.

One evening while greasing her hair, I tested the waters.

"How do you like Allan's house?" I asked being that we'd flown out last week to attend one of his games.

"It's beautiful. His interior decorator has great taste."

"Do you want a house like that?" I asked.

"Iain, the houses in Allan's neighborhood average ten thousand square feet. Exactly what would I do with a house that big? Allan has an entire staff to see to the upkeep of that place."

"Well what type of house do you want?"

"One where you come home to it every night," she answered.

Well damn.

“Where do you want to live?” I asked thinking I wouldn’t mind moving to Atlanta.

“With you,” she responded.

Well double damn. It sounded like Victorious was more than ready to become Mrs. Iain Banks ... but I had to make sure.

“I just want to give you the world,” I said.

“Just give me you and I’ll be satisfied,” she replied.

“You already have me,” I whispered.

“For fear of sounding as if I’m an advocate of slavery, I want papers on you,” she said right before ordering me to get back to greasing her hair.

The smile in my heart was so big that I almost missed her soft words. “I don’t know if I’ve told you this before, but you have the best hands.”

“Only every time that I grease your hair,” I joked.

“Well, it’s true.”

Victorious was going to say something else, but she suddenly sighed and remarked, “Oh, goodness, you have the best hands. After you started greasing my hair, I stopped letting anyone else do it because it just wasn’t the same.”

I was pleased and could feel the smile stretch my face. Her next comment stretched my smirk completely out of control.

“I know that this is selfish, but I would be absolutely devastated if I found out that you were greasing another woman’s hair. And then I’d go to prison because I’d have to kill her.”

I don’t know what motivated my next actions, but before I knew what happened, the Neanderthal in me surfaced, and I wrapped her hair around my fist pulling her back so that she was forced to lean closer to me. I leaned closer to her and declared, “And I would be most displeased if I ever caught another man greasing your hair.”

“I would never let another man grease my hair especially as you have the best hands around.”

“Let me clarify myself. I would be most upset if any man attempted to touch you ... in any manner whatsoever. You’re mine, Victorious.”

“You sound all alpha,” she remarked.

Turning her, I practically growled. “That’s because I’m with my female and I’m trying to impress her with my maleness.”

“So you’re going to be all jealous?” She teased.

“Even more so than I am now. In fact, I hope that you don’t have a male ob/gyn because he’s going to have to go,” I stated.

“As long as you never plan on having a female urologist or proctologist,” she threw back.

“You’re pretty safe on that request.”

“Oh, you’re so cute. That wasn’t a request, Iain. That was a decree,” she said right before sighing. “You’re so gentle when you grease my hair, that I can’t help but wonder what it’ll be like when you make love to me.”

Victorious and I had shared many intimacies and I treasured each one of them.

“Baby, I have tried my best not to dishonor you and I’m not going to start now,” I declared.

“Iain, you’ve done many things—made me mad as hell, worried me to no end, withheld strawberry shortcake—but you’ve never dishonored me.”

“And I’m not going to start now. When I take you to bed, it will be as Mrs. Iain Banks.”

“Mrs. Victorious Jefferson-Banks, but we won’t squabble over details. It’s that ‘Mrs.’ that’s the most important part,” she said as she placed soft kisses on the edge of my jaw.

We kissed for several minutes. Damn, that woman could kiss. Then again she’d had damn near eleven years to perfect her technique. She knew exactly what turned me on—which was every damn thing about her. Reluctantly I called a halt to our erotic play.

“Baby, we have to stop.”

“We can’t even make out?” She asked breathlessly.

“I wouldn’t survive that. As it is, I’m hanging on to my control by a thread,” I admitted.

“How long have you been holding on to that thread?” She asked.

“Round about eleven years,” I said.

She sighed, but she backed off. When she left the comfort of my lap I also let out the breath that I’d been holding. Closing my eyes on the tempting picture she made, I leaned back into the cushions.

“Are you angry?” I asked.

“No, Iain, I’m incredibly aroused, but I’ve been aroused for the past eleven years. Plus I have an active imagination and a storehouse of fantasies that all involve you,” she threw back with a smile.

Though I was hurting, I couldn’t help but smile. Victorious was more than ready to become my wife. Tomorrow, I was going to get the ring.

* * *

Since I was going to ask Victorious to marry me the next time I was in Atlanta, I did what every guy with good sense would do, I called her best friends ... and then I called mine. Andreas was already in D.C. but Allan was in Dallas.

“I need y’all here next week,” I said without preamble.

And being the type of friends they were, they didn't waste time asking for details.

"I'm going to marry Victorious," I announced over steaks.

"Like there was any possibility of that not happening," Andreas laughed.

"For real," Allan said. "That woman has had you on lock since Vacation Bible School."

"Since before then," I said truthfully. "Since the moment she stepped into our church."

"Congratulations, friend," Andreas said.

"Yeah. Congratulations, player. You couldn't hope for a better woman, so don't fuck it up. Heed my warning: hurt that woman and I'll kick your ass all over the district plus the fifty states," he threatened.

"And I'll help him," Andreas chimed in.

"So I take it you two are kind of partial to her?"

"Definitely," Andreas said.

"No kinda about it. Victorious has got quite a mind—and she's not afraid to use it," Allan answered.

I shot both of them a dirty look before rounding on Andreas.

“Ändreas, I hope you don’t have a thing for Victorious because that’d be very dangerous for you. I know from experience that you can scrap with the best of them. Any other day we might brawl to a draw but not when Victorious is the reason for that brawl.”

“Hold on, Iain. Dr. Mrs. is my mother when I’m in D.C., which makes Victorious my sister. I don’t want her like that.”

Satisfied that my roommate didn’t have designs on my woman, I turned on Allan.

“You sure it’s just her mind that you’re interested in? You might have three and a half inches, eighty pounds and two Pro Bowl appearances on me, but I’ll fight you over that woman,” I said sincerely.

“Hold your roll, player. There has never been any question whose woman Victorious is. Even if there was, Victorious has made it more than clear that you’re the only man she’ll have,” Allan stated with conviction.

“She told you that?” I inquired.

“She didn’t have to. All anyone has to do is look at you two together.”

“Yes,” Ändreas agreed.

I sat back glad that I got quieter instead of louder when the crazy white boy came out.

“It’s definitely time for me to marry Victorious. I’m acting like a straight fool over her. Andreas and Allan, I apologize.”

“There is nothing to forgive, although I’m not sure how any man is affected so strongly by one woman,” Andreas said. “Not that Victorious isn’t worth it,” he hastily amended.

“All good, player. You’ve been acting the straight fool over that woman since the day I’ve known you,” Allan said. “Y’all have such a storied history. There’s no way you can let that go to waste.”

“That is true,” I said.

“Oh and since you’re keeping count at home, you should know that I was selected to the Pro Bowl three times.”

* * *

Some part of me would probably always think that I wasn’t good enough for Victorious but hey, if she wanted me, I was all hers. Then again, I’ve been all hers for the past eleven years. I had serious work to do, but first I had to head to Alcira and drop in on a few people. I walked into my parent’s home and simply told them that I was going to ask Victorious to marry me.

“The sky’s also blue,” my momma replied.

“While we’re playing ‘*state the obvious*,’ water’s also wet,” my daddy tossed in.

I was surprised at their response, but what I really wanted to know was how they felt about it. “How do you feel about it?”

“Don’t ask stupid questions, boy,” my father said.

“Yeah,” my mother agreed as she slapped me on the back of the head. “You’ve practically lived over at Lillian House since the day the Jefferson’s moved in.

“I’m glad you guys are okay with it,” I just hope that she accepts.”

That statement earned me another slap on the back of the head. “I know that you have a graduate degree from one of the nation’s finest universities, so I’m not sure where all this stupid is coming from,” she said. “Victorious loves you and if she didn’t, I’d have a thing or three million to say about that.”

“As would I,” my father said.

“Thanks mom and dad,” I said.

“You’ve grown into a fine man, son. Victorious couldn’t wish for a better man.”

My mother hugged me and asked, “When can we expect some grandchildren?”

“When God is ready to bless us with some,” I quipped before walking out the door to make that five-minute drive over to Lillian House. I had dressed as carefully for this visit as I did for our prom. When Dr. Mr. answered the door and showed me in, I could tell that he and Dr. Mrs. were at a loss. Victorious was not here so there really was no reason for me to be here.

Yet there I was—dressed to the nines and carrying a portfolio. After getting the niceties out of the way I spread out my life story: income tax returns, my financial portfolio, my medical records, and even a letter from my pastor.

“Do you need an attorney?” Both of them inquired.

I shook my head no.

“Are you ill?” Dr. Mrs. asked with concern when she saw my medical records.

“Drs. Jefferson, I don’t need an attorney nor am I ill. I do need for you to hear me. This is a testament of the man that I have become. I live a clean life. I attend church regularly as stated by my pastor. I’m in good health as verified by my medical records. Though I can’t buy Victorious a house like this—right now—I’m financially sound. Though I’m not an

attorney or a graduate of an ivy-league university I don't think that I'll embarrass Victorious at social functions.

I have everything that's supposed to make a man successful, but I don't have the one thing that makes a man truly complete: his other half. And Victorious is my other half. I know that many in your social circle will consider me a couple of steps down for Victorious, but Lord knows I love that woman. I've loved her for exactly eleven years, three months, and ten days and my love for her won't cease even when time ceases to exist. I intend to ask Victorious to marry me and it's my most fervent prayer that Victorious will grow to love me one-tenth as much as I love her.

I'm not going to ask for your permission to marry Victorious because I believe in my heart that I was created for that woman. Though humans might throw up obstacles to prevent me from marrying her, only God could stop me from my destiny. Victorious is my destiny. Regardless of all that, Drs. Jefferson, I love and respect you and would like to have your blessings."

I was nervous, but I noticed the Drs. Jefferson clasping hands. Dr. Mrs. stood and shook my hand.

"It's about damn time. Son, I knew from day one that you were in love with my daughter –which proves that you have good taste. I've

watched you around Victorious and have never been disappointed with what I've seen. You've always treated Victorious with respect and handled her like she was the most precious thing in your world. Since I first held that tiny bundle in my arms I've wanted nothing but the best for her and I know that is you. And just for the record, you don't need a *juris doctorate* or a degree from an Ivy League university to be worthy of her. You've always been worthy of her."

"Yeah, what he said and if anyone even intimates that you're somehow a lesser man they're going to catch a fist in the throat," Dr. Mrs. said as she pushed her husband aside.

"I cannot believe that it took you eleven years, but since you've loved her since you guys were fifteen, I'll let that slide. I just want you to know that there had *never*—and I do mean never—be another Alaska fishing episode. You won't like the end result if there is another one. You also won't be alive long enough to not like it."

There was no mistaking her earnestness. She didn't have to give me a look or any other warnings being that I'd already experienced her undiluted anger and I sure as hell didn't need to experience that again.

“Ma’am, I promise you that I would cut out my own heart before I did anything to cause Victorious pain,” I stated emphatically never letting my gaze leave hers.

“Good. And Iain,”

“Yes ma’am?”

“There had better be a wedding – an actual wedding. No secret running off to get married like her secret weekend trips to Charlottesville or the secret weekend trips to the Adirondacks to play house with you. Got that?”

She really was a ninja master. “Yes, ma’am. But I think I need to correct a misconception. I have *never* played house with Victorious and I won’t be playing house with her until that Mrs. precedes her name.”

I know my admission might’ve made them question my manhood, but it was better for her parents to question my virility, than for them to think that I had treated Victorious like a whore for the past eight years ... or that she’d allowed me to do so.

Both Dr. Mr. and Dr. Mrs. gasped but they must’ve believed what I said was true because Dr. Mrs. softened her gaze and hugged me so hard I was concerned that Dr. Mr. might call me out for getting too close to his wife.

“Oh, Iain,” she cried. “I can’t wait to show you off as my new son,” she said.

“What do you mean that you can’t wait?” Dr. Mr. asked. “You’ve been telling people he’s your son for years.”

“Oh hush, Elon. Now it’s official.”

“When can we expect some grandchildren, Iain?”

“Whenever God blesses us with some, sir,” I replied.

Dr. Mr. threw one final piece of advice at me before I walked out the door.

“Don’t make me kill you son.”

“I promise you that I won’t.”

And then Dr. Mrs. rejoined. “Yeah, and don’t make me find a rogue scientist to resuscitate you so that I can kill you some more until I grow tired of killing you.”

I wondered if I would be as protective of my girls.

Book II: Right Damn Now

After my candid talk with Andreas and Allan I made my move. I started stalking my prey—and Victorious was my prey. I needed to be near her and I hoped that she felt the same. Every casual touch we shared was like an electric charge.

“Are you trying to seduce me?” I asked one day as she ran her fingers through my hair.

“Iain, I’ve been trying to seduce you for years.”

“And I’ve been romancing you for years,” I returned.

“I can’t argue with that,” she said. “Now tell me what’s wrong with me playing with your hair?”

“There’s nothing wrong with it. It’s just that my scalp happens to be one of my erogenous zones.”

“Your scalp is an erogenous zone?” She inquired with an arch of her brow.

“Hmm mmm,” I practically purred before I grabbed her hand to cease her ministrations.

“I know that you didn’t just move my hand,” she challenged but couldn’t do much about it as I still held her hand within mine.

“I had to,” I confessed.

“Oh, you had to,” she said disbelievingly. “Care to explain why.”

“Yeah, because,” I stopped to regroup.

“Because what?” She prompted.

I decided then and there that regardless of how beautiful she was that I was going to have to turn the tables on my future wife. My erection was so hard that I was concerned that it might snap a few of my buttons on my button fly jeans.

“Because,” I began before placing her hand over my straining cock.

“As I said earlier, my scalp is an erogenous zone, and therefore a direct link to my cock.”

Victorious let out a startled gasp followed by a long moan. She was breathing hard and struggling to regain her composure ... just like I’d been since I’d met her. Over the years, we’d shared many kisses and I’m sure that she’d felt my erection numerous times as I hugged and spooned her, but I’d never initiated contact this intimate or spoken so basely to her. I know she was surprised but hell, but so was I. For years I had allowed her to have her way and though I was sure that her having her way would continue to be the pattern for our relationship, the alpha male was rearing its head—and it was wreaking havoc on Victorious.

I had to put Victorious off of my lap before all of my good intentions were shot to hell. She was still so flustered that she allowed this without protest. I eyeballed her as she aimlessly wandered around before entering the kitchen.

I thought she might have come from my words alone and her hasty retreat confirmed my suspicions. The alpha male stilled and processed this data. *So, Victorious gets off on dirty talk.* Luckily, I had a silo of dirty words that I could speak to her, but they would have to wait until after we were married because I only had so much control. If I started that, I was sure that I would go completely caveman and then she would most assuredly be flat on her back with me all up in her.

While I was momentarily lost in my musings Victorious had recovered. She walked in carrying a dish of shortcake and a glass of ice water. Taking a seat opposite from me she asked, “So what else is directly linked to your,” she paused. “Cock?”

“Anything on my body that you touch,” I answered honestly.

Her smile let me know that my answer pleased her. As wonderful as I knew her to be, I knew one thing for certain: Victorious did not like to share.

“You know that you like it when I touch you,” she purred.

“That’s true. It’s that whole sophisticated older woman seducing the innocent young country boy,” I joked.

“If I wasn’t over here eating this strawberry shortcake, I’d be kicking your butt right now.”

“And if you weren’t over there eating that shortcake I’d be over there eating you so stop tempting me,” I warned.

Taking a peek at her through eyes that were mere slits at the moment, I noted her look of incredulity ... and I wanted to pound my chest. Since we had come this far, I decided there was no time like the present.

“Do you think that you have what it takes to start your own firm?” I asked casually.

“Are you questioning my legal prowess?” She paused from eating to ask.

“Absolutely not,” I said. “I was just wondering if you’re going to be able to help pay the mortgage on this,” I said as I pressed *play* on the DVD player.

I watched her as she watched Zuri walk through the property. Nestled on ten acres of land ten minutes on the other side of Silana sat her log cabin—designed per her specifications. Good thing that I’d had the

foresight to have it built even before I'd proposed to her. Just like at my graduation, she cried all the way through it.

"If you keep crying you're not going to be able to see the pictures clearly," I said.

"Like I need to be able to see it clearly. It's my log cabin," she said as she put down her shortcake and hurled herself into my arms.

"But I'll only let you live there if you wear this," I said as I slid a ring on her finger.

She didn't even stop kissing me long enough to look at it. "Aren't you going to look at it?"

"Don't need to. I'm interested in my wedding band, not the engagement ring."

"So I take it that's a *yes*?" I asked between kisses.

"You bet your sweet ass that's a *yes*," she exclaimed before tackling me to the floor and having her way with me. You know how those older women are with their out-of-wack hormones and raging sex drives. *And yes, we remained fully clothed.*

Chapter Sixteen

Though I was all kinds of excited to finally be getting married to Victorious, I had a CD to finish. It was time being that I'd been writing it for the past eleven years. This one was going to be different from my debut CD because I didn't plan on covering any songs. Every lyric in every song was one that I personally wrote because this CD was a diary of our romance.

Though I wasn't quite done with the CD, I went ahead and contacted Lagi to do the cover art. No plain wrapping for this one. I wanted Victorious to pose with me for my next cover. Victorious was reluctant to do so being that an interracial cover might not be the best move for an aspiring country artist. I understood her concern but I was first and foremost, her man. Everything else was a distant second. I could sing other songs, play different music, but nothing was going to change about me being her man because I wasn't giving Victorious up for nothing.

From the spark that flashed in Lagi's eyes and her pose (raised fist in the air) I knew that she was just as passionate as I was about Victorious appearing on the cover with me although she kept quiet about it. Kinda. Lagi might be little but she was loud.

I was glad that Victorious did agree to pose because I wouldn't have released that CD without her on the cover. And after seeing the finished product, I was glad that Lagi did the cover art. I owed Aloha because other than Victorious, the cover art was the most stunning creation that I'd seen.

In retrospect, one of the best moves I'd made (besides recognizing that I'd been created for Victorious) was listening to Silana (like she gave me a choice) about that first rights thing. The other women in the Posse had always said that Silana was the business but I had no idea. Counselor Silana Toussaint was fierce and I was damn glad that she was on my side.

Though I wasn't required to give the company who bought the rights to my first CD first right of refusal, I approached them (after having Silana look over the paperwork and getting the official copyrights to all of my work). They loved the music ... they hated the cover. And so did every other major label. I'd never heard one question asked so many ways. *'Is that woman black?'* No matter how it was asked or who did the asking my response was always the same.

"Damn straight."

The cover might've been a sticking point for them but it wasn't for me. Victorious was all kinds of fired up, as was the rest of the Posse. Still, as fired up as she was, tossing about terms such as 'sorry motherfuckers'

‘civil rights’ and ‘burn that bitch to the ground’, she tried to talk me into using different cover art. Oh, how I loved that woman. Gently holding her face in my hands I kissed her and told her what I’d been telling everybody else and their momma. The cover art was non-negotiable ... just like my relationship with her.

“But,” she began.

“No buts, Victorious. I appreciate your passion and your desire to help but please respect my wishes. Let it go. I know I’m not as smart or well-heeled as you, but let me do this my way. Okay?”

She pouted but she agreed. And once Victorious gave her word; it was given.

“Thank you, baby,” I said as I kissed her.

“I still hate them though. I am not their friend.”

“I understand,” I said. “I’m not their friend either.”

* * *

I wasn’t their friend but it was okay. I wasn’t interested in being their friend. I’d made many connections thanks to Dr. Mrs. I knew the best artists in the field but I didn’t want the best. The best wanted to be paid like the best and I understood that but I wasn’t trying to break the bank for this album especially not when I didn’t have to. Spending time in Atlanta

afforded me the opportunity to visit some good clubs. I'd been to quite a few and though these artists might not be considered 'the best'; they were passionate about their craft and I needed passion more than perfection.

I procured a band and now all I had to do was procure the studio. Allan helped me with that. Sure, I could've asked the Posse but I didn't want to ask the Posse. I wanted to do my own footwork on this. Allan had never dropped a CD nor did he have any plans to but I knew he knew people who had. That's how I found myself in recording studio A of Black Gloved-Fist Records.

Owned and operated by LA transplant, Yvonne Purple - a self-described hip-hop head - Black Gloved-Fist Records specialized in cutting edge hip-hop and they had the walls of platinum albums to prove it. Regardless of their specialty, they had a first rate studio. All I had to do was talk her into letting me use it.

"Tell me again why you're not in Nashville, Memphis or one of those places known for white guys in boots and cowboy hats," she said while reclining in her purple suede chair.

"Because I'm not willing to compromise on my cover," I replied.

"What's on your cover that's so bad that they aren't willing to negotiate?"

“Nothing on that cover is bad and nothing on the cover is negotiable,” I said as I handed her a copy of the cover.

“This is country album, right?”

“Yes,” I said waiting for the obvious question.

“Is she black?” she said pointing at Victorious.

“Yes, she is,” I said proudly.

“You know that there are plenty of places between here and Nashville where you can rent studio time?”

“That’s true, but I want the best and Black-Gloved Fist Records studios have top of the line everything, including management.”

“It’s obvious that this is you, but who is the woman?”

“The woman who’s about to be my wife,” I said proudly.

“Who is Allan to you?” She asked as she looked in Allan’s direction.

“One of my best friends.”

“Hmm, a black best friend and a black fiancée. You’re not one of those white boys who like to pretend you’re black just because you roll with black people and have some hip-hop records are you?”

“A- I don’t own any hip-hop records. B-I’m a man, not a boy. C-I don’t roll with black people; I have relationships with people who happen to

be black. D- What you see is what you get. I'm a southern white male who likes country music, pickup trucks, and cowboy boots."

"And the woman named Victorious," she added.

"No ma'am. I like those things but I love the woman named Victorious."

Ms. Purple must've liked what I said because she uncapped her fountain pen (purple of course) and scribbled something down. Standing, she reached across the desk and offered her hand.

"Welcome to Black Gloved-Fist Records," she said.

* * *

While a white guy in the halls of Black Gloved-Fist Records wasn't an anomaly, the sounds coming out of the studio were. It wasn't unusual to have a small crowd hanging about. It was a good thing that I'd gotten used to being stared at or it might've unnerved me.

Today was going to be my last day at Black Gloved-Fist Records. Tuning my guitar, I was surprised when one of the guys hanging about addressed me.

"I've been waiting for two weeks. When are you going to sing *"Always on My Mind?"*" Zuberi asked.

“I can sing it right now but it’s not going on the CD,” I said surprised that this teenager not only knew Willie’s classic song but was waiting to hear it.

“Can you?” he asked.

Zuberi Bruce was an easy-going kid with a voice made for audio books. Keith David, Sam Elliot, James Earl Jones, Sean Connery were known for their voices, but all they had on Zuberi was age. Zuberi was a spoken-word artist, and with that voice I could see why. Still, I’d like to see what he could do with some of the old school R&B guys. I bet he could tear some Luther up.

Because it was Zuberi who’d asked me to sing it, I did. As usual, I got lost in the song when I played. The world around me faded away and it was just me, the melody and lyrics. I only came back to myself when the last note was sung. And when I did, it was to the head nods and choruses of ‘damn’.

“You might call yourself a country artist, I-Dogg, but you sure got a lot of soul in you,” Yvonne said.

“So why aren’t you putting that song on your CD?” someone in the crowd asked.

“Because this CD is a history of how I love my woman. And as much as I appreciate this song, I could never sing this version to her.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s a lie. There are a lot of things I might not be, a lot of things I haven’t done but there was never a day that I didn’t love Victorious as hard or as good or as righteously as I could have,” I said.

“Your lady’s a lucky woman, I-Dogg” Yvonne said.

“No ma’am. I’m a blessed man.”

Chapter Seventeen

Prayers for Victorious finished and in circulation – with the cover that Lagi had designed – I concentrated on getting married. Even though they'd known for a while, we still had to make an official announcement. Per Posse style, they feted us at dinner. There was much eating and drinking and being merry. And there were also many threats bandied about. I took those threats seriously, because I knew why they threatened. Victorious was worth every one of their threats and more.

We didn't take a long time with wedding plans as we'd been planning this moment since we were fifteen. In a matter of ten minutes, we'd decided a day, a place and a time. We'd decided to marry at Lillian House being her parents had a full on ballroom.

I lined up a tailor to make me a custom suit and Victorious traipsed off with her mother and the Posse to find a dress. Considering the last time I'd seen her in a dress, I was sure whatever dress she came back with would throw me into cardiac arrest. And I couldn't wait.

Once we set a date, everything fell into place. Silana took care of all the legalese. With the help of the Posse, in less than a week our home looked like it should be featured in a magazine. Though her luxury

townhouse was valued at several hundred thousand above our home, Victorious had already moved all of her stuff into our house and had Zuri put her townhouse on the market. Because we were trying to do this thing right, she took up temporary residence with Silana.

Though our ceremony wasn't exactly a quiet affair, I didn't expect it to be front page news. Then again, I'd never married a princess before. Everyone who was anyone (and apparently Victorious' family knew everyone) was on the guest list.

And then there was the CD. Though it'd just dropped, it was already being talked up. The cover art and the fact that it was recorded at Black Gloved-Fist Records created a buzz. People wanted to know who that beautiful woman was on the cover. The people calling into radio shows wanted to know why I'd elected to make it an independent project rather than going with one of the traditional labels. All of that talk caused sales to skyrocket.

As much as I enjoyed the fact that it was doing well, I wanted them to talk about the music. Those weren't just words scribbled on paper or notes played at random. Those songs constituted my prayers. That was a veritable record of my romance with the woman that I loved above all others.

Finally, someone started talking about the music. I held my breath hoping that they got it. I didn't realize that my anxiousness was evident until Jack called me on it.

"Iain, why are you so nervous? You know that CD is going to be a classic. Music programs will probably make it required listening."

Shocked because I'd rarely heard Jack speak so many words at once that weren't threats, it took me a moment to respond.

"Because I'm baring my soul."

"From what I hear, you ain't exactly been hiding shit when it comes to Victorious."

"You have a point there, but this is about how I feel about Victorious and I don't want anyone to find it lacking."

"It doesn't matter what everyone else thinks; Victorious doesn't find it lacking so fuck the critics," she said.

"Yeah, what Jack said, Iain," Victorious agreed as she snuggled up closer to me.

Yeah, fuck the critics I said. And then I got a call. Okay, it wasn't simply *a* call, but *the* call. The Opry called and wanted me to perform. Damn.

"See baby, I told you that you were the shit," Victorious smirked.

“You’re biased though,” I said as I caught her in my arms. It was a good thing that I worked out because that woman was forever jumping in my arms – not that I minded.

“I’m wow, just wow,” I said.

“Yep, wow. So what are you going to wear?”

“Who said that I was going?” I teased.

“I know good and damn well that you didn’t lose your mind between the end of that call and right now. This is the Opry we’re talking about so you can just pack your guitar and take your fine ass on to Nashville.”

“But it’s a week before our wedding,” I said.

“And? Were you planning on walking to Nashville?”

“No, but,” I began.

“Iain, you’re going to Nashville,” she said.

“Only if you go with me,” I returned.

“Like that was ever in question,” she said.

“I mean to the theater, not just to the city of Nashville.”

“Are you sure?” She asked.

Picking up her left hand I kissed the finger that bore her engagement ring.

“Absolutely.”

“Well then, I’m going to need some new shoes.”

* * *

Though I was glad to be going to Nashville, I wasn’t about to take Victorious anywhere without suitable protection. Once again, I called upon Allan and Andreas. Allan was a beast so I wasn’t worried about too many people rolling up on him. Though Andreas was a lot smaller in stature, there was pure scrapper underneath that impeccable Italian style.

“You think it’ll get ugly,” Allan asked.

“I don’t think so but I’m not taking any chances with Victorious.”

“And I don’t blame you, but who’s going to protect you from Victorious when she finds out that you’ve procured babysitters for her?”

“Think I’ll need it?”

“Perhaps you have allowed her beauty and wit to blind you to her faults but Victorious has a temper. All I’m saying is expelled from Vacation Bible School,” he joked.

“If you don’t count her little misconception that Carolina is the better public university, Victorious doesn’t have any faults,” I said.

Andreas didn’t say anything although he did make the sound of a whip cracking.

“You know, I can’t wait for you to meet the woman who brings you to your knees.”

“Never going to happen,” Andreas said.

I ignored him. “And when she does, I’m going to bring this up.”

Because the awards ceremony was going to be a live event, I took special care with my appearance even though there wasn’t that much to see to as I was dressing pretty casual. I wore a white collarless shirt along with my cuffed dark grey dress pants with my cowboy boots. I thought I looked alright, but it was Victorious’ low whistle that made me reconsider bumping up that description.

“Damn!” she said as she practically jerked me in the room and laid a kiss on me that had me so hard I was worried that I’d hulk out of my clothes.

“Baby,” I said as I dredged up some superhuman strength to step back from that temptation.

“Put the hat on, Iain,” she purred.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea being that you can’t seem to keep your hands off of me with it off,” I teased.

“It’s not my fault you’re walking around looking so fine.”

And speaking of fine, I took another step back so that I could properly see what Victorious was wearing.

I knew that Victorious would be dressed to kill because that was her M.O. Though her outfit was simple enough, on her it was anything but. She wore a simple jersey, v-neck dress and pumps but she filled it out like it was made for her.

“How do I look?”

“You’re going to make me have to kill somebody tonight,” I said.

She simply smiled at my words.

“I should make you wear a coat over that,” I mumbled.

“You can try,” she said as she picked up her purse and looped her arm through mine.

* * *

From the roll of her eyes, it was clear that Victorious thought that I’d gone overboard by having Allan and Andreas there, but she took it in stride.

“Oh goody, three men to hold my bags when I go shopping,” she said as she squeezed my arm.

Because I was scheduled to perform, I didn’t sit out in the audience. Lightly kissing Victorious, I left her in the capable hands of my friends. I couldn’t help but smile knowing that they were probably getting an earful

right about now. I was up early and though I should've been nervous I wasn't. I took the stage and sang all of Victorious' favorites ... and brought down the house. And then for the first time, I recited 'Greeting.' Not really a song at all, just honesty set to music.

How do I select just a few words when every time I see you so many come tumbling across my mind

*How do I decide a melody when you are all the songs I want to sing
like describing taste to a man who has only tasted ashes
or beautiful to a man who has only seen hate
or tenderness to a man who uses his hands only to hurt
or sonatas to a man who hears only his own desires*

How do I describe eleven years of love in a verse or in ten thousand

How do I give our love its due when I'm limited by

Words and prejudice

Ignorance and hate

Fear and loathing

At first a secret wish

*then a relentless hope
until you became my everything
and stroked my mind with your goodness
seared my heart with your laughter
flooded my soul with endless possibilities
and changed how I saw the world*

*you're like an old Spanish love song
a new summer day
an everlasting covenant between me and my God*

“That’s quite a love song,” the host said when I finished.

“Thank you. The one it is written for is quite a woman,” I responded as I looked out into the audience at her.

Spotting her immediately, I mouthed the words in my heart. “I love you.”

She waved and returned my passion, “I love you too.”

Now that was a way to end everything, having the woman you love tell the whole world that she loves you back.

Chapter Eighteen

The town of Alcira was abuzz. Never had so many limousines, Bentleys, and six-figure sports cars lined the streets. I don't think that I'd ever seen so many millionaires (or billionaires for that matter) gathered in one place. Because of the caliber of guests, security was tight. Nothing was getting onto the grounds of Lillian House (by air, land or sea) unless it was invited.

Dressed in a suit that cost more than my first truck, I couldn't help but look good but today wasn't about me; it was about Victorious. Standing next to Allan and Andreas at the front of the Jefferson ballroom, I tried to remember to breathe. It'd taken eleven years to get to this moment and now that it was fast approaching, it couldn't get here fast enough.

When I was on the verge of working myself up, I heard the opening of the Wedding March – trust Victorious' parents to hire an award-winning classical pianist to play at their daughter's wedding. Turning around, I saw my beloved and for the first time in my life came dangerously close to passing out. Victorious was always beautiful, but there weren't enough words to describe how she looked in that moment. I'm sure that she was wearing a lovely dress but it wasn't the dress; it was the woman in the

dress. And there was no doubt that it was a woman who wore that dress because Victorious filled out that dress like nobody's business.

It wasn't until I looked at the wedding photos that I realized what her dress looked like. From the moment Victorious stepped into that ballroom, I saw all of the images of Victorious that took up residence in my soul. I saw her as she was the first moment that she stepped into the sanctuary of Alcira Presbyterian. I saw her in every outfit she wore to Vacation Bible School. I saw her wearing her prom gown. I saw her wearing my lacrosse jersey. I saw her wearing her cap and gown. I saw her at her hooding ceremony. I saw her at the Opry. And before I could blink, I saw her father placing her in my care. Right after that I heard her whisper my name and close the distance between us. I whispered her name back and gathered her in my arms. Then I stopped seeing anything at all because tears were streaming from my eyes like water over Niagara Falls.

Right there I gave my testimony. Raising my right hand in the air I held it palm up to the Heavens and thanked God for this woman. I heard choruses of 'Praise God,' 'Have Mercy,' and 'Jesus.' I don't know how long we stayed that way but it must've been a good while but I didn't care how long it took. Victorious and I were getting married.

Finally gathering ourselves, I linked my left hand with hers and we faced the Reverends Rice and Chances. Each of them led us in prayer and laid hands upon us. Finally, we were united in holy matrimony. There were no sweeter words than hearing Victorious say, “I do,” and I’d never spoken truer words than my own “I do.”

Though Victorious’ parents were big time, they didn’t adhere to societal standards. Instead they set their own. And so did Victorious, which is why the reception was so laid back. The tables may have boasted the best place settings that money could buy but no frou-frou food filled any of those plates. The menu was a mix of soul food and southern cuisine.

Though everyone else changed into more casual attire, Victorious and I remained in our wedding finery.

“You sure you don’t want to change into something more comfortable, baby?” I asked.

“I do but I’m only going to wear one wedding dress and I want you to unhook it,” she said.

And that was the end of that conversation. Before I could respond to that, Dr. Mr. approached.

“Alright, here’s the deal. We need a dance, some pictures, some cake-cutting, and then you kids need to get the hell out of here. You don’t need

to waste a moment entertaining. That's what we're here for. People can enjoy barbeque and black-eyed peas without you and if they can't they can get the hell out of my house. Now I figure that we can get everything done in half an hour and you can be on the yacht five minutes later. It's docked outside and the crew is waiting your orders."

Did I mention how much I loved Dr. Mr.? Once her father found out that we planned to honeymoon in the Bahamas, he surprised us by chartering a 135 foot yacht to take us there. He and Dr. Mrs. had a yacht but it was only 96 feet.

Though Dr. Mr. predicted half an hour, we were done in twenty-five minutes. Witnessing our love for each other, everyone worked together to get us on our way. As soon as we stepped into the master's quarters, I pulled Victorious to me and we sunk to our knees ... and prayed. I don't recall how many times I said 'thank you, God,' but if I'm pretty sure I wore that prayer out.

I did indeed unhook Victorious from her gown with all of the reverence that I could muster. In turn, she damn near tore off my suit and slung it across the cabin. For the first time in eleven years, we stood before each other as Adam and Eve stood before each other in the Garden. We were not ashamed of our nakedness. Though I couldn't swear on it, I was

sure that God looked down upon His creations and saw that they were good.

* * *

Because we'd taken eleven years to get to know each other, our honeymoon was filled with a whole lot of laughter and loving. It was also filled with revelation and I treasured every new thing that I learned about my wife. *My wife*. I couldn't get over how good those words tasted in my mouth and how comforting they felt in my soul.

Lying in bed with a sleeping Victorious, I opened one of the books with which she'd gifted me. There were eleven of them – one for each year that we'd known each other. The journals started after she and her family moved to our town, and chronicled our escapades from the Vacation Bible School incident to the first road trip we took. Several of our emails were pasted in the book along with several pictures of me. I was touched more than I can say, however, nothing prepared me for her description of me as a person, as a friend, as a man, as a lover, and finally as a husband. I know you might be wondering how she described me a lover *before* she described me as a husband and that's because she considered the way I touched her, talked with her, and played with her to be types of lovemaking.

I was touched by it all, but the last few entries brought tears to my eyes. It was a vivid description of what I meant to her. It was the stirrings in my soul reflected back at me.

I have waited years for him to love me as he loved me last night. His touch was the balm that my body had been craving. Regardless of how life treats us I will only have one husband, not because I don't believe in divorce, but because I believe in us. Iain supplies my need for intimacy in myriad ways. His gestures endear him to me; the way his eyes darken when he looks upon me replenishes me; his caresses soothe the rough edges of my temper; his greetings are sunshine. I can hardly stand the touch of another after growing accustomed to his fingers greasing my scalp, his hand holding mine, his body serving as my shield. I love him so much that sometimes it frightens me, yet I could no more stop loving him than I could stop believing in God. Finally, he is my husband but first, he was my best friend.

Victorious was still asleep when I finished the journals. Getting up, I wrapped the journals in her wedding veil. Taking out the waterproof sack that held our passports and money, I emptied the contents into the suitcase and slid the journals inside. We could replace those items but I couldn't

replace those journals. Soon as we got home they were going in a safe - next to what used to be my most valued possessions (stocks, bonds, and cash). Finished with my task, I walked out onto the deck, looked up at the Heavens and thanked the Man Upstairs for the honor of being made for Victorious and asked that He watch over us. Finished with my prayers, I got back into bed, pulled Victorious close to me, and went to sleep with her words in my heart. I have loved her for eleven years, four months, and ten days ... *and she has loved me almost as long*, but when you have eternity, who's counting?

Epilogue: The Reveal

Lying there seeing my own blood trickle off of my forehead and the tip of Jack's booted foot, I wondered if I was about to have more of my own blood pouring out of me soon. It wasn't like Jack had the best of tempers. Nor was it like I could do shit about it if she wanted to cause me more pain. Considering all of the options, I was surprised when she leaned down and held a compress to my head.

"Iain, you're going to need stitches. I'm going to help you up, okay?" She said as she lifted me like I didn't weigh shit.

Later, I promised that I'd give that more thought, but right now, all I could do was lie in Jack's arms and pray that I didn't further disgrace myself by throwing up or breaking down into tears. Since my eyeballs were hurting, tears might not have been a viable option though.

I found myself laid out on Silana's granite counter. I heard yelling, lecturing, and the soothing clucks of Silana's tongue. My vision was blurry but I could see a little better than I could a few minutes ago. I still couldn't see all that good but I could see Reign and she had scissors. It wasn't that I didn't trust Reign; it was simply that I was pretty sure that I didn't want her anywhere near my eye with a sharp object.

Doing my best to move, I almost fell off of the countertop. I would have if not for Silana's quick reflexes.

"Dammit, Iain, Jack just laid you up here. Will you be still?"

"Reign, eye, gouged out," I mumbled.

"I'm not going to gouge your eyes out," Reign said. "I'm just trying to help you."

"Iain, head wounds bleed a lot so I'm not sure if you need stitches just yet. However, if you don't stop bleeding in the next ten minutes I'm going to take you to the ER," Silana soothed as she did her best to make me comfortable.

"Victorious," I said.

"Don't worry, we're taking care of Victorious too," she said.

"Tired," I admitted.

"I know you are, Babydoll, but you can't go to sleep."

Did Silana just call me 'babydoll'?

My musings were interrupted by her calling the Evil Twins. "Aloha and Atlanta! Get over here and make sure he doesn't fall asleep," Silana ordered.

The next time that I woke up I was lying in bed. I was all alone if one didn't count the massive headache I had. I was also wearing very little.

Sitting up, I almost threw up from the pain.

"Iain, be careful, honey," Silana said.

"Where am I?"

"My house," she said.

"Where's Victorious? I've never spent the night without her."

"She's in the bed next to you. We had to give her a sedative."

"Why? Is she okay?" I asked, my own pain quickly forgotten.

"She's fine but I need you to tell me how many fingers I'm holding up."

"Six, "I said trying to get to Victorious.

"What's your middle name?"

"James," I answered getting agitated.

"What university did you graduate from?"

"Virginia – both times. Silana, I'm fine. I can do any trick you want me to but I need to see Victorious."

"Okay then, but don't wake her."

Heeding Silana's words, I was careful as I slid into the queen bed with Victorious. Holding her, I carefully checked her over. Suddenly, the events

of yesterday all came rushing back. I was the cause of Victorious' distress. The knowledge that she'd been hurt and I was the cause for that hurt caused my eyes to fill with unshed tears and my soul to fill with guilt. I shouldn't have pushed her so hard, I thought as I succumbed to sleep.

* * *

The next time I woke up, I knew that Victorious wasn't in the room. Getting up, I headed to the bathroom and took care of my needs. I wanted to tear the house apart looking for her but I knew that my energy would be wasted. She might not be in the room but she was in the house.

Indulging in a hot shower, I dried off and slid into the clothes that had been so thoughtfully laid out. Obviously, Silana or one of the Posse had made a clothes run, I thought as I tugged my Virginia t-shirt over my head. Sliding into my tennis shoes I headed downstairs.

As soon as my foot hit the bottom step I was met with an 'are you alright?'

"I'm fine, Silana. Where's Victorious?" I asked.

"Thinking about what she did," Indy said not making any effort to hide the pissed off in her voice.

That gave me pause. Looking at Indy, I asked. "Are you alright?"

“I’m fine, Iain. Thanks for asking but the real question is how do you feel?” She asked as she felt my forehead with the back of her hand.

“I’m fine,” I said wondering where the rest of the Posse was.

“Well, sit down and eat, then we’ll talk,” Silana said.

I managed to eat the broth she put in front of me but I wanted nothing else unless it was Victorious.

“You sure you can’t eat anything else?” Silana asked.

“Yes. Where’s Victorious?”

“Come with me,” she said.

Silana led me into her sumptuous parlor – aka the ‘getting somebody told’ room. I heard the noise of the argument before I even reached the door. Da hell? This is where the rest of the Posse was, in here telling off my Victorious. As soon as I walked in I made to make a beeline to Victorious who was looking miserable, but Jack stopped me.

“Sit down elsewhere, Iain,” she said.

It wasn’t a request. I didn’t like it but I did as she bid. It wasn’t like I could fight her in my condition and win. For that matter, I wasn’t sure if I could fight her in peak physical shape and win.

“I’ll sit down but I really need for y’all to stop talking to her that way,” I said.

“She needs to be talked to this way. Either we can talk to her this way with love, or she can be carted off to jail where the nice police interrogator can talk to her while arresting her ass on a domestic violence charge,” Jack said.

“That’s really not necessary,” I said.

“Oh, unfortunately, it is necessary. Every year over a million women and over eight-hundred thousand men are assaulted by an intimate partner,” Silana said before rattling off more facts.

“Okay, I get it,” I said.

“I don’t think you do, but you will. But before that Victorious has something to say to you,” Indy said.

“I’m sorry I hit you, Iain,” Victorious said.

“It’s okay,” I answered, aching to go to her.

“It is not okay, Iain,” Indy said. “Didn’t you hear what Silana just told you?”

“She didn’t mean it,” I said.

“That’s what many victims of abuse say, Iain. All that’s left for you to say is that Victorious did it because she loves you,” Silana said.

“Doesn’t matter. She willfully threw the garden gnome at you. As soon as she picked up that garden gnome and pointed it at you, Victorious

was guilty of assault. When the garden gnome actually hit you, she was guilty of not simply battery, but aggravated battery,” Zuri said.

I’d forgotten that Zuri also had a law degree.

“I meant to throw it, Iain,” Victorious said. Though I didn’t mean to hurt you, I meant to throw that gnome. I was mad.”

“Victorious is going to anger management and you’re going to come to a class on domestic violence,” Indy said.

“I’ll go to the class, but is it really necessary for Victorious to go to anger management?”

“Yes, because if the situation had been reversed and you’d thrown a garden gnome at her, we would have found that brick and beat you to death with it,” Jack said.

“And then used it to mark your shallow grave out in the woods,” Reign added.

“Next time someone around you is out of control, get the hell out of Dodge, Iain. Sometimes walking away is the only thing between you and death,” Jack said.

“Now that we’ve squared that away, we all owe you an apology,” Silana said.

“For what?” I asked.

“For lying to you and continuing to lie to you,” she said. “After all, that’s what started the fight between you and Victorious.”

I paused thinking about the beginnings of the argument. Something had caused me to ask Victorious about the fight that led to her having a broken rib. And while she related the tale to me, I found myself silently finishing her sentences. I knew where she’d pause. I knew the place in the story where there’d be inflection in her voice. I knew it because Victorious told this story the same way every time – the *exact* same way. She told it that way because she’d been rehearsed. She’d rehearsed it because she was lying.

There were many things that I knew about Victorious. Foremost among them was the fact that Victorious rarely lied. And then I became scared because if Victorious was lying, she was covering up something big ... something that I was sure that I didn’t want to hear but something I had to know.

“Iain, we swore an oath that we’d never tell the truth about that fight. We shouldn’t have sworn it without adding loopholes but we did and it’s too late to take it back. Even if we told you, you’d be an accomplice to the events of that night,” Silana said.

Before I could get angry, Reign rose from her seat and walked over to me.

“We can’t tell you what, Iain, but I can show you why,” she said as she pulled her hair back into a scrunchy.

Then she whipped her t-shirt over her head. Normally, a pretty woman in a bra would’ve garnered at least a second look from me, but this wasn’t any woman. This was Reign. And though I’m sure that she looked real good in a bra, her breasts weren’t the thing that caught my attention. The thing that caught my attention was the hideous scar around her neck. It was then that I realized that I never saw Reign in a collarless shirt or with her hair swept up.

I’d seen scars like that before ... but only in westerns. Tears pooled in my eyes and spilled out. Reign. Somebody had tried to hang Reign and from the severity of that scar, they’d almost succeeded. No wonder she spoke in such low tones; she didn’t have any choice.

“Reign,” I said as I held her to me. “I’m so sorry, baby.”

“I’m sorry too, Iain,” she said giving me a watery smile.

Her smile broke me. It broke me because it meant that she’d had a long time to come to terms with that.

Jack’s voice broke into the silence. “Reign’s my daughter, Iain.”

Suddenly, all the mad left me. Okay, not all the mad, but I understood that I really didn't want to know the full story ... except for one more thing.

"Tell me that the one responsible for this is..."

"Deader than dirt and so are all of the sons of bitches that were rolling with that bastard," a new voice said.

Turning, I looked upon the woman who walked into the room.

"Hi, Iain. I'm Raven- Jacks' sister and Reign's aunt. Nice to finally meet you," she said.

No wonder the Posse didn't seem to broken up over her death. She wasn't dead.

*** JL ***

This concludes Book 3 in the WILD, WILD series.

Thank you for reading. I hope that you enjoyed the romance.

Jayha

Praises, compliments, adulation and the like for Jayha can be left at:
jayhaleigh@gmail.com

Statistics on domestic violence:

<http://www.abanet.org/domviol/statistics.html#prevalence>

Jayha Leigh

Okay, let's see...I like adulation...A LOT...so y'all should do that...NOW...*more, more, more...oh yeah, just like that, louder, louder, say it like you mean it. Yes! Yes! Yessssssssssss!*

Oh, give me a minute. Okay, what else do I like? *Hmm.* Dessert, sweet iced tea, using the word 'MF'...and chasing it with the phrase 'you can kiss my whole a**', action movies, fountain pens, luxurious bath and body products, and unbridled power. *Did I mention dessert?*

So in my spare time...ha ha ha ha ha...Spare time. WTF is that? That must be a rumor...you know like unicorns.

I use my actual name as a pseudonym so in the event that I wild out I won't bring shame upon my family, who believe it or not, actually like me...so there.

My favorite season is football; my favorite color is Carolina blue.

I need my ego stroked several times a day and regular doses of cheesecake to keep me content. I have a mild sense of megalomania but it never bothered me as much as it bothers others.

What else? I've been accused of being many things including the catalyst for the fall of the Roman Empire and a cult leader with low aspirations but those are rumors started by my haters.

That's pretty much it...I'm tired, have a stack of dvds to catch up on, and an exam next week, and I still have to plot the destruction of all who oppose me, which is a hell a lot of people. No wonder I'm always so tired.

AND ONE MORE THING. There's only *one* Carolina and it's in Chapel Hill.