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Jayha Leigh

The Bible Scriptures quoted [Prov 20:22, Luke 1:71, Luke 6:27, Psalms 82:3-4, Psalms 91, 1 John 3:18, 1 Corinthians 13:7, Song of Solomon 8:7, Isaiah 41:10] are from the NRSV of the Holy Bible.

The quotation: “Love, not time, heals all wounds” is authored by an anonymous author.

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To everyone who has scars...may you find the salve
that heals you.

To Aunt Donna who dibsed Hannes from jump and
has kept him close to her literary heart.

To all of the readers who've been waiting on this story.

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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.

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.

PROLOGUE:

ANATOMY OF THE HOTNESS

February 2006 (Present Day) Atlanta

Like all the women in her family, Zuri Summers Rangers-Decebel was the straight out shiz-nit—in all capitals, neon letters...blinking so hard she could make the Vegas Strip look like it was burning out. She wasn't bragging, she wasn't being narcissistic, she was simply telling it like it was. Women in her family didn't wait for life to happen; they hunted life down and jumped onto its back. While everyone else might be content to simply hold on for eight seconds, Rangers-Decebel women weren't satisfied with "passable." Nope, they dug in their spurs and rode whatever adventure they'd undertaken to the ground...then jumped off, did a little dance, and jumped on something else. There wasn't anything special about it—that was just how they did things in her family.

Her momma raised Zuri to believe there was no adventure too big, no dream too outlandish, no nothing she had to fear, no fuck-up so big it would cause their family to stop loving her. As a result, she blossomed into the superhot, badazz, Lamborghini-

driving, stiletto-shoes rocking, certified genius diva that she was. *Oh yeah, and did she mention she was the hotness?*

Zuri scored on the ninety-ninth percentile on pretty much everything, and that included standardized tests, bootyliciousness, and making people want her. Again, not bragging, just pure truth. You didn't have to take her word for it...all you had to do was listen to the choruses of envy, catcalls, and gasps of awe that followed her.

You might be thinking, *what a bitch*, and, well, you wouldn't be saying anything her sister hadn't already told her...every day. She could be a bitch, but the truth was, she was the best friend anyone could have. Zuri might've spent the bulk of her time with her inner posse, but she pulled for the underdog. A one-woman (one hot woman) picket line when she had to be, she was the Psalms 82:3-4 [Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.] for those in need, and she made no apologies for it.

She didn't think she was better than anyone else; she simply remembered what it was like to be in need. Every day she woke up, she remembered that she was the beneficiary of grace...not because of anything she'd done or via any test she'd taken, but through the will

of the Creator. Conversely, each day she made it a point to give back. Sometimes people she helped didn't want the grace she was giving them, and the U.S. being a free country she let them reject it...for about two seconds before she told them to shut the hell up and gave it to them anyway.

She might be a Christian, but she wasn't perfect, and she didn't waste time trying to pretend she was. Just as she made no apologies for being hot, she made no apologies for her personality—as divisive as it could be. Family legend stated she'd been a pistol from the moment the midwife smacked her on the ass and passed her to her momma.

Her first word might've been "papa," as her grandfather spoiled her something bad, but her first full sentence was *Papa, aren't I pretty?* Her second sentence was, *No, I'm beautiful, not pretty.* She was an expert in praising herself by age two and proficient in cussing by age three...and on the receiving end of a shitload of ass-whippings for acting grown. By age five she'd conquered the art of strutting. She had every reason to strut: no one on the playground of Nonzerosum rocked jelly shoes, Roos, Yo-yo sandals or bunny slippers with the panache that she did back then. And no supermodel anywhere rocked heels like she did now.

Few people rocked style like she did. And even fewer people had a temper like hers. She might be all hot and hot and more hot on the outside, but when she got stirred up, she was molten lava on the inside. She didn't get stirred up often (that was her momma's job), she didn't go deep stalker-revenge mode (that was her sister's job), but when she was moved to pure pissed-offness, it was so Event Level Extinction (ELE) time.

And right now it was ELE time. Looking down at the business card in her hand, she knew somebody was fixing to die. No one else would look at that card and think twice about it, but she wasn't anybody else. She was herself, and for all the other things she might be, Zuri was nobody's fool—she had the IQ tests, the undergrad from Carolina, and the graduate degree from Duke to prove it. This card was the metaphorical lipstick on the collar.

Looking down at it again, she felt the growl vibrate in her chest and the pissed-off rise to the top. *Sophos Eder, MD*. Zuri might be a giving person, but there were some things she didn't share. Namely one Hannes Sighelm. Hannes was her man, full motherfucking stop, and Sophos and his staff of supermodelish chicks with their “call me anytimes” in loopy cursive handwriting were fixing to learn that.

Luckily, she didn't have to travel all the way into the city, being that Dr. Eder lived in an upscale

neighborhood a hop, skip and jump from her own upscale neighborhood. Well, being that she'd bought out thirty percent of the lots in the neighborhood and talked her sister into buying fifty percent of what was left, Tonita Estates wasn't technically a neighborhood at all, but instead the rather large playground of the Decebel girls that just happened to border Brookhaven. As it was, Brookhaven better not be asleep, because if it was it was about to be waken the hell up, she thought as she slid into her pumps. Blowing out a deep breath, Zuri took a moment to fix her hair and don a clean shirt. Sure, she was going over to whip some ass, but there was no reason to look frumpy...especially when the day might end with her getting a mug shot, she thought as she grabbed a dagger and tucked it into her jeans. Sliding into her black leather swing jacket, she pulled on her sunglasses, winked at herself in the mirror, and set out on her mission.

PROLOGUE II:

THE CATALYST FOR THE ISH THAT GETS STARTED...AND FINISHED

Already half undressed as he hit the door, Hannes slammed it shut with his boot before kicking said boots off. He didn't bother locking the door because frankly, he didn't have the energy it would take. He'd used every last bit of energy he had trying to refrain from ravishing Zuri each night and stay focused at his job during the day. His jobs were challenging, but he wouldn't have it any other way, especially as they came by him by way of Nigel Drystan—the man who owned most of Atlanta. Because of Zuri and Nigel, I Sigh Engineering had suddenly become a whole lot more popular and subsequently profitable, and he wanted to keep it that way. It wasn't that he didn't have enough; it was that he wanted to leave a legacy to his brothers and their children, seeing as their good-for-nothing sire wasn't about to.

As always, any thought of his sperm donor caused an immediate buildup of resentment...and memories. The memories drained him of what little energy he had. Heading to his bedroom—oops, his brother's guest room, he amended—he stepped out of

his jeans and fell onto the bed...and groaned. Zuri's scent permeated this room...just like it did his truck...and everywhere else she touched. Ironically, he seemed to be the thing she touched most.

Ah, Zuri. Surely, she was the most beautiful creation he'd ever seen, and that included all of the Alps in Austria, Peterskirche (St. Peter's Church), Schloss Belvedere (Belvedere Palace), Staatsoper Vienna (the State Opera House), the Danube from high atop Wachau Valley ,and everything in the Kunsthistorisches Museum (Museum of Art History). And may his fellow Austrians forgive him (and to hell with them if they didn't), but Zuri was undoubtedly more beautiful than the entire collection of symphonies and string quartets composed by Joseph Haydn, the first Johann Strauss's "Radetzky March," Leopold Mozart's greatest creation—Wolfgang Amadeus, and Arnold Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique.

Zuri was beautiful like the Alps in winter, Yosemite in Spring, the Florida Keys in Summer, the Cabot Trail in Autumn, and Galápagos anytime. If this was another era, there would be temples built to celebrate her beauty. He wasn't simply talking about how good she looked in...every damn thing she wore and in nothing at all; he was talking about how good she looked inside of her heart. Zuri might be

proficient in cussing, but she was so damn soft, so unbelievably giving, so undeniably gifted. His life was lines one and five in the song “There Is a Balm in Gilead;” Zuri was his earthly version of the third line in all three verses. God made him, Jesus saved him, but Zuri...Zuri healed him. And not just some of him, but all of him. She took his anger and gave him love in return.

Hannes didn’t know everything, but he knew that Zuri loved him. And from that, he also knew that love, like justice, was blind. She had to be blind because she looked right at him...without blinking, without fear and without repulsion. Either she’d seen a lot of ugly in her life, or she saw something in him that only his mother could see.

Zuri’s love was worth...everything he had. Her love gave him something more in life to focus on than the rage that had fueled him. He discovered many things in her love, including his sense of humor, his soft side, his vanity. Soon, he hoped he’d find strength in her love...not just the kind of strength it took to move heavy objects, but the kind of strength it took to move lives, long-held prejudices, and mountains for those you loved. He loved Zuri. He did. He loved her so much that he had to force himself to dig deep into his happiness and find enough strength to leave her.

She was too beautiful, too good to be saddled with a monster like him.

Tomorrow, he thought. Tomorrow, I'll have the strength to tell her no, to shut her out of my life. Tomorrow, he said as he closed his eyes. Even as he vowed it, his whole being revolted and his ego mocked him.

You lying bastard. You'll never have that kind of strength. And even if you did, Zuri isn't letting you go anywhere.

Yes, she will. I might not be pretty, but I'm still Alpha, and Zuri can be reasonable, he told himself, although he knew every syllable was a lie and every sound broke his heart.

Yeah, Zuri can be reasonable, which is why you're sleeping in Mathis' house instead of your own. By the way, have you found it yet? his mind taunted.

Shut up.

No, this is fun. Didn't she just reiterate that you're her stuff...yesterday, or was it this morning? No, wait. It was yesterday AND this morning, his ego amended.

He couldn't help but smile at that. Zuri had reiterated that point, quite loudly in front of all of Buckhead, moments before she'd jumped in his arms and kissed his breath away. Before he could draw in air, she'd swatted his ass and winked at him and

sashayed to his truck. She hadn't even turned back, just hollered over her shoulder. "I know you're looking and I don't blame you, because I'm hot like that. Now get your fine ass in this truck. And then drive us home so you can get your fine ass on me."

And he had. And this morning when he'd left her house, she'd shouted down the block reminding him who he belonged to. No, he'd never have the strength to leave her. But he did have the guts to be better for her. And Dr. Sophos Eder would help him. He'd said he would. And when he did, then he would dare to dream about a future with Zuri.

The blaring of his phone and the pounding on his door woke him. Cracking one eye open, he realized he hadn't even been asleep for five minutes. *Who the hell?* and *what the fuck?* were his first thoughts as he dragged himself out of bed, grabbed the phone and walked to the door.

"What?" he answered both simultaneously without regard for manners or clothes. He lived too far out in the middle of nowhere for anyone to bother visiting. And being the ringtone wasn't "Brickhouse," he knew it wasn't Zuri, so he didn't need to mind his manners.

“OH MY GOODNESS! I see why Zuri is such a slut-whore for you!” Reign exclaimed from the door even as the two vamps surrounding her made retching noises.

“Pants, dude, damn,” Tosya Aleksandrovich growled.

“My eyes, my eyes,” Vyacheslav whined as he stumbled off the porch.

“You two shut up,” Reign admonished before throwing out a direction he was meant to follow. “Turn so I can check out the back.”

“Like his naked ass is any better than his cock all out in the wind,” Tosya said.

“Sounds like somebody’s being a hater,” Reign said. “Hey, I have an idea: all y’all get naked, and it can be like a naked otherworldly male contest.”

“NO!” everyone exclaimed, including the voice in his ear.

It was only when he heard screaming that he recalled he had a phone call.

“Hannes, do not let Reign talk you into any kind of mess. I don’t even want to know why your dick is out, but put it in some pants and get it over to Silana’s like right now.”

Normally, he didn’t do orders, but being that it was Jack giving the ordering, he said the only thing he could under the circumstances. “Yes, ma’am.”

Clicking off the phone, he smiled at Reign before addressing the vampires.

“Fuck you, and why are you here?”

“Fuck you first,” Tosya returned.

“Dude, Zuri would so kick your ass if you tried, and I’d totally help her. They’re just the muscle in front of the real muscle...you know, in case I have to ‘convince’ you to come with us.”

“Well, not that you will have to ‘convince’ me, but if you had to, you’d need more than these bitches to take me down,” he said.

“I thought as much, which is why I also brought along the barbarians,” she said as she stepped aside and split the air with a sharp whistle.

Sure enough, he was met with threats in Scots-Gaelic as Andrew, Thamesia and Baisealach made their presence known. Not scared but also not wanting an all-out battle with the battle-happy and proud-to-be-described-as-barbarians highlanders, he growled at the vamps before walking off to the bathroom to shower.

He was showered and dressed in fifteen minutes flat, and a minute after that he was holding on for dear life as Reign tore down the street in his truck. Yeah, that was something else they were going to have to talk about. How was it that his stuff was always getting commandeered by Zuri or one of her posse?

PROLOGUE III:

NFW—NO FUCKING WAY

Zuri didn't have to have a mirror available to know that she didn't have even a hint of remorse on her face. Why would she have any remorse when she felt absolutely none? At best, she had a whole lot of "fuck somebody up" she had yet to deliver. She was good and pissed, and with plenty reason. Hannes wasn't here. Gevehard, Lothair, Konstantin and that bitch-ass Mathis were here (by royal Momma decree), but her Hannes was still not here. Her momma and Silana were pelting her with choruses of "what the fuck is wrong with you's", "oh Lords" and "Amens" in between Indy's on-the-spot sermon. The young berserkers and vamps in attendance were smirking. Reign was somewhere probably ogling her man and having a good time doing it. Oh yeah, and Dr. Eder's "want to change something that's perfectly fine as it is" bitch ass was sitting over in the corner being sweet-talked down from pressing charges. She really didn't know why they were even bothering with the sweet talk when they knew good and damn well that if the good doctor insisted on pressing charges, one of the Posse would "help" him see the error of his ways.

Her thoughts were interrupted by chaos coming through the door in the form of Reign.

“World record!” she yelled even as she adopted a gladiator pose in the center of the room and commanded all in attendance to hail her. Of course the berserkers and vamps did because they didn’t know any better. The barbarians did simply because they admired chaos in all its forms. Atlanta, Aloha and Victorious, being all pregnant, didn’t even stir from the spots they’d nodded off in, so they couldn’t answer. Reign looked pointedly at her, awaiting her praise...like that shit was happening anytime soon.

“You been ogling my man’s ass?” she asked instead.

Knowing praise wouldn’t be forthcoming, Reign simply gave her an evil smile before answering. “Of course. And being that he answered the door all hot and naked, I also ogled his front. No wonder you’re a whore for him,” she said before looking over at Hannes as he entered the house and purring.

“You’re dead later on,” Zuri promised.

“I might’ve been scared if I didn’t have the army of three,” Reign said as she nodded in the direction of the barbarians.

“Your little barbarians against my entire army?” she asked.

“Ain’t nothing little about my barbarians, chick. And I’d put my three barbarians against any *two* armies,” Reign countered before mmm, mmm, mmming at her man because she was an evil bitch.

Her and Reign’s squabbling was interrupted by her momma. “It’s a damn shame when Reign is the one displaying the good sense.”

Zuri’s eyebrows disappeared into her hairline upon hearing that comment. Reign might not currently be in any shit, but Reign was batshit crazy on her best day. She was tempted to snort her disbelief and point that out, but she wasn’t in the mood to be bitch slapped to sleep. She might be grown, but she’d never be grown enough to get smart with her momma. No way, no how, no ma’am. Her momma might love her and her sister like nobody’s business, but she didn’t play that smart-mouthed kids thing regardless of the age of said kids and who said kids belonged to.

She was saved from saying anything when her momma turned her attention on Hannes, who’d just walked in the door.

“And what the hell are you doing that is causing my oldest daughter to act all death row-ish and my youngest daughter to act crazier than usual?”

Before Hannes could draw in a breath, her momma talked all over any answer he might’ve given. “You know what? I don’t give a damn what you’re

doing. You'd better fix it and fix it fast, or I'm going to get all up in it, and I can guaran-damn-tee y'all that don't nobody want that. You understand me, Hannes?"

"Yes, ma'am," Hannes said.

"Good. Now explain yourself, Zuri," her momma demanded.

Zuri didn't need any further prompting to know she'd better start talking and talking fast. While she wasn't particularly scared of payback or even the minute possibility of Dr. Eder pressing charges, one person had the capacity to scare her shitless: her momma. Xiloxoch Rangers-Decebel (aka Jack Ryans) was a whole lot of things, but afraid of shit wasn't one of those. Looking over at her sister Reign, she knew she had to start talking, and talking fast.

"Hannes," she said, and her voice broke. "Hannes," she said again.

PROLOGUE IV:

DAMN TO THE INFINITE POWER

Zuri had said his name many times and in many different tones. She'd whispered it, screamed it, and purred it...sometimes all in the same sentence. Regardless of how she said it, it got to him *every* time because every time she said it, she meant it. But this time when she said his name, it punched him in the heart. With the exception of when the Creator had whispered him into being, Hannes' name had never meant so much. It was an explanation, an entreaty, a prayer. There was so much emotion in that one syllable that no one present could help but be moved...including him. Zuri said his name like it was the entirety of her hope, every dream she'd ever dared dream. She said his name like it was a part of *her*. She said his name like it was *everything*...and in her mouth, it was. His name was everything, and he was someone.

“Why, Hannes?” she asked in a voice so laced with pain that her hurt hurt him.

Before he could answer, she brought her hands to her breast—the very breasts that'd she'd held him against as she'd wrapped him in her softness—and squeezed her fists tight as if she could rip the pain

from her own chest. Realizing the futility of her actions, she reached out to him with those beautiful hands that had held him to her with such delicate strength that all he could do was let her. Opening her palms, he saw that one hand held her hopes; the other held evidence that damned him: the business card. Hannes didn't have to read the card to know what she held in her hand, nor did he need further clarification. Reaching out, he took her empty hand and filled it with his kisses. He took the other hand and filled it with his humility.

Letting the tears he'd spent his whole life holding at bay fall into her palm, he explained.

"Because you're the most beautiful creation in all of Creation, and I'm a monster on my best day."

"You are not a monster! You're the most beautiful man I've ever been in the presence of, Hannes," she choked out. Though her voice sounded nothing like the melodious syllables that usually fell from her mouth, Hannes knew Zuri meant every word she'd said.

The pain of her words registered with him even before his ear picked up the sound of them.

"You're blinded by your own goodness," he rasped.

"My love for you has enhanced my vision," she said as she removed her hands from his clasp, reached

up and gently traced the scars on his face before pulling him down and breathing salve on them with her lips.

Hannes didn't flinch like he wanted to do each time she touched him with her gentleness and caressed him with such fearlessness.

"Why don't you believe me when I say I love you?" she asked.

"I do believe you, Zuri. I just don't know why you love me...why you want to love me when I don't deserve your love."

"What can I do to make you love me back?" she asked.

He didn't want to be moved by her passion, but before he could think another thought, his work-roughened hands caressed the silk skin of her jaw before tangling in her thick tresses. Leaning towards her, he whispered his truth. "I love you more than anything."

"But you don't love yourself at all," she accused as she looked at Dr. Eder.

"Dr. Eder is one of the nation's top plastic surgeons. He can fix my face," he explained.

"How can you profess to love me when you only love part of me, Hannes?"

"I love all of you, Zuri...every millimeter of you."

“All except the seven foot two inch, three hundred thirty-five pounds that makes up my other half,” she said.

Zuri had already broken him with the sound of his name from her lips; now she devastated him with her confession.

Closing his eyes in an attempt to stop her from running him through with happily-ever-afters he wanted desperately but didn't deserve, he choked out words that hurt his pride, his shifter and his soul to speak. “I won't let you do this.”

“*Let?* You won't *let* me?” Zuri asked in a soft yet dangerous tone.

He should've known his Zuri wouldn't take that well. Her anger, as always, tempted his bear. “I'll give you anything, Zuri, but I won't give you regrets.”

“Did you say “let”? Zuri asked again, as if she hadn't heard a thing past that.

“You won't *let* us have a chance? Every day since we've met you've held pieces of yourself back from me, and I've waited patiently for you to give them to me...not because I want to take from you or hold something over you, but because I want *all* of you. I *deserve* all of you. You might not want it, but you've got *all* of me and I'm not *letting* you walk away from us.”

“You’re condemning yourself to living with a monster. I’m a monster, Zuri. Even though part of me is human, I have no humanity. You accept the man; you accept the bear; but you refuse to acknowledge the monster. If you can’t accept the monster, you can’t accept me...you can’t love me, Zuri. As much as I want you to really love me, as much as I need you to love me, as much as I’d give just to have you, I can’t escape who I am. I’m a monster.”

“Even if I thought you were a monster, I’m not scared of monsters. I even like some monsters, including Cookie Monster, the Two-Headed Monster, the two lead monsters from *Monsters, Inc.*; hell, I even like Reign.

“Don’t tell me I don’t love you or attempt to quantify my love, Hannes. You might be one of the most intelligent beings I know, but regardless of how many times you graduated valedictorian, you’ll never be knowledgeable enough to tell me how *I* feel. Despite having membership in NSPE [National Society of Professional Engineers], you’ll never be a good enough mathematician to calculate my love for you. You know why, Hannes? Because there is no limit to my love. I love you like 1 John 3:18: ‘...not in word or speech, but in truth and action;’ I love you like the seventh verse of 1 Corinthians 13: ‘It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all

things;’ like the first part of Song of Solomon 8:7: ‘Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.’”

Being a shifter, Hannes had exceptional senses, but he didn’t need to draw on his sensor abilities to feel the passion in Zuri’s words. He saw her conviction; he felt her truth; he heard her determination...and it stripped him of everything...even as it built him up.

“Some other person might’ve written those words, but I *am* those words, Hannes,” she said in a tone that reminded him that Zuri had a *juris doctorate*. “Since you continue to think you’re a monster despite my words, despite my love, despite my everything, I won’t wait for you to lay down your good intentions or wait for your integrity to crumble,” she decreed as she backed away from him.

Every word of her declaration took Zuri a little further from him. And he let her go, allowed her to put distance between them even as his body protested the loss of its mate. His *Liebling* was beyond angry, and yet still so achingly beautiful even in her fury. He couldn’t help but be enraptured by the absolute beauty of her movements, the undiluted passion in her words, the fire in her eyes.

And then she turned and snatched up a dagger. The hilt of the dagger was an amazing composition of

blues, but it wasn't the hilt that had his attention; it was the deadly-looking blade. Before he knew it, Zuri's hand was going forward, and she was making her closing argument.

"I'll transform myself into a monster," she decreed.

All Hannes saw was the blade going toward her face, and then his beast took over. He'd never moved with such speed or desperation, never felt such fear. His hand came up to intercept the blade, and when it did, he felt an explosion of pain as the blade nearly ripped through his arm. It would've ripped through his arm if he hadn't already started to shift. He was big in humanoid form, but he was huge in grizzly-polar form at a length of nearly ten feet, six feet in height when on all fours, and weighing in at a smidge above a metric ton. But pain was pain. And as much as the pain in his arm beat at him, the pain in what his pride had caused his mate to do beat at him hardest.

"Hannes!" Zuri screamed.

He answered her scream with a whisper, as she'd hit a major artery. "You deserve the best of everything, Zuri," he said.

"And that's why God delivered you to me, Hannes."

The combination of the truth blazing in her eyes and the reality of what she was willing to do exposed

him, broke him down. Zuri had toppled every single one of his reasons, had destroyed all of his best intentions, had closed the last bleeding wound within him even as she opened up a fresh one outside of him. She was his mate. Knowing he needed to shift in order to expedite his healing, he reached out to Zuri with his uninjured hand and brought her to his chest.

“Mine,” he said before taking her lips. “Mine,” he said again as he moved down her neck and nipped her skin.

“Silana, forgive my mess, but I must shift completely to speed up my healing.”

“There is nothing to forgive. Go ahead and shift—I’ll clear the room,” she said a moment before she made good on her words.

PROLOGUE V:

THE WAITING

Zuri wasn't a physician, but she was sure she was in a state of medical shock. And why shouldn't she be? Hannes' blood poured from his arm, he'd partially shifted, and he'd proclaimed that she was his. Her already quickly beating heart beat faster upon hearing those words.

"He loves me," she whispered to the room. "He loves me," she said again.

"With every. Single. Breath," he decreed.

Those words slid through her and made her feel alive everywhere they touched. *He loved her. He loved her. He loved her.*

Her mantra was interrupted by Hannes. "I have to shift so that I might heal. Don't be afraid," he said.

"I could never be afraid *of* you. I can only be afraid *for* you," she clarified.

"Thank you for that," he said as he backed away and finished shifting before emitting a roar that shook the foundations of the house.

Zuri watched in wonder as Hannes finished shifting into the most beautiful golden bear she'd ever seen. And the biggest fucking bear she'd ever seen. He was huge, dangerous-looking, and hers. She liked

everything about Hannes, especially the part about him being “hers.”

After he finished shifting, he cautiously approached her. Zuri knew he was gauging her fear. Fuck that, she wasn’t scared of much, least of all Hannes, regardless of what form he took. Before she could count to three, she ran across the room and hugged as much of him as she could fit in her arms. A soft knock on the door was followed by Silana’s voice.

“Zuri, we’re placing some things outside the door.”

Opening the door, Zuri spotted the trolley. The trolley bore first-aid materials, clean clothes for her and a comforter. Zuri couldn’t help but appreciate Silana’s thoughtfulness. Rolling the trolley close to the fireplace, she tended Hannes’ wound. Soaking up the blood with the steaming hot towels, she doused it with some of Grandmomma Rika’s concoction. Grandmomma Rika’s concoction was the first thing she’d learned to make as a child—the second thing was iced tea. Satisfied the wound was as clean as she could get it, she wrapped it in a clean sheet and secured it.

Gently caressing the bandage, Zuri started to shake. Though the wound didn’t look too bad now, the sight of how badly damaged his arm had looked when he was in humanoid form haunted her. She could’ve maimed Hannes for all eternity. Despite the fire, she

broke out in the shakes. Looking up into his eyes, guilt overwhelmed her, and she burst into tears.

"I'm so sorry, Hannes. Forgive me," she sobbed over and over into his fur.

Hannes didn't do anything. He simply stood still and allowed Zuri to cry herself out. When she finally ran out of tears, he nudged her in the direction of the chair closest to the fireplace and growled low until she sat in it. Grabbing the comforter from the trolley, he dragged it to her and waited patiently while she settled it around her. Satisfied, he settled down on the floor before her. She was strangely comforted by the golden bear that was bigger than most midsize vehicles. Hannes was a big motherfucker...more importantly, he was *her* big motherfucker, she thought as she buried her fingers into his fur and drifted off to sleep.

Hannes' first instinct was to head off to the woods, but he'd just claimed Zuri, and it being late February, it was simply too cold for her. This chamber, however, was just right and when he shifted back to humanoid form, he'd be sure to thank Silana for not just this kindness, but all of the kindnesses she heaped upon him. And later, he'd thank Jack for birthing his mate. *His mate*. No two words resonated

so deeply within him as those. He'd known Zuri had feelings for him and that those feelings ran deep, but until he'd watched her damn near maim herself to prove them, he'd had no idea anyone could love that deep. Watching her cry for him hurt him more than that dagger of hers ever could. He'd had much worse than this, but he was sure that information wouldn't soothe her. She hurt when he hurt. And he hurt when she hurt. Right now, she was hurting and on the verge of shock. Nudging her to the chair, he waited as she situated the comforter around her before settling in front of her. It'd take him half a day to heal, but meanwhile, he'd watch over his mate.

The roar he'd emitted earlier had held instructions for his brothers. Even now they surrounded the house in bear form, ensuring that nothing disturbed his mate. Nothing would get between them again, including his pride. Settling himself a little closer to Zuri, he looked his fill as he thought of everything that'd brought him to this moment. Finally closing his eyes, he quickly fell into a relaxing slumber, having no idea that he and Zuri were about to share much more than space...they were about to share a dream, thanks to Silana's house, which was much more than a house. It was also a character of its own, whose magic touched all it allowed to enter its doors.

CHAPTER ONE:

THE DECONSTRUCTION OF YOUTH; THE CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Austria, back in the day

Hannes Sighelm was a lot of things: mean, ugly, a bastard, relentless, unyielding. Being ugly wasn't the worst of his offenses, although his ruined visage was difficult for most beings to get past. Those who did somehow get past it, however, weren't able to get past his demeanor. Hannes wasn't nice, he wasn't personable, he wasn't sociable, and he didn't pretend to be. He was a died-in-the-wool bastard, and he played it for all it was worth. The combination of his armored truck build, his frightening face and the "try me's" that blazed in his golden eyes served as an effective warning device. And if that didn't work, his harshly worded, thickly accented "fuck you's" got his point across. People avoided him...and so did everything else that breathed. Confident that their blood tie would keep them safe, only his brothers Mathis, Gevehard, Lothair and Konstantin entered his den...but not for very long. Though the resemblance was clear (discounting his face), he was nothing like his brothers. For that matter, he was nothing like

anyone. He was nothing like anyone, and he didn't need anyone...anymore.

He wasn't born as the crotchety bastard of the highest order that his little brothers referred to him as. Hannes used to be like so many other male shifter cubs—carefree. He spent his days enjoying the beauty of the Austrian Alps. He spent his nights being taught, nurtured and loved by his grandparents and mother.

Hannes knew he was different, but he didn't know he should be ashamed of it until he grew big enough to wander off on his own. Being a curious bear, he learned all that there was to learn. Soon, he'd learned everything that could be learned at the top of his world, and not long after, he and his brothers ventured to the lower altitudes to attend school.

Seeing the science labs full of equipment and books, all he'd seen were possibilities. He couldn't wait to learn, and unbeknownst to him, the townsfolk couldn't wait to teach him. Gifting him with hellos, they followed them up by feeding him the bitter fruit of knowledge. He'd learned many things with that first bite, chiefly that he hated apples. Along with physics, chemistry, and Latin, he learned what it was like to be hated.

Mixed-breed shifters—Alaskan grizzly on their mother's side and polar on their father's side—the golden-colored boys didn't fit in with the polar bears

that dominated the region. The product of multiple nationalities, their strange family tree set them apart socially. Though they were born in Austria, as was their mother, their father was German, and their maternal grandparents hailed from an uninhabited island in Alaska's Kodiak Archipelago.

They received a lot of shit, yet he and his brothers gave it right back. They began and ended every school day the same way: knee deep in a smack down. They were often outnumbered, but having Kodiak and Polar bloodlines and Ina Sighelm as a mother meant that they were never outsized (they were of the super-bear variety), out-skilled or out-techniqued. Despite their meager possessions, they were never out-classed. It'd taken a while but eventually they'd cut a swath of ass whipping through the entire male population of the school.

Though the physical challenges soon stopped and the verbal taunts dwindled down to whispers, the most hurtful taunt of all was always present in the smirks on the faces of their classmates and in the blatant ostracism that greeted them each day. The good people had made it clear they were unwanted, and they soon learned to be okay with that. Perhaps if they'd given their classmates the alms of envy they wanted, they would've been left in peace, but they hadn't given them any inclination that they cared.

But one day something happened that caused him to care. He met his father—Ingwaz Deonté, King of Polar Bear Shifters...and his wife, Queen Brunhild Deonté, who was many things, but blessedly not his mother. Being shifters, no one had to tell him that King Ingwaz was his father. But being the asshole he was, King Ingwaz informed him just how little he thought of him. “You are no one to me,” he announced as pretty as you please.

Hannes knew that, but to hear it stated so blatantly, so dispassionately, and so publically hurt. He was so angry all he wanted to do was lash out, but he knew better. Clenching his jaw, he kept his hands by his side, but he couldn’t keep the fire out of his eyes or extinguish the rage that filled him up. And that was all it took.

It didn’t matter that he hadn’t made a threatening move toward the king. It hadn’t mattered that he hadn’t spoken out of turn...or at all, for that matter. It didn’t matter that he stood statue still. It didn’t even matter that unlike many shifters, he could mask the scent of his emotions. His rage was odorless, but it was so white hot that everyone present felt it...and feared it.

One moment he was battling his own rage, and a moment later he was battling the mercenaries who formed the Deonté Royal Guard. The fact that the

monarchs traveled with mercenaries was testament to the type of shifters they were and were not.

“Teach him just how much of a nobody he is,” the queen commanded as she turned her back on him.

It didn’t matter that he was a few weeks away from turning eighteen. It didn’t matter that a line of seasoned mercenaries stood in front of him. Running never crossed his mind. Shifting, he didn’t wait for the attack—he brought it to them. His brothers said he fought valiantly, like a bear possessed. He slashed and clawed his way through half the front line of mercenaries before his brothers were able to get to his side. Even then he slashed and clawed his way through another few before being brought down. And even on his back he fought with everything he had, determined that if he was going to die, he would do so fighting. He fought hard to die even as his brothers fought to save him. In the end, all he remembered was the rage, the blood, and finally blackness.

He woke two days later and didn’t rise from his bed until a week after that. When he finally did rise, there was no trace of boy left in him...just as there was no trace of personality. He’d only wanted to see one thing: if his brothers still lived. They did, but barely. Feeling guilt press down on him, he ignored his own pain, dragged himself to their sides, and almost broke

what small portion of his broken body remained whole by tending them and willing them to stay alive. Once they obeyed his command to stay alive, he willed them to heal. Two months later, they were as good as new, but the exertion had taken a toll on him. His scars did not heal over unblemished...and he did not care. Looking in the mirror, all he saw was his wrecked face, his scarred-up body, and rage.

He stayed up on his mountain training, healing, and losing a little more of himself to the rage each day—and reliving as much as he could remember of the fight every night in his sleep. It was a year before he left his mountain, and when he did he went straight to the Vienna Basin and enrolled at Technische Universität Wien—the Vienna University of Technology, where he earned his degree in Civil Engineering with a specialization in Geotechnics. Tired of Europe, he travelled to America and spent five years working his fingers to the bone before enrolling in the University of Texas and picking up his Masters in Civil Engineering and then his Ph.D. from MIT.

Attending the NSPE conference in Atlanta, he decided to stay. He worked his fingers to the bones some more and founded his own construction company, which he named after his mother. Despite I Sigh Engineering showing healthy profits, he sunk all of his money back into the business. As there was no

one he wanted to be around, he lived frugally, opting to live in a small two-bedroom house. His den would never be considered “nice,” but it was clean, out of the way smack dab in the middle of nowhere, and had everything he needed: a bed, a desk, a chair, a laptop and gym equipment.

He didn’t have a television because he didn’t want to be regaled with programs depicting romance when women shuddered upon the very sight of him. He wasn’t interested in being inundated with scenes of happy families when he would never procreate or, for that matter, have a woman lie with him without benefit of payment, complete darkness, and doggy style sex. He didn’t have furniture because he didn’t have company. Despite his large stature, he made do with a full-size bed. It didn’t fit him, but being that life hardly fit him at all, he ignored it like he did everything else that hurt him. A king-size bed would better accommodate his frame, but then he’d have to face the extra room in his bed...the extra room that taunted him with the nothingness taking up residence there.

CHAPTER TWO:

APPLYING THE BASE COAT

Tonita Estates, Atlanta, GA, September 2004

The remnants of the familiar nightmare woke Zuri from her sleep. A silent river of tears trickled down her flawless visage, and terror gripped her heart. It was always the same nightmare. The dream never deviated. It was simply a replay of the horrific events...in graphic detail that was more intense than any HDTV on the market. But unlike television, there was no pause; there was no fast-forwarding option; there was no shutting it off. It was the same forty seconds...every time she closed her eyes.

Early Summer, 1998, Nonzerosum, NC

In a battle that had raged for twenty minutes, that had ended with too many injuries to list and too much fucked up to name, everything had boiled down to that small snippet of time. Despite suffering injuries of her own, it wasn't her injury that caused the nightmares. It wasn't even the almost mortal injury Reign had suffered. It was the moments before Reign's injury...the moments right before Reign's

captors had kicked the chair from beneath her as they condemned her to death by hanging—and not the more humane forms of hanging, such as the standard drop method, which broke the victim's neck, or the long (measured) drop method, which took into account a victim's height and weight so that it delivered enough force to break the neck without decapitating. Being the sadistic bastards they were, they used the short drop method—which strangled the victim over a period of ten to twenty minutes as the weight of the body tightened the trachea with the noose. Though she hated the bastards for it, she was thankful they chose this method, as it allowed Reign to live.

As brutal a death as hanging is, not even that was what caused her nightmares; it was Reign's reaction to it: complete fucking fearlessness. Reign didn't react with fear or plead for mercy, which would've bought her some time. Instead of fear, Reign gave them defiance; instead of begging, Reign gave them a smirk. It was the smirk that did her in. That smirk said more “fuck you's,” “sons-of-bitches,” “sorry bastards,” and “motherfuckers” than any five navies could've said.

It got to her...and it sure as shit got to Reign's captors, who hastily kicked the stool out from beneath her to begin her hanging. As Reign swung from that

tree, they mocked her defiance. “Maybe now you’ll learn some respect.” Of course Reign didn’t answer, as her trachea was being crushed. “You feel like begging now, girl?” the lead rogue asked Reign as he caught her body in midair and held her up just enough to stop the choking. Drawing in a breath, Reign didn’t use her breath or reprieve to show her contrition. Instead, Reign used her second chance to demonstrate her love for Zuri. Looking right at her while she stealthily dragged her way closer on her dislocated hip, Reign smiled and let her mask drop, and when it did, Zuri was blinded with the love she saw swirling in her eyes. And then that mask was back on, and her mind was flooded with Reign’s string of cusses. “*Get your ass back in hiding now, Zuri.*”

Zuri didn’t bother answering, as she had no intention of going back. From the look of displeasure on her sister’s face, Reign knew it too. Reign didn’t have to see the “hell no” on her face. Being twins, Zuri and Reign had always been able to feel strong emotion in each other. If they focused hard enough, they could even pinpoint each other’s location. They could never hide from each other regardless of how hard they’d both tried during their fifteen years. For once, Zuri was grateful for what she’d always considered a curse. No one wanted another person in their head, especially when that person was Reign—queen weirdo

who not only had no filter on her thoughts, thus making her laugh at inappropriate times, but also had no fashion sense at all, as evidenced by her outfit. But right now, Zuri was grateful she knew where to find Reign and what she was thinking. She was also humbled and scared: humbled by Reign's love and scared at her willingness to die. It's one thing for someone to *say* that they'd die for you. It was another altogether to see that promise in action.

Reign was willing to die for her. She was also willing to live for her...at least long enough for her to get to safety. Being her sister, there was no way she was allowing Reign to do any such thing. Reign wouldn't have gotten this far alone if she hadn't been all commander and put her to sleep with a jab to the temple. Touching the side of her head, Zuri winced. There was no way she was going to let Reign die, as she had to kick her ass for that.

"Your pain beat at me, Zuri," Reign said.

"Yours beats at me now, Reign," she returned.

The actions of Reign's captor spurred her to move faster. Tired of Reign's unwillingness to cooperate, he screamed at her.

"Answer me, bitch. Beg me for your life."

Zuri knew two things. First, Reign wasn't going to beg for shit. Second, her defiance was going to push her captor over the edge. With her hip busted up, she

wasn't sure if she could get to her in time, and so Zuri asked Reign for the one thing she knew in her heart that Reign wouldn't give her.

"Beg, Reign. Beg him for your life," she pled as tears gushed down her face.

"I can't, Zuri. I can't. We've spent all our lives hiding from the monsters that hunt us. I can live under assumed names and made-up identities, but it's the begging that got to me, Zuri. I've spent the last fifteen years begging...begging God to please reunite Momma with the only man she's ever loved, even if that meant her leaving us. I'm tired of begging, Zuri, so don't ask me to. Go back, Zuri. Go back, because Momma's going to need you when I break her heart with my pride. Go back, Zuri."

"No," Zuri responded a moment before Reign's captor let go of her and allowed her hanging to resume. Despite the presence of gravity, it was as if Reign fell in slow motion. Digging her elbows into the ground, Zuri clasped her machete and snake-crawled her way across the carpet of grass like her life depended upon it...because it did...and so did Reign's.

"Go back, Zuri," Reign attempted again.

"There's no way I'm letting you die wearing glitter pants," she said as she pushed her own pain to the back of her mind and dragged her body forward.

Reign emitted a raw, raspy gurgling sound. Despite the ugliness of the sound, Zuri smiled. Her captors might think it was the sound of Reign dying, but she knew better. Reign was laughing. And a moment later, her captor was screaming as she opened fire and laid flat everyone that surrounded her sister.

Seeing the captors dead, Zuri wanted to collapse in relief, but Reign was still hanging. Though she wasn't Israel or Jacob, needing some strength, she recited Isaiah 41:10: "do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand." She said it once and made it to her knees. She said it again, and the nausea she felt subsided and the ringing in her ears stopped. She said it a third time, and she was a foot away from where she'd been when she started praying. Feeling her strength increase, she recited that verse until she made it over to where Reign hung. Looking up at the tree, she knew that despite her best efforts, there was no way she could jump up high enough to cut her down. Though she had another cartridge, she wasn't about to risk shooting Reign in an effort to get her down. So she did the next best thing: she crawled beneath her and, despite the pain, stood on both knees. The pain of the position was excruciating, but she'd gladly bear it for Reign, knowing Reign would bear it for her.

“Stand on my shoulders, Reign.”

It took a minute of fiddling around, but Reign found a foothold.

“Thank you, Zuri,” she said.

Having no strength left, she simply patted Reign’s foot and recited Psalms 91 in its entirety...and Reign joined her...and so did a third voice. Instead of being fearful of that third voice, she was comforted by it. Though neither she nor Reign could tell the gender or age of that voice, both of them had heard it before and had been comforted by it. The voice felt like power, and, chanting along with them, it seemed to give both her and Reign strength to hold on. And hold on they did.

Though it was early morning when the chaos had begun, it was full night before their family had found them. Zuri had never heard a more beautiful sound than the sound of her papa Everglade’s diesel engine four-door Dodge coming their way. And she’d never seen anything more beautiful than their family rushing toward them. And when she said “rushed,” she meant it. The members of their rescue party might have twenty to forty years on them, but no Olympic sprinter made it up that mountain in more impressive fashion than their family did. Cutting Reign down, their papa handed her over to their godfather Klondike Ballinger. Lifting her from the

ground, he handed her over to their other godfather Dawson Summers. They hadn't even got in the truck bed good before their grandmomma Rika was checking their injuries and filling the air with her cusses. Sitting between them, their momma simply held on to them real tight.

"We're going deep cover."

Neither she nor Reign asked any questions about what "deep cover" meant, nor made any comments. There was no need to, as there was a resoluteness to their momma's tone and a hardness in her demeanor that neither had ever seen before. Their momma wasn't simply mad; their momma was furious, and one did not incite the wrath of Xiloxoch Rangers Decebel with impunity. Their momma didn't play—she got even-er...and from the looks on everyone's faces, they were going along on the "get even-er" ride.

Daylight had come and revealed not just the extent of her and Reign's injuries, but also the extent of the damage the Decebels and their cronies in Nonzerosum had done. Their part of the mountain looked like they'd just finished shooting the scene for the Battle of Stirling in the movie *Braveheart*. Her godfathers had brought in feral and hungry hogs. What hogs hadn't taken care of, the incinerator their momma and aunt constructed did. There were a lot of questions that could be asked, but neither she nor

Reign bothered, because there really wasn't any established etiquette for an after-massacre conversation. Then again, both she and Reign had other things to focus on—namely getting well. A combination of their grandmamma Rika's concoction and the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico did wonders to aid in their healing. Still, no one could explain why both of them healed so fast...and so spectacularly. Other than the scarring, it was like they healed better than new.

Although she had a broken arm and a separated shoulder to go along with her hip dislocation, and they hurt like a son-of-a-bitch, her injuries didn't even begin to compare to Reign's. Reign had deep rope burns on her neck and her wrists where her hands had been tied behind her back. She also had damage to her neck and trachea, multiple fractures of her ribs, a broken ankle and a muscle tear. But she bore it like a soldier...just like she bore everything else.

"*It's okay, Zuri,*" Reign had attempted to comfort her whenever she'd see her crying.

"*No, it's not. I hate them, Reign,*" she'd cried harder. It wasn't okay, and until they hunted all of those bastards down, it'd never be okay. And they would be hunted down, because their Aunt Naira had asshole bait, a plan, and the will to carry it out. While they went deep cover in the Florida family home of

their papa Everglades, their aunt Naira went deeper cover and faked her own death so she could carry out her revenge. And what glorious, gory, inventive, methodical, long-lasting revenge it was. While their aunt's revenge was nothing short of spectacular, their momma had put the "p.s." on the demise of those who'd thought to hurt them. Ah, her family. Nobody delivered "fuck shit up" like the Decebels.

And yet, it wasn't enough for her. Most of those involved had suffered a horrific demise, and yet sometimes that wasn't enough...especially when it came to him. Though she'd watched many a horror film with Reign, she'd never seen a monster like the man who'd hung Reign. While she knew he wasn't in any kind of condition to hurt her physically, the memory of him hurt her in her dreams, in the private spaces of her mind, in the sanctified places in her soul. Somehow it didn't seem fair that a monster like that could only be killed once, when not a day went by that she didn't feel the effects of his cruelty, and not a night went by that she didn't relive the torture.

She'd kept it together by imagining his time at the hands of their family...sometimes several times a day. Yet even after all this time, she was nowhere near satisfied with the revenge, just as she was nowhere near the end of cursing them out. She'd learned additional languages so she could sling curses at him

endlessly. Despite the many words that filled her head, despite the number of curses she knew, there were never enough words to tell the universe how much she hated that man. Despite her religion teaching her that vengeance was not hers, she wanted it.

The fact that she and Reign were only alive because of some of Luke 1:71: “that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us,” she held on tight to Proverbs 20:22: “Do not say, ‘I will repay evil;’ wait for the Lord, and he will help you.” But it was hard, so damn hard. She tried and every day failed a little less spectacularly, but every day she failed nonetheless. Maybe one day she could live up to Luke 6:27: “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,” but that day wasn’t today. She hurt too bad, too completely; she raged too much.

And like always, when the hurt became too much, a voice filled her head: *Be at peace, my heart.* And just like that, she was. Immediately, the shudders eased.

Tonita Estates, Atlanta, GA, September 2004

Taking a deep breath, Zuri focused on the plush mattress beneath her and the mountain of pillows that

decorated her bed. As always, she couldn't help but think of Reign when she thought of her bed. A crazy, lunatic genius, Reign had headhunted some engineering nerds, ergonomics people and furniture manufacturers and created a bed that queens and kings couldn't dream up. Crafted of flame maple and marble and inspired by Tuscan columns, the headboard, footboard and columns looked like something the great sculptor Augusta Savage would've created. Ivory and Carolina blue silks poured down from a clasp on the ceiling and wrapped around the stately columns. And then there was the mattress and pillows. Made of some kind of material she couldn't pronounce, the OSLS (Only Soft Landings Sister) brand mattresses and pillows were durable, yet so soft they put cumulus clouds to shame. Rounding up a group of fashion-industry people, Reign and her team had created the Princess Zuri bedding line. The material used to create Princess Zuri bedding was so smooth it was what baby skin wanted to be.

Reign had delivered the bed and set it up without fanfare. She'd simply left a card on top of the bed that read: "So you'll always have a safe place to land." Zuri had sighed a whole symphony the first time she'd lain on that bed, and after sending up thanks to God of Everything for having Reign as a sister and a best friend, she'd fallen right to sleep.

The bed, like her home, always comforted her. When she'd wake up frightened, she reached for that comforting voice that told her to be at peace. It was always accompanied by a recitation of Psalm 121, focusing on the last part of verse seven: "he will keep your life." Zuri didn't hold on to many things, but she held on to that verse like a lifeline, because that was the one truth she could grasp with absolute confidence. Despite the pain, despite the impossibilities, she and Reign were still here.

These back and forths with her conscience and with her God always left her with more questions than answers and more why than okays. They also left her weary. Your arms are too short to box with the Creator, she reminded herself as she looked over at the stained-glass window and read the inscription decorating it: "Love, not time, heals all wounds." She didn't need faith to believe that, as she'd had so much time, so much time full of so much emptiness, so much doubt, so much regret. Time wasn't the Great Healer; perhaps love wasn't either, but nevertheless, she hoped some of it came her way.

Her tears punctuated her confession. She didn't bother washing the tears off, as there were always more ready to fall. Because she kept them locked up so tightly during the day, they made a break for it at night, seeping out on their own accord so that she

wouldn't burst from the sorrow she refused to acknowledge during the day. Those nighttime tears cooled her rage just enough to keep her from igniting.

Just as she didn't bother to scrub at her tears, she didn't bother trying to go back to sleep. She didn't bother pretending like she didn't hate him. She didn't bother with bothering.

Instead she thought about the many ways she'd tried to cover up the hurt, which revolved primarily around mayhem, money and men. While the mayhem was kind of fun, it was short lived. While the money bought her things, in the end she recognized that they were just things. The men—now that was a different story altogether.

She thought of the many "whos" she'd allowed in her bed in an effort to crowd out the nightmares and to fill up the space. Even with company, every bed was always too big, the chasms too wide to traverse, her trust too nonexistent to allow anyone to stay the night.

Once she'd been gifted with *this* bed, she'd recognized the sacredness of that space and could no longer even consider allowing just anyone in. Perhaps she wanted too much, but being that she'd lost so much, she couldn't bother feeling guilty about her exacting standards. She could be finicky when it came to the person she chose to share her space (which was why only the architect, his crew and her Posse had

stepped foot in her new home), her body (which was why she hadn't had a lover in so long), and her trust (which was why she'd never kept a lover for long).

Choices were never free, and as a result, Zuri experienced a loneliness that had all but consumed her. Along with the loneliness came shame. While her inner diva preened at the attention her beauty and wealth garnered, the soft places within her hurt to know men didn't look past that to see what else she had to offer. She'd tried her hand at downplaying her looks, but that wasn't her. She enjoyed dressing up and getting girlyfied, and she'd enjoyed the day she'd finally grew strong enough to stop apologizing for it.

While she'd regained a little bit more of herself, the times that saw her lying in bed singing the lyrics of Bonnie Raitt's "I Can't Make You Love Me" were the times she was closest to breaking. Those were the times she had to remind herself not to give in. Those were the times Reign invited herself over and huddled up next to her and played sentinel even as tears covered her own face. Those were the times when that voice seemed to fill the room: *Be at peace, my hearts. Be at peace.*

CHAPTER THREE:

CHANCE MEETINGS

September 2005

Being the preeminent seller of real estate in the metro Atlanta area, there weren't many properties in the 303 zip code with which Zuri was not familiar. Zuri knew Atlanta, and she knew the area that surrounded it. Though she might dress like a diva, walk like a diva and diva like a diva, when it came to business, she wasn't afraid to pull on her high-heel Tims, borrow Reign's Range Rover and bar owner Mad Bruce's mean-ass dogs Thistle and LochNess, and trek to the ends of Georgia to make a sale happen. In her short tenure as the most badass real estate agent in the Peach State, she'd sold everything from single-family homes to bars to cornfields to skyscrapers.

Today had been one of those cornfield days, which was why she was driving up to the Mad Clatter so damn late. She needed to return Mad's dogs, and though she wasn't a drinker, she needed the madness of the Mad Clatter to counter the effects of the assholes she'd spent all day dealing with. Just because Georgia was comprised of a whole lot of backwoods didn't mean that people had to take being backwoods

to the extreme. Backwoods people who'd come into money equaled a headache just waiting to happen. In the end, she got the commission (because no one else in their right fucking minds had wanted to work with them), but she'd also gotten a big fucking headache to go with it.

Walking into the Mad Clatter at eleven p.m., she was met by a familiar sight: Mad and Cadillac drinking coffee and most likely embroiled in their never-ending argument over whose wife was more beautiful, whose bike was fastest, and which of them was more badass; Gage and Cannon on opposite sides of the bar, just looking for any piece of a reason to kick off an ass-whipping; Balere Kennesaw sliding beers down the bar along with a few choice curse words; and Mad's (and Scotland's) motto, which was emblazoned over the bar: *Nemo me impune lacessit*—No one provokes me with impunity. Ah, she was glad to be back to a comfortable level of crazy.

Waltzing up to the bar, Balere set a cold iced tea (in a frosty mug) in front of her before she had a chance to make her request. Taking her iced tea, she was set to go join Mad and Cadillac when someone caught her eye. A big motherfucker, with golden hair and skin, he sat at the far end of the bar nursing a beer. Unlike the other patrons, he wasn't watching sports, he wasn't talking shit, and more importantly,

he wasn't having a good time. Zuri didn't need to see his eyes to know that. She felt it, but being she didn't know him and he wasn't giving off "I want company" vibes, she left him to his thoughts though she sent warm vibes his way.

Making her way over to Mad, she hugged both him and Cadillac before taking a seat.

"Thanks for letting me use Thistle and LochNess," she said.

"Did they get any action?" he asked.

"No, they didn't get to attack anyone." She smiled. Mad looked as disappointed as his Dobermans over the fact they didn't get to attack someone. "My clients were straight out of *Deliverance* if the storyline had been just a tad more backwoods, but besides testing the boundaries of good taste, good sense, and common decency, they didn't do anything that warranted a dog attack, although I may have Reign start ish with them just on GP."

"Ah, maybe next time," Mad said.

"Hopefully, there won't be a time when I need to unleash the dog version of the Apocalypse on my clients. That might earn me a review from the realtor board."

"We could smash them if they tried," Cadillac said.

“Didn’t your wives decree that y’all aren’t allowed to kick ass and take names?” she asked.

“Maybe.”

“Mmm-hmm. I can always tell them,” she threatened.

“You could, but you wouldn’t want to get us in trouble,” Mad said while giving her the sad eyes.

“The sad eyes only work if you’re under the age of seven,” she said. “It doesn’t work when you’re six and a half feet of dangerous.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Cadillac said.

“As will I,” Mad said.

Zuri was mid-laughter when she once again caught sight of the man at the counter. Something about him called to her. And then she caught his eyes in the bar mirror. It was the briefest of looks, but the moment was saturated with emotion. His sadness pulled at her; his aloneness beat at her; the sense of resignation that enveloped him broke her heart so much that she actually felt a pain in her chest. Involuntarily, she gasped.

“What is it, darlin’?” Mad asked.

“That man. He seems so...broken.”

“Aye, he came in here about two hours ago and hasn’t said a word since except to order more beer. Balere already took his keys, and he’s a beer away from being cut off.”

Ah, he was a beer away. That was why he nursed his beer. It was the last one he'd be served. From her perch, she watched the stranger watch nothing at all. He spoke only to Balere, and then only briefly. She watched as he pushed a few dollars across the counter. A moment later, the bar filled with the sounds of Bonnie Raitt, singing "Have a Heart."

"He's been playing blues off and on all damn night," Mad said.

"And you let him?"

"Yeah. Cadillac said let him be."

"He appears to be nursing more than just a broken heart. That boy's nursing a broken life," Cadillac said.

"I couldn't stand to take something else from him when it appears that life has already taken so much from the lad."

"Mr. Mad and Mr. Cadillac, y'all are good men."

"Which is why you're not going to tell our wives on us, right?"

"Maybe." She smiled before lapsing into silence. Bonnie's music always got to her. Rising, she stood and went to the jukebox and selected another Bonnie blues song. A moment later, the bar filled with the first strains of "I Can't Make You Love Me."

As always, she closed her eyes and silently sang along with Bonnie. The man at the bar wasn't so

silent. He sang this song...not particularly well, or in English...but with raw emotion that struck a person right in the center of one's chest. He sang this song like he'd lived it, and that came through despite him singing off key and in German. Making up her mind, she approached the big man.

Sliding next to him on the barstool, she gently placed her hand atop his. She noticed that he flinched, but he didn't move his hand...nor did he look at her.

"Want to dance?" she asked.

Hannes didn't know what brought him to the Mad Clatter, but when he walked in he felt like home. The bar was decorated with nothing but a motto and a couple of warnings. The pitchers of ale were tall, the peanut bowls were full, and the seats were littered with rough-and-tumble men. All in all, the place looked like it had seen its fair share of brawls. He wasn't there to brawl, though; he was there to escape. It seemed lately that he'd had a lot to escape from: the whispered remarks, his own visage, and the memories. Today was the anniversary of Ingwaz Deonté telling him he was nobody. He hated that it still got to him, hated the man for not even caring enough to hate him, hated himself for caring that Ingwaz existed.

Laying a c-note on the counter, he instructed the bartender to bring him beer until the money ran out. Not accustomed to being looked directly in the eye, he didn't expect the little bit of a woman to challenge him...until he looked in her eye and saw the steel there.

"I'll serve you, but there's a point where I'm going to cut you off. And seeing that you aim to get good and drunk—and I can appreciate that—let me see your license so I know where to have someone drop you off, tell me how much you weigh so I know when to cut you off, and give me your keys," she demanded.

Yeah, demanded. Not even bothering to tell her that it'd take more ale than she had time to serve him to make him drunk, he simply handed her his keys.

"Who do I need to call to come get you when you get shitfaced?"

"Nobody."

"I'll call a cab for you a little bit before I cut you off, then."

"I'll walk."

"Not if you want to drink here you won't. By the way, I'm Balere. I hail from a family of moonshiners meaning I'm used to dealing with big, mean motherfuckers, so don't start none, won't be none. *Capeche?* That's like Italian for *I hear and I obey.*"

In no mood to argue with her or correct her translation, he simply nodded his agreement, and before he was finished with his nod, she placed a tall one in front of him along with a fresh bowl of peanuts. In return he placed a ten spot on the counter. "Can you find me some good songs on the jukebox?"

"Whatcha in the mood for?"

"The blues."

"I don't know what kind of selection they have, being all they seem to play here is Charlie Daniels and rock at full blast, but I'll get as close as I can. And by the way, this doesn't make me your bitch. I wouldn't just do this for anybody, but since it's you, I will," she said.

Balere had iffy taste in music. Her first few tries were hit and miss, but he wasn't complaining being she was doing him a solid. Finally, she hit on some music he was feeling. When he nodded, she gave him a smile in return.

Despite her questionable people skills, Balere was a topnotch bartender. He never had to ask for her to top him off. All he had to do was answer her checklist of questions to prove that he wasn't shitfaced. He didn't get drunk, but he did grow more melancholy. The beers had slowed down, and the bartender's warnings got more frequent. Finally, she

said he was one away from his limit and handed him back twenty in change.

“Your bill was fifty even. I’m saving thirty for the cabbie.”

Ah, so thoughtful. “Keep the rest,” he said as he slid the twenty back across the bar.

She didn’t take the money, simply laid her hand atop his. “Don’t drink anymore tonight, okay? You seem like a nice guy, and I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

The bartender meant to be kind, but she didn’t know she was destroying him with her concern. No one was concerned about him. He was a monster, a big motherfucker who looked like he could unleash hell at any moment, a prick, an asshole, a bastard—literally.

“I’m a bastard,” he admitted. “You don’t have to be nice to me.”

“Yeah, well, half of my best friends are bastards and the other half are assholes. And I know I don’t have to be nice to you, but I want to be. If it’ll make you feel better, I can always beat your ass real quick.” She smiled.

Raising his mug, he wished her well: “*Mögest du alle Tage deines Lebens leben!* May you live all the days of your life!” he translated.

“Same to you, Hannes,” she said as she brought him a cup of something hot. “Hair of the dog...without the hair, the dog, or the alcohol. Drink it voluntarily or I can force it down your throat. Your choice.”

He wanted to crinkle his nose up at it. He might be Austrian born and bred, but he’d lived in the South long enough to become particular about his tea, and thus only drank it one way: sweet and iced.

Taking another sip of his beer, he closed his eyes and got sucked back into the memories. It wasn’t hard to do, being the memories were so close and Bonnie Raitt was singing. Ah, that woman knew how to sing a ballad and play the blues. And the Mad Clatter knew how to let folks be. Discounting Balere, no one had bothered him, even though it was on the brink of closing time.

He was girding up his loins to go home, and then *she* walked in. Hannes didn’t have to look up to know that someone spectacular had walked into the bar: his whole body alerted him to that fact. She smelled beautiful, and her voice only amplified that. Despite his best intentions, he looked in the mirror, and their eyes met briefly...and the breath left his body. He’d never seen a woman like her. She wasn’t dripping in diamonds or decked out in designer labels, but she made jeans and leather look damn good. Who was he kidding? That woman was so beautiful she could

make a pile of shit look good. *She was so beautiful she could make him look good.*

Not wanting to wish for something else he could never have, he tuned her out and went back to listening to Bonnie sing about his life. *It's as if you know me, Bonnie*, he thought once again. *It's as if you've glimpsed my life and your social activist heart wrote about the indignity, the injustice, the sorry state of almost being.* The last lyrics faded into silence at the same time he finished the last drop of his beer. Blowing out a breath, he was all set to await the taxi that Balere had insisted on calling, but then the jukebox blared to life again, playing the one song that tugged at the threads of his humanity. "I Can't Make You Love Me" was the kind of song he stayed away from because it made him feel too human, too vulnerable, too exposed. And yet, he found himself singing along with Bonnie in German. Deep into the lyrics, he didn't notice that he was no longer alone until he felt a hand on his, accompanied by auditory enticement. "Do you want to dance?" she asked.

He didn't have to look at her to know she meant it. Not giving himself time to decline, he stood and held out his hand to her. She went right to him like he didn't tower over her...like he wasn't a monster...like she wasn't afraid. He was going to be polite and keep a respectable distance between them but she wasn't in

the mind to allow that. Wrapping her arms around his waist, she looked into his eyes. Reaching up, she smoothed his hair back from his forehead and sang the next line from the song. And he knew...knew that she knew the place he was at and knew that this was not a side of her she showed many people. Good thing he wasn't people, he thought as he dragged her closer and sang the next line in German.

She laid her head on his chest, and he held her to him as gently as he could...and she fit him like perfection. The scent of this woman filled his nostrils, the feel of this woman soothed his beast, the depth of this woman pushed the melancholy back. After the song was over, he tried to pull back, but she wasn't having it.

"I selected more than one song," she said as she snuggled deeper into his chest.

She had beautiful taste in music and impeccable footwork. Never had he been so glad for his tutelage in ballroom. They danced to some of everything: "The Dance" by Garth Brooks, "(Everything I Do) I Do It for You" by Bryan Adams, "When I Said I Do" by Clint Black and Lisa Hartman Black, "Love is" by Vanessa Williams and Brian McKnight, "Always" by Bon Jovi, "Wicked Games" by Chris Issak, "I don't Want to Miss a Thing" by Aerosmith, "If You Asked Me To" by Patti LaBelle. He in his native German, she in her sultry,

come hither voice. When they finally parted, she pulled him down and introduced herself.

“Zuri Summers,” she purred.

“Hannes Sighelm,” he returned.

“Nice to meet you, Hannes,” she said.

“No, the pleasure’s all mine,” he countered.

Smiling, she pulled him down and kissed him.

When she pulled back, she responded. “Now it is.”

For the first time in his life he was speechless.

“Let me take you home,” she offered.

“If I do that, I won’t want to let you leave,” he confessed.

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“You’re...” *Too beautiful, too good for me, too beautiful.* “Too kind,” he finished.

“Actually, I’m not, but I’ll let you get away for now. Call me, Hannes,” she said as she opened his shirt and wrote her name (like he’d ever forget it) and her phone number on his chest in permanent marker.

He’d never forget her, and yet he knew he’d never call her. Zuri deserved a better man...a more handsome man...a man, full stop. On his best day he was more beast than man. Still, every night he dreamed of Zuri, he ached for Zuri, he prayed for Zuri.

CHAPTER FOUR:

NOT ONLY ISN'T IT OVER; IT HASN'T EVEN BEGUN

Third week in November 2005

Zuri was a patient woman...kind of, sort of, not really. She'd been patient and waited for Hannes to call her, but after two months: nothing. How dare he not call her? They'd had a connection so strong that she still felt him every night when she went to sleep. Whereas before she was sometimes afraid to go to sleep, now she couldn't wait because he was there in her dreams.

Some people might say she was crazy to feel so strongly about a man she knew so little about, but she *knew*...knew with everything in her that Hannes was *the* one. Closing her eyes, she recalled how safe, protected and cherished she'd felt in his arms. They'd fit so perfectly, so beautifully. While he might be willing to walk away from that, she wasn't.

She'd cajoled Balere (read: gave into her demands) into giving up the 411 on him—and being that Mad and Cadillac had driven him home, she had a lot of 411. Zuri had discovered he was an engineer...and not just any engineer, but the cream of

the crop, which meant his company would be at the invitational fall Meet and Greet of Atlanta's movers and shakers. Hosted by Nigel and Corinna Drystan, the event was a veritable Who's Who of Atlanta. The rich and filthy rich were in attendance and mingled with the awesome, which included her and pretty much everyone in her whole posse (who came, left business cards and went with the quickness), the Winston cousins who owned Everything and the Kitchen Sink, and by extension the swankers who owned Vorn Investments. Restaurateurs Dréa of Dréa's Cookhouse, Ranek Thracius of Obsession, steakhouse owner Logan MacDarien, the CEO of Jeanie's Lounge, You Can Kiss Our Whole Sass Sports Promoters, I Sigh Engineering, Sons Engineering, Coach Blitz Hampton, Valere-Hampton Law Firm, Antithesis and Thesis St. Augustine, owners of a whole heap of stuff including high-end car shop Warp Need, the CEO of Kallikrates Construction, the CEO of Hyde & Seeke Landscaping and her software-creating husband Trent, the CEOs of Archean Farms and Creed Farms, the owners of Magnussen-Robeson Investments, the Ninja Nuns, Zoysia Art, and spa owner Serengeti Uhuru, who owned Me, Myself and Sigh.

Archives of the minutes revealed that normally his brothers represented their firm, but they weren't

going to be able to make it until about an hour after it started, because they were going to be busy and she was going to see to it. That meant Hannes would be there—at least for the first hour. Being that Hannes was going to be there, of course, she was going to be there too...looking all kinds of hot.

There weren't many things on Hannes "hell no" list, but what was there, he meant. Heading that list was "Interaction." It didn't matter if it was with humans or shifters, he didn't handle communication with anything that spoke if it didn't involve money being exchanged. And even then, he preferred that someone else handle that.

Hannes didn't have time for the fidgeting others did around him; didn't have the patience for beings who couldn't look him in the eye, yet demanded his expertise; didn't have the strength to put up with the whisperers who not only didn't know but didn't care. All he wanted to do was go about his work and then go home. That's all. He didn't want to have to make excuses for people, didn't want to forgive people for the damage they inflicted upon him. More importantly, he didn't want to forgive himself for...anything.

He was tired of being called “monster” by strangers. That was an intimate name he reserved for himself. Of course he was rarely called names to his face, but rather behind his back in hushed whispers or in memos dispersed amongst higher-ups, reminding them to remind their employees to not discuss his visage. They should’ve saved their ink. If they wanted to pen a memo, they should’ve used that space to remind employees to look him in the eye. Despite the caveats lurking behind his golden stare, his eyes were his best feature. The last female he’d paid to tolerate him had told him so. He grimaced, recalling her words: “You have beautiful eyes. You should smile more so you’ll be less frightening,” she’d said moments before she’d asked him to turn out the lights. Though he didn’t smile much, he’d smiled at that, as he was definitely more frightening when he smiled.

Despite his visage and demeanor, he was only dangerous when provoked, and he was rarely provoked because most people had the good sense to walk softly around him, which was a good thing. Of course, most people didn’t walk around him at all, and he preferred it that way.

Hannes had many talents outside of engineering and moving heavy shit. He cooked, danced, and built things out of wood...but only for his mother. Only she

loved him so completely. Of course, she was biased, but he loved her more for her bias.

The family members he didn't love right now were his brothers, whose absence made his presence necessary. They didn't just leave him with people, but with a lot of people. When well-to-do individuals assembled, something happened: they became gauche. They indulged in word games. Ironically, he found their innuendos, double-entendres and veiled insults more insulting than outright rudeness. That was why he normally limited his interactions to the rough, work-hardened men who got dirty for a living.

His brothers were supposed to handle anything involving dressing up and engaging in chitchat while he handled everything else. He should not be here. He was not a people person; he was not a shifter person; he was not an anything person. He was not likeable, he was not approachable, he was not comfortable being here. But I Sigh Engineering needed him, and he would do what he always did and shifter up and ignore the whispers. He was used to it; he could take it. He'd spent all of his adult life taking it, but every shifter has his limit, and he was close to reaching it when his brothers finally made their appearance.

The new Zuri Summers was a straight-out diva extraordinaire. A self-appointed hottie with the trail of panting men, ridiculous lingerie collection, and the mechanical bull in her house to prove it, she divided the year into clothing collections and clothes into a single category: *damn, I make this look good*. Her clothes came in three sizes—fitted to a “t,” short as hell, and you’re-defying-the-laws-of-physics-by-not-falling-out-of-that. They also came in three levels of tight: need-a-circus-strongman-to-get-you-into-them tight; one-half-size-away-from-a-yeast-infection tight, and Garth-Brooks-jeans tight.

She wasn’t all beauty or book smarts. Fluent in Italian thanks to her love of fine clothes (she got that from her papa Everglades), she was also fluent in Creek thanks to her papa’s Tequesta and Seminole roots, and German thanks to Reign’s fascination with knowing every damn thing. Thanks to the tutelage of her papa Everglades, her grandmomma Rika and her momma, she could survive in any environment. She knew how to talk without saying anything, how to walk without making a sound or leaving a track, how to start a fire with a rock in the rain, and how to finish a fight. She also knew how to eavesdrop with the best of them (and when that didn’t work, she knew how to work sophisticated equipment that took all the work

out of it). This was how she knew the ugly things said about Hannes, and more importantly, who'd said them. And she committed it all to memory. Having spent an incredible evening with him, she knew how hurt he was. She was hurt with him.

Hannes walked as if he didn't have a care in the world—neither fast like he was in a hurry to outrun the cruel words, nor slow like a man whose spirit was crushed. He walked with the self-assurance of a man accustomed to being given a wide berth, but that wasn't what caused Zuri to pause. It was the “you can't break me” set of his shoulders and the way he endured the cruel remarks with uncontested acceptance. Either he was numb to the cruelty or he was a master at concealing his hurt. Zuri, who herself was a master at concealing hurt, knew it was the latter. And she knew that shit wasn't about to stand.

Her heart hurt for him more with every taunt, every scathing look, and every bit of ostracism he received. So Hannes had some scars; she knew that under the scars was a good man who had a sense of adventure just waiting to break free from its self-imposed exile. She appreciated intelligence in a man and decency in human beings. And she really appreciated Hannes Sighelm.

Hearing catty women comment upon his scarring pissed her off, but hearing the room full of

pretty boys chime in with their two cents worth kicked her anger up another notch. Zuri absolutely loathed bitchy women, but she had a zero-tolerance policy regarding bitchy men. Having a minor in cussing, she always had a “kiss my ass” cocked and at the ready and a spare “look motherfucker” in her designer handbag, which she was more than happy to use when the occasion warranted. And in her opinion, the occasion not only warranted the use of her unparalleled cussing skills, it demanded it. Her sense of indignation on full alert, she wanted to take the time to cuss them up one side of the universe and down the other, but the woman in her demanded she go after Hannes. He might wear an “I don’t give a damn” attitude as well as he wore that hand-tailored suit, but under that suit was still a human being with a heart that was capable of being broken. And besides being certifiably divalicious, she was the official cheerer-upper of the Posse.

Spritzing on a tiny bit of perfume, Zuri smoothed down the skirt of her fitted business suit, grabbed her swing-style coat and briefcase, squared her shoulders and went after her man. She wasn’t aware of the picture she made as she strutted down the marbled hall. Every man in the place stopped and looked at her. Her face was dominated by golden eyes and full lips. Her legs were so killer that she didn’t

need the three-inch Manolo Blahnik's to make them look better, but the stilettos didn't hurt none.

So caught up in her goal, she momentarily lost track of Hannes, which was ridiculous being that Hannes Sighelm was a whole lot of man to lose. He was NBA-center tall, NFL-offensive-tackle stature, and bodybuilder ripped. The man was simply built like a brick shithouse, and not even expert tailoring could hide that fact. His neck strained with muscle, as did the muscles in that square jaw, which was currently clenched tight. Yeah, he was fine. Oh yeah, and he was hers...every delicious inch of him. Running, she caught up with him just as he reached the bank of elevators.

"Hannes?" she called and tapped her foot, waiting for him to turn around and acknowledge her.

It took everything Hannes had to walk sedately to the elevator. The beast in him wanted to tear that place to pieces, but the miniscule piece of his heart that still felt wanted to just get away—far from the taunts, the shudders, and the rude stares. He especially wanted to get away from the sympathetic glances people gave him after getting a glimpse at his brothers. Though he wanted to run to the elevator, he

forced himself to walk. Fifty more steps and he'd be there. Forty steps. Thirty steps. His countdown was interrupted by the voice that sounded like sex personified...by the voice that'd haunted his dreams every night. Though that voice caused his heart to sing, he stiffened knowing just how beautiful the woman attached to the voice was.

Though the man in him wanted nothing more than to look upon the woman that voice belonged to, the bastard in him was too close...the hurt was too close...the humiliation was too close. Hannes knew that she'd heard the taunts, seen the cuts. He didn't want her to see him like this.

"Hannes?" she called again.

Though he wanted to flee, he turned because despite all of the bad things he was, he wasn't a coward.

Already having glimpsed her beauty, his heart still damn near beat out of his chest, and his temperature rose two degrees. Taking a deep breath, he momentarily closed his eyes, willing his body to return to its normal homeostasis. As delicious as his memories were, they didn't do justice to Zuri. Seeing Zuri in a darkened bar after numerous mugs of ale didn't compare to Zuri in broad daylight at high noon. He knew he was staring, but he couldn't help it, and

even if he could help it he didn't want to. How could one gaze upon a masterpiece and not stare?

Zuri took his staring in stride, most likely accustomed to that sort of reaction. He didn't have to look around to know that everything with a cock was staring...and wanting. His mind frantically ordered him to pull up, but his cock told his mind to shut the fuck up and do something about his steadily rising temperature and his increasing heartbeat. Hannes knew that he shouldn't stare not only because it was rude, but because of his visage. He was a scarred mess. His chest and back were both scar ridden, but they were covered with clothes. The only thing that could cover his face was darkness, and there wasn't any of that around.

For the millionth time he wondered what his life would be like if he weren't scarred up. He didn't have long to wonder, because Zuri was growing impatient. Hannes didn't have to be a mind reader to realize that the tapping of her foot meant business.

"Hello, Zuri," he said.

"'Hello, Zuri?' That's all the greeting I get after the night we spent together?" she exclaimed as she took his hand.

“I need to hear some apologies, some ‘I was wrong for not calling you like I was told’; some ‘I’ll never leave you hanging again,’” she said as she got all up in his personal space. Even with her three-inch heels and five-foot-ten-and-a-half-inch height, she was still dwarfed by his height. Instead of intimidating her, it simply turned her on...just like Hannes’ silence.

Zuri wasn’t deterred by his silence. She simply took it as a challenge. Knowing that they had an audience, she decided to use it to her full advantage.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” she asked.

“Ah—you’re rather hard to forget,” he said.

“Explain the reason you didn’t call, then, especially since I wrote my digits on your chest,” she said as she slid her hand in between his blazer and his crisp dress shirt and stroked the area where his nipples were.

Hannes didn’t say anything, but his eyes said plenty: they went supernova. *That’s right, Hannes. You know you want me, and so does your body. It’s just a matter of time before you admit it.*

“Is there another woman?” she asked. Before he could respond, she continued. “It doesn’t matter if there is, because I’ll get rid of them chicks. You’re my man, and that’s the way it’s staying.”

“Um—” he began.

“You done here?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said after clearing his throat.

“Good,” she said as she grabbed his tie and dragged him down. “Because we have a romance to begin, and it’s about two months overdue,” she said moments before she kissed him. She didn’t give him a quick peck on the lips; instead, she gave him everything. Plastering her body to his much harder one, she wrapped herself around him like a silk ribbon.

She was so caught up in the kiss, not even the dingling that signaled the arrival of the elevator was enough to make her back off. Hannes smelled too good, tasted too good, felt too good for something so trivial to make her consider pulling back. Rather, it was only Hannes’ smooth voice that made her pull back.

“Zuri,” Hannes whispered against her lips.

“Hannes,” she responded as she continued to take leisurely sips of her Austrian.

“Our elevator is here,” he said.

Sighing, she held on tight to his thick forearms and dragged in a deep breath. “Good,” she said as she nudged him into the waiting car without looking. “The sooner we get out of here, the sooner I can get into you,” she said as she pushed Hannes against the wall and dragged him back down for a kiss.

“Did you two consider getting a room?” a voice asked.

Annoyed with the intrusion, Zuri pulled back and looked into the face of a man who looked exactly like Hannes...without the scars.

“Obviously you’re related to Hannes.”

“I like to say that Hannes is related to me,” he said before introducing himself. “I’m Mathis, and you are?”

“Zuri, Hannes’ woman,” she said, not liking this motherfucker at all and not sure why.

“Well, Zuri—beautiful name for a beautiful woman, by the way—there’s no one else about. You don’t have to pretend,” he said.

Everything in Zuri went still...and a split second later, her anger exploded, and before she knew what’d happened she’d jabbed Mathis in the throat. Then when he bent over in pain, she bitch slapped him so hard he got a face full of elevator door. She would’ve finished him off, but she suddenly found herself behind Hannes. While Hannes’ strength might’ve prevented her from getting to Mathis, it didn’t stop her words. “You better be glad you’re related to Hannes, or you’d be on the way to the ER to get your teeth picked out of your esophagus,” she said.

Of course, Hannes’ asshole doppelganger wasn’t even fazed by her violence or her words. Removing a

handkerchief from his pristine suit, he simply dusted imaginary lint from his suit and spoke. “Ah, feisty as well as beautiful.”

“And I’m popular, meaning I can make one call and have ten truckloads of peeps here ready to roll on you, so recognize,” she said. She would’ve said more, but a laughing Hannes gathered her up.

“I’ll see you later, brother,” he said as he removed her from the elevator.

“I can’t believe you didn’t let me fuck him up,” Zuri pouted.

“It’d be kind of hard to explain to our mother,” he said.

Not expecting those words or the laughter in his voice, Zuri looked up at him.

“Being that Mathis seems like a whole lot of asshole, I don’t imagine it’d be difficult at all to explain to your mother. It’s not like she just met him.”

“This is true, but there’s no need for violence.”

“He insulted you!” she said.

“It’s the way between brothers,” he shrugged.

“Well, he’d better keep his “ways” to himself, or there’s going to be a misunderstanding and he’s going to go missing. Now let’s not waste any additional time on the asshole; I want to talk about us.”

“Zuri,” he began.

“You didn’t call,” she said.

Hannes looked like he was about to argue, but finally he settled on a much smoother path of conversation: agreeing with her.

“I apologize, *Liebling*.”

Zuri was as surprised by Hannes’ use of an endearment as she was by his apology. Hannes didn’t seem like the type of man to surrender to shit—even a small point.

Quickly getting over her surprise, she pressed on. “You should be sorry. Take me to lunch to make it up to me.”

“When?”

“Now. If I let you go off on your own, it might be another two months before I see you again.”

“Very well then,” he said as he helped her into her coat, before gently taking her elbow and walking out into the November afternoon.

INTERLUDE:

INTERRUPTION OF A GROOVE THING

Mathis Sighelm knew a few things with certainty, and he didn't need his MPhil from Cambridge University to come by that knowledge. First, he knew he was a good-looking male, and the medley of sighs, moans and "ooh damns" with which females serenaded him attested to that. Looks weren't hard to come by when he was composed of Sighelm and Deonté genes. Second, due to his mother being a demanding parent, he knew there were few challenges he couldn't excel at, and that included any class in university and every fight he'd engaged in. Third, even with all that his maternal grandparents had done for him and his family, his brother Hannes was one of the best males he knew.

It was Hannes he had to thank for everything he was and had become after the age of eighteen. He'd learned the fine art of dignity by watching Hannes handle himself in the face of the daily humiliations heaped upon him from uncaring individuals. He'd learned how to walk with pride by watching Hannes do all he could to uplift the Sighelm legacy, while refraining from anything that would bring shame to the Sighelm name. He'd learned how to stand his

ground and when to stand his ground that day that Hannes faced down a line of five mercenaries without blinking. Discovering how hard Hannes had fought to keep him and his brothers alive after the aftermath of that battle, he'd learned how to fight for life rather than simply settle for existence. Coming face-to-face with what it'd cost Hannes, he'd learned what it was to love unselfishly, unconditionally, and without reserve.

To say that he loved his brother wasn't simply an understatement; it was a gross understatement that bordered on an outright lie. Hannes meant everything to him. Everything and then some.

Hannes had a core of steel, and though sometimes he bent, there was never a time when he broke. Despite the river of pain that he felt course through Hannes, it was the well of perseverance that had kept him going for so long. It was that gritty determination that had driven Hannes to work so hard and make I Sigh Engineering the success it was today. It was Hannes' total commitment to their family that made him and his brothers work so hard in university, at the business, at everything. How could they not work hard when Hannes had given everything for them. Every. Thing. And despite all Hannes had given, he took nothing for himself...not even comfort.

Though he and all his brothers were quints and could often feel what the others were feeling, being

that only thirty second separated their time of birth, he'd always felt a deeper connection to Hannes. He and Hannes shared much, including similar intellectual pursuits, fighting styles, voice and looks. Before his scarring, he and Hannes sounded and looked so similar, it was only scent that allowed their family to tell them apart.

Hannes meant everything to him. He'd challenge anyone who hurt him, and that included females. His brothers and he had run off many a female who thought they were going to use Hannes and thus damage him further. That shit wasn't happening on their watch...it wasn't happening while he drew breath.

It'd always been relatively easy to run off females because those who could withstand Hannes' silence, wintry personality and direct glare were few and far between. Even females who were in the sex-for-hire business had to be paid extra to be with him. Even those who could tolerate his visage found it difficult to tolerate his coldness.

And then there was the female named Zuri. Mathis knew of her, had known of her since the evening two older gentleman had driven up the dusty dirt path with a tipsy Hannes in tow. While he'd thanked them and put Hannes to bed, he'd spent the rest of the night listening to Hannes whisper this

female's name: *Liebling*. "She's the most beautiful anything I've ever seen, Mathis."

Hannes didn't simply say it; he meant it. And it broke him, for Hannes had never whispered anything with so much want, with so much need, with such utter hopelessness.

If he'd called her by her given name instead of an endearment, he would've found her long ago and warned her off. But she was always *Liebling* to Hannes. His *Liebling*. His greatest wish. His biggest heartbreak.

When the elevator opened and he saw the female kissing Hannes, he didn't have to ask if that was her. All he had to do was open his senses and feel his brother's happiness to know. Looking upon her, he could understand why Hannes wanted her. But as beautiful as she was, as well-heeled as she appeared to be, as well-educated as she seemed, none of that was enough if she didn't love his brother. And not that greeting card, acknowledge-you-on-Valentine's-Day-and-anniversaries type of love, but that "I Shall Not Be Moved" kind of love. If this female didn't love Hannes like that, she had to go. If she tried toying with his brother, he'd make life most unpleasant for her. No ifs, ands or buts about it. He'd never stand by and watch anyone hurt his brother with impunity. Hannes

disguised it well, but Hannes had a tender heart. And despite his great strength, he had a breaking point.

Not one to wait around to see how things panned out, he made the first move. Introducing himself, he waited for her name. Zuri. A beautiful name for a beautiful female, but it wasn't her name that surprised him. It was her apparent dislike of him. Ah well, since she already disliked him, in for a penny, in for a pound. Throwing out a barb, he waited with baited breath to see how she'd react. A moment later, when his throat was stinging from her jab and the side of his face was on fire from her slap, and his ears were ringing from her cuss out, he had to hide his smile in his handkerchief. Ah, she was feisty. She just might do, he thought. She just might do.

CHAPTER FIVE:

LET'S GET READY TO RUMBLE

All morning, thoughts of the moment he could leave the Meet and Eat dominated Hannes' thoughts. Right now the only thought he had was: Zuri. His *Liebling* was here in the flesh and giving him five kinds of hell and his brother nine kinds of it...and then some. Though he didn't like having any other male around her, he couldn't help but smile at her immediate dislike of his brother. No one outside of the kids they'd gone to school with had ever dared dislike Mathis. Too bad no one alerted his *Liebling* to that fact. Not only did she not like him, but she let him know it. And from the residual anger that wafted off her, he guessed she was still mad.

In an attempt to move her from her anger, he asked about the lunch she'd insisted on taking him to.

"It's a nice day out."

"Yep, it is, especially since you're here with me. Do you want to walk over to the restaurant?"

Throwing a look at her heels, Hannes raised an eyebrow and asked, "What about your shoes?"

"Aren't they the freaking business? I bought my outfit to go with these shoes," she said as she stopped and held out her foot.

Obviously she liked shoes. Voicing that, he got an earful.

“To say that I ‘like’ shoes would be to say that Harriet Tubman ‘liked’ freedom; Count Basie ‘liked’ jazz; Italians ‘like’ pasta; Germans ‘like’ David Hasselhoff; and my sister ‘likes’ being a weirdo. I don’t simply ‘like’ shoes. I loooooooooooooove shoes. Unlike many individuals, I take my shoes damn seriously, and as such have divided shoes into three categories: shoes I have, shoes I don’t yet have, and shoes that I wouldn’t put on my feet if my life depended on it.”

Hannes shook his head at her enthusiasm about her shoes. “All I meant was, are you sure you should be making lengthy treks in such delicate footwear?”

“No, but I’m willing to walk if it makes you more comfortable.”

“Why would I be more comfortable walking than driving?” he asked.

“Because considering what just happened in the elevator, it stands to reason that if I get you in another enclosed space, I’m going to be all over you.”

Not knowing exactly how to respond to that, he cleared his throat. “Ah, okay.”

“What does that mean? Does it mean ‘ah, okay, you’re right and I wouldn’t mind you jumping my bones’? Does it mean ‘ah, okay, you’ll consent to get in

a vehicle with me'? Or does it mean 'ah, okay, I'm scared'?"

Did this female just imply he might be scared of her? his shifter asked.

Yes, she did, his body answered.

Oh, hell no. Show her why you're Alpha.

Stopping in his tracks, he bent towards her. "It means, Zuri, that I will consent to get in a vehicle with you. And though I don't have much practice at it, I'm attempting to be a gentleman. You might be fearless, but I'm betting you've never had this much male."

"I don't think any woman has had as much male as you are, and that's their loss. But let us get something clear right now: I had you the moment our eyes met in the mirror of the Mad Clatter," she sassed.

"Yes, you did," he said quietly and truthfully.

She must've liked his response, because her smile got bigger and she gripped his hand tighter and dragged him along...and he let her.

"I've been thinking your name every night while in bed. The name Hannes suits you, but we need to get you a good stripper name. We could tout you as 'the sin from Berlin.'"

Not knowing who "we" was, he gently corrected her about his nationality. "I'm Austrian, not German."

She winked at him before commenting. "German and Austrian amount to the same thing: loud

opera and an unhealthy fascination with David Hasselhoff.”

Now that she had Hannes firmly in her grip, she started to tease him. She couldn't help it; she liked to see him smile, and something told her he didn't do much of it. Though she wanted nothing more than to take him home and feed him some Zuri, she sensed that he needed laughter much more than she needed to feel him all over her. Hearing his rich laughter, she knew she was right. Her macking him would have to wait, but while they waited, they were going to have some good food and some even better company.

Stopping in front of her ride, she looked at him and knew there was no way all of him was going to fit in her Lamborghini Murcielago.

“I'm not going to fit in that,” he confirmed.

“But my car goes so well with my outfit...with both of our outfits.”

“We could take my truck, or I could carry you to the nearest restaurant.”

The image of Mr. *Wear-the-ish-out-of-every-damn-thing-he-put-on* carrying her caused tingles to race up her spine. The only place she wanted Hannes to carry her was to bed, right before he fucked her into

the next day. Saying a few silent *hmm, hmm, hmms*, she opened her PDA and fired off a quick text informing her Posse that she would be arriving and that Mr. Sighelm would be accompanying her...and she needed food to distract her from throwing him down and having her way with him.

“You won’t be required to carry me this time. And since this is our first official date, I’ll allow you to drive me, but I am picking the place we eat,” she said.

“Fair enough,” he said as he weaved through the parking lot and stopped at a big-ass truck with a large tool box attached to the truck bed and at least a thirty-inch lift kit.

Raising her brow, she just looked at him. There was no way she could get into that without his help. “You do plan on helping me in?”

“Of course,” he said as he opened the door and effortlessly lifted her before settling her in the passenger seat.

“I hope you drive well,” she said as he slowly navigated the parking lot.

“Being that I learned my driving techniques from *Knight Rider*, of course I drive well,” he said.

“See, there goes that unhealthy fascination with David Hasselhoff. And if you really want to pick up some stellar driving techniques, you’ll get some tape of the Duke Boys.”

“The Duke Boys wished they drove like the Hoff,” he said.

“Please. That car did all the driving. All Hoff did was look good behind the wheel. The Duke Boys had panache, daring, and...”

“A confederate flag on their car.”

“Okay, fine, you got me there, but they still drove better than Hoff.”

“I win,” he said a moment before asking a question. “Might I ask where we’re going?”

“Yep, and just for playing along, I’ll even answer you,” she joked. “We’re going to Evil Twins.”

“Isn’t that a sports bar?”

“It’s not just *a* sports bar, it’s *the* sports bar, but more importantly, I can always get a table and expedient service. I know the owners.” She winked.

“I imagine they’re only too pleased to cater to your whims.”

“Of course they are. Like them, I’m a Carolina alum, and I have a healthy amount of dislike for Duke.”

“And that’s important?”

“Are you kidding me? After loving Jesus, it’s next in line. And while we’re on the subject, since you’re my man, I’m telling you right now, you have to be a Carolina fan.”

“But what if, hypothetically, I graduated from the dreaded Duke?”

“I hypothetically wouldn’t give a damn. After all, I also graduated from the dreaded Duke. So find another excuse—not that any you come up with are going to work. You’re my man, and that’s the way it’s staying.”

“Did you really graduate from Duke?”

“Yep. Did you?”

“No, I graduated from Technische Universität Wien—Vienna University of Technology with a degree in civil engineering before completing my Ph.D. from M.I.T.”

“Impressive. How many electives did you take that involved opera?”

“None—being I’m Austrian, I don’t need to be educated about good music.” He smiled. “Although I did take many, many years of ballroom dance.”

“Good, then you can take me dancing on our next date.”

“You can dance?” he asked.

“In and out of bed,” she said right before winking at him. “But don’t worry, I won’t show you up too bad.”

Though Hannes had heard of Evil Twins, as his brothers often frequented the sports bar, he'd never been. While he liked good food as much as most men, he stuck to takeout. As soon as he parked, he suspected that Evil Twins was all that he had heard and more. As soon as they walked in, they were greeted by a flash of neon and ushered to a private table.

Before he had time to peruse the menu, Zuri interrupted him. "So how do you want your steak cooked, what condiments do you want with your baked potato, and do you want regular sweet iced tea or diabetic coma-inducing sweet iced tea to wash it down?"

Hannes was surprised. He'd never had anyone be so assuming with his palate, nor had he ever been in the presence of a woman who read him so well.

"What makes you think I want steak with a potato?"

"The same thing that makes me think you'd also like some pussy for dessert. Now hurry up and pick, or I'll pick for you."

Hannes went still at her words. She had no idea how right she was. He wanted her with an intensity that scared him. The image of him burying himself balls deep in her enticing mouth or sweet sex made his cock go into an immediate and full hard-on. It was a

fantasy that he'd gone to sleep to for the past two months. He didn't even have to close his eyes to conjure the image of Zuri's soft skin, tempting breasts, flared hips, and perfect ass. Nor did he have to be in her presence to recall her scent.

Hannes didn't have to look at Zuri to know that she was wearing an "I told you so" look, but in his fantasies all she was wearing was a look of rapture. He'd wanted Zuri every day for the last two months, but right now his want had kicked into a whole different gear. Taking a calming breath, he finally noticed the waitress flouncing off. Had Zuri ordered for him whilst he was wrapped up in his fantasy?

"Zuri?"

"Hannes?"

"Did you just order for me?"

"I did, two steaks medium rare, two baked potatoes, and regular sweet tea. I told the waitress to bring all the condiments for the potato. You were taking too long."

"I'm a man, *Liebling*."

"Hannes, anyone with good sense cannot help but notice the fact that you're a man."

"If anyone does the ordering, it is me," he continued.

"And the hunting and gathering, but I didn't see you take down a mastodon or anything for lunch, so

yeah, sit back and enjoy the best steak you'll ever have."

"I don't take kindly to being bullied."

"And nor should you, but that wasn't bullying; that was hurrying you along. When I do decide to bully you, Hannes, you'll know it; you'll like it; and, you'll beg me for more."

"So you won't have a problem with me rushing you?"

"Oh Hannes, I can see you rushing me now. 'Hurry up and take it off for me, baby. Hurry up and get on your back. Hurry up and spread your thighs. Hurry up and take my big, hard cock.' Does that sound about right?"

Groaning, Hannes crowded her and whispered in her ear. "That's not how it would go. Were we to be intimately acquainted, *Liebling*, I wouldn't have the patience to utter such useless words. I would simply rip the clothes from your delectable body in my haste to pleasure you."

"Oh. Damn."

Hannes hadn't meant to take their teasing this far, but Zuri had taunted his shifter. No woman had ever pushed him so far, so fast. Despite her being able to more than hold her own with him, he owed her an apology for being an ass, especially when she'd been nothing but kind to him.

“Zuri, I apologize.”

“No need for that, Hannes. I just like teasing you. If I’ve overstepped any boundaries, *I* apologize, and if you’d like I’ll run to the kitchen and change your order.”

“That’s not necessary, *Liebling*. You were spot on.”

“I usually am, so make the phrase ‘I told you so’ part of your vocabulary, because since you’re my man you’ll be hearing it a lot.”

“I see you also like to have the last word. Must be a woman thing.”

“It has nothing at all to do with being a woman; it has everything to do with being right. So there,” she sniffed.

They continued with their banter until the waitress brought their food. After saying grace, Zuri pointed her fork at him and instructed him to prepare to embark on an unforgettable culinary experience.

Tasting his steak, Hannes closed his eyes and involuntarily groaned when the flavor exploded on his tongue.

“You just had a mouth orgasm, didn’t you?” Zuri teased.

“How did you know?”

“Why do you think that I keep eating here?”

He continued eating and was pleasantly surprised that Zuri had a healthy appetite. Though she didn't eat anywhere near what he did, it was clear that she enjoyed her food. And being familiar with how smoking her body was, it was clear that everything she ate went to all the places that made her a woman. He could watch her eat throughout the entire meal, but then his cock would stay hard. Tearing his eyes away from her succulent mouth, he searched around for a subject foremost on his mind that didn't include fucking her until she screamed out his name.

He was saved from making polite conversation by the arrival of the waitress, who informed Zuri that the owners wanted a word with her at her leisure. Hannes' stomach dropped. Regardless of how nicely it was phrased, he knew a summons when he heard it. Her friends probably wanted to ask her what she was doing with a monster.

Having received Zuri's text about bringing a date to Evil Twins, Aloha met them at the door. Zuri was her usual “about-to-strut-down-the-catwalk” self, but

the man with her was another story. He reminded her of a modern-day henchman, being all hard planes and angles and wearing a look of distrust. Despite harboring some concerns about the man walking with her sister, she couldn't help but smile when she noticed the way he shielded Zuri with his own body and sent out warnings to the other males in the vicinity. The man might be rocking a thousand dollar suit, but under the expensive threads was walking danger. She knew what walking danger looked like because she was married to a man just like him.

Usually she worked during the lunch crunch, but Zuri didn't usually walk into Evil Twins with a man, so she left the bar in the capable hands of her staff and trained a watchful eye on the man in Zuri's company. Her diligence wasn't due to his scarring, but due to the fact that he was with her sister. Zuri might be hotter than the entire catalog of Playmates, but underneath the diva was a woman with a soft heart that was still mending. One wrong move and dude would be wearing a steak knife in his chest. It would be a shame to waste so much man, especially one who had so much potential, but she'd do it...without hesitation.

Zuri knew that sooner or later either Atlanta or Aloha would demand to see her so she could ask what the fuck was going on. She wasn't surprised. All of the Posse members were protective of her. Glancing at Hannes, she guessed what was going on in his head. He was a man, therefore capable of jumping to stupid-ass conclusions.

"Hannes, when I get back, your ass better be here, or else...and believe me, you don't want to find out what comes behind 'or.' You got that?"

Getting up, she informed the waitress, "Make sure he doesn't go anywhere. And keep your hands off him. He belongs to me."

Walking into Atlanta and Aloha's office, she sat on the edge of her desk and asked the proverbial question. "What?"

"You have a phone call," Aloha said before handing her the phone and flouncing off.

Aloha didn't hesitate as she approached Zuri's date. Spotting the waitress hovering nearby, she asked, "Standing guard?"

"Yes, boss. I was even warned to keep my hands to myself."

"Well, I'll take over the watch."

Turning to the man, she got straight to the point. "I wasn't warned to keep my hands to myself. If you hurt Zuri..." she began.

"You'll kill me?" he finished.

"Oh no, I won't kill you, but..."

"But I'll fuck you up," Atlanta finished as she rocked up. "By the way, who are you, other than a dead man if you hurt our sister?"

"Hannes Sighelm. And you two are?"

"I'm Atlanta, the less evil of the twins, and this is my eviler evil twin, Aloha. Now let's get back to Zuri. Hurt her and we'll declare war upon your person. If you got a problem with that, you better get over it quick, fast and in a hurry, because Reign's the one who'll kill you."

"Reign?"

"Zuri's evil twin," Atlanta explained.

"Reign's what Southerners call right particular," Aloha stopped giving him the stink eye long enough to add her piece.

"She's particular about comic books. She's downright homicidal when it comes to Zuri," Atlanta corrected.

"Who's Jack?" Hannes growled.

Smiling, Atlanta asked, "Are you a Carolina fan or a Duke fan?"

“Carolina. Who’s Jack? Who’s he to Zuri? And where can I find him?”

“Jack’s her momma.” Atlanta smiled.

“Her extremely protective, always-has-lime-and-a-shovel-at-her-fingertips momma.” Aloha smiled too.

“And you don’t have to worry about finding *her*, unless you hurt Zuri, and in that case you should go ahead and do one last thing on your ‘do before you die’ list, because Jack will find you and you’ll die a horrible, horrible death, Mr. Sighelm.”

“Now that we got that out of the way, tell us how you liked your lunch,” Aloha inquired. “Your choices are, ‘it was the best thing you ever wrapped your mouth around’ or ‘it’s one of the things that bends the universe towards justice.’”

Zuri stomped down the stairs madder than hell. Spotting the evil twins interrogating Hannes, she swooped down upon them. Turning Hannes around, she plopped herself in his lap and gave Atlanta and Aloha the eye.

“I cannot believe you guys called my momma and Reign.”

“I cannot believe you thought we wouldn’t,” Atlanta returned.

"I've brought other men here without you feeling the need to drop the dime on me," she spat.

"That's because you were simply buttering them up to close a deal," Atlanta said.

"Yeah, and despite many of them being all kinds of hot, you never looked at any of them the way you're looking at Hannes," Aloha threw out.

"Yeah, what she said," Atlanta mmm-hmm'd.

"And there is the fact that Mr. Sighelm is a whole lot of man," Aloha said.

"A whole lot," Atlanta mimicked as she eyeballed him all slow like.

"Yes, Hannes is a whole lot of man, but he's my man, so put your eyeballs back in your head before I smack them out, Atlanta"

"And you need to wipe that smile off your face, Aloha, before I tell Imax that you're looking at other men. You know that crazy man of yours just let you out from under him."

"Ianikut doesn't own me. I can do whatever I want," Aloha pouted.

Both Atlanta and Zuri broke out in laughter at Aloha's absurd comment. "That's so cute that you think that. Which one of his brothers is playing sentinel to you today...or should I say which *ones*?"

"Don't make me hurt you, Zuri."

“Says the woman who just started walking right.”

“I’ll be sure to remember all of your smartass remarks when you’re bedridden from the loving Hannes puts on you.”

“You better amend that to say you’ll visit Hannes when he’s bedridden from the loving *I* put on him. And stop thinking about my man and a bed.”

“Hannes looks sturdy enough to freak you on any flat surface, Zuri,” Atlanta said.

“Ladies, I’m right here,” Hannes interjected.

“Settle down, Mr. Sighelm, while we plan your future,” Aloha piped in.

“So you’re going to be a jealous heifer, hmm?” Atlanta asked.

“Damn skippy, because Hannes goes with my outfit, so shut up.”

“Oh well, that’s that then. Hannes, I hope you don’t mind being stuck with this harpy, because once something goes with her outfit, she keeps it. Still, we’ll be keeping an eye on you, Hannes, so if you’re tempted to act crazy—don’t,” Atlanta warned him.

“A close eye, but don’t tell Zuri, being that she’s so possessive and all. She never liked to share.” Aloha winked at him.

“We’ve got to get back to work but we expect to see Mr. Hotness...I mean Mr. Sighelm at a proper Posse gathering,” Atlanta said before walking off.

“What if I was busy?” he asked as he settled her into the passenger seat.

“I’d say TFB—Too Fucking Bad. You’re the one who didn’t call me like I told you to, so we have two months of stuff to do to make up for lost time. First stop, the sports store so we can order you some Carolina gear.”

Zuri and Hannes ended up making a day of it. She dragged him all over the metro Atlanta area and was impressed when he didn’t complain. They did more talking than they did shopping. The big Austrian had an easygoing nature and was every inch a gentleman, which was evident by the way he used his body to shield hers and kept a death grip on her hand as they strolled all over the place. Zuri looked up at his scarred face, and all she saw was a man—a beautiful, beautiful man.

The ringing of her phone interrupted her replay of the day's events. She'd hardly gotten the phone off the cradle before she heard the unmistakable sounds of a summons. "Lunch, tomorrow. Silana's house," her momma said before hanging up.

Not even bothering to be upset, Zuri spent the next few minutes planning her outfit. As always, considering her ensemble left her with a smile on her face. Lying in bed, she stretched out and reveled in the comfort of her mattress. A moment later, she reveled in the pleasure she'd felt in the presence of Hannes. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and looked inside her heart and found him there...right where she'd put him. She loved him.

Hannes lay in bed that night and sighed. Today had been a fun and good day. Not only did he have the best steak he'd ever tasted, he'd met two other remarkable women. The Evil Twins had looked him full in the face without flinching and then threatened him without hesitating. He couldn't help but admire that and them.

Though he discovered a soft spot for them, he discovered his softness overall due to Zuri—hottie extraordinaire, as she put it. His heart seconded that

without hesitation. So did his shifter and his cock. Zuri was unlike any individual he'd ever met. She was strong, feisty, kind, blunt, and just a wee bit narcissistic...and she didn't even attempt to hide that. She was also fair. While her default mode was "bossing people around," she didn't have any problem with standing up for her convictions, even if that meant she stood alone. Nor did she hesitate to apologize when she was wrong.

Zuri was the kind of female a male kept. He suspected she was also the type of female who didn't allow just any male to keep her. If he wasn't careful, he could easily fall in love with her, as he was already three-quarters of the way there. Actually, that was a damn lie. He'd fallen absolutely, one hundred percent in love with her that night under the dim lights of the Mad Clatter two months ago.

CHAPTER SIX:

TRUTH & DARE

Having participated in two grillings, Zuri knew what lunch at Silana's house was going to be like.

"So, tell me about Mr. Sighelm," her momma asked as soon as she stepped her Jimmie Choo-clad foot across the threshold.

"Can you give a hottie time to catch her breath?" Zuri panted as she sank into one of the plush chairs.

"How about answering the question while you catch your breath," Silana responded in full attorney mode.

It was obvious that neither her momma nor Silana was in a playing-around mood...and she knew why. All of the Posse members were overly protective when it came to her, and she loved them dearly for that—most of the time. "I love him, Momma."

Her soft admission was met with a chorus of indrawn breaths and then silence.

All eyes in the room darted between her momma and Reign. Though neither of them uttered a single word, she knew they were contemplating her words...and conjuring up possible consequences.

"That fast?" Indy asked.

“Yes,” she answered as she held her momma’s eyes, pleading for her to understand.

“Did you tell him yet?” her momma asked.

“With every single breath,” she admitted without shame.

“And does he believe you?” Indy asked softly.

“He wants to, but he’s wary.”

“Of what?” Indy asked.

“Of kindness, of humanity, of decency, of so many things,” she said.

“But you won’t give up on him, will you?” her momma asked.

“No, Momma. Even if none of you understand...even if *he* doesn’t understand, I won’t let him go. I’ll stalk him to the ends of the earth if I have to.”

Zuri didn’t know what to expect, but it wasn’t the sight of her momma kneeling in front of her with her arms open wide.

Not even hesitating, she fell into her momma’s embrace. There was no safer place on earth than in the cradle of her momma’s strength. A second later when Reign joined them, the embrace only got better.

“When the women in our family give birth, it is customary for mother and child to spend several weeks in seclusion strengthening their bond. You and Reign were a full month old before I named you.

Being that you were fascinated with looking at yourself in the mirror even as a baby, the name ‘Zuri,’ which is Swahili for ‘beautiful,’ seemed fitting. Reign, on the other hand, was fascinated with Momma’s photos depicting Aztec, Incan, Tequesta, and African royalty, hence her name. Your middle names, however, didn’t come from observation. They came to me in a dream, yet I was reluctant to heed those names because they weren’t feminine, they were barely pronounceable by Southern tongues, they weren’t my idea and you were *my* babies. But when I went to write out your names for the birth certificates, it was as if someone else was guiding my hand, and before I could stop myself I’d named you Zuri Tsedaqah and your sister Reign Dikaisyne. Tsedaqah is Hebrew for righteousness, and Dikaisyne is Greek for justice.

“Though I was reluctant and I know you two were mad as hell about your names as soon as you got old enough to have to write them and threaten anyone who dared use them, I became thankful that I heeded the dream. You and Reign not only grew into your middle names, you became your middle names.

Reign is the embodiment of justice as the ancient Greek scholars imagined it: the whole duty of man not just to his own desires, but in his dealings with other men...and then she took it further to include all of humanity. You, Zuri, are the

embodiment of righteousness. A giving heart that pumps righteousness throughout your body beats behind your designer clothes, and not even your head-turning beauty can hide that from those who know you. You love from the soul, not with the eyes, and you give until sometimes there's almost nothing left of you, but that's who you are."

Zuri was humbled by her momma's words. "You see all that?"

"I see more than that," her momma answered.

Not even the memory of the burn of the rope slowly asphyxiating her came close to paining her like the sight of Zuri's tears. Not able to stand seeing her sister in pain (unless she was the one causing it), Reign decided to insert some ridiculousness into the situation.

"I also see you need a retouch," Reign said, knowing how particular Zuri was about her hair.

"I do not!" Zuri said.

"Do too," Reign singsonged as she put her fingers through Zuri's locks and pretended her hand was stuck in naps. "Can't. Get. Loose," she said James T. Kirk style.

“You’d better get loose, because you’re getting ready to get a beat down,” Zuri said as she pushed her and dove on her.

Well, she tried to dive on her, but besides having cat-like reflexes, Reign was also quick. In a flash, she was on her feet and across the room, hiding behind Silana.

“Save me, Silana. Save me before Zuri’s naps march across the room like Napoleon marched his army all over Europe.”

“Jack, it’s hard to believe that both of your children have law degrees.”

“I know, being they spend most of their time acting like they’re crazy. They must get that from my momma, because clearly, I’m the voice of reason.”

“Um, excuse me, Jack, but you have a shovel and a bag of lime in your trunk,” Victorious said.

“Yeah, because I need to be prepared.”

“I’m not touching that, but I tell you what is touching—the walls of my stomach. Isn’t one of you supposed to feed us?” Atlanta asked.

Lunch, as always, was delicious, being that Silana cooked it. Still not through messing with her (because there were still more hours in the day), Reign

kept kicking her under the table...until she pinned down her foot with the heel of her stiletto.

“Ouch, Momma, Zuri’s kicking me,” Reign tattled.

“Reign, stop messing with your sister,” their momma said.

Knowing Reign thought their momma was going to tell her off instead, Zuri smiled at her sister and mouthed a taunt: *ha-ha*.

Of course, Reign wasn’t about to take that lying down. “The Evil Twins said Hannes was quite a man, and I have to give them props for having a good eye.”

“And how would you know this?” Zuri asked with suspicion. Not only was Reign the resident conspiracy theorist, she had trust issues with pretty much all of humanity.

“Because I checked him out for myself.”

“Reign!” Zuri was about to work up some indignation, but deep down she knew Reign could do no less, would do no less. After all, she was her best friend and her sister.

“Zuri!” Reign hollered right back.

“You staked out his house, didn’t you?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“You don’t even feel bad about what you did, do you?”

“Not even a little bit.” Reign smiled.

“What if he’d caught you spying on him?”

“I would’ve had to bone up on my technique.” She smiled before asking, “While you were busy dragging him to every store in Atlanta, did you perchance check out what a great ass he has?”

“Reign Dikaisyne Ballinger Rangers-Decebel! You know damned well I checked out his ass...every chance that I got.”

“And it was good, wasn’t it?” Reign giggled.

“Damn straight.”

“I’m so happy for you, being that all that celibacy you’ve been saving up had me worried you might develop Popeye-like forearms from all of that masturbating you’ve been doing.”

“You are so dead and so behind the times. Ever heard of the Rabbit?” Zuri threatened.

“Of course I have—if I could, I’d own stock in that company. And if you’re so intent on killing me, then I guess I’ll give you a good reason,” Reign said as she tossed a stack of photos on the table of said man with said great ass.

Yep, she was dead.

Reign wasn’t a professional photographer, but you would’ve never known it from the photographs.

She had captured Hannes in his element. Damn, he could stop traffic, and it had nothing to do with his scarring, but everything to do with the man beneath the scars. He virtually oozed testosterone. To Zuri, there was nothing as sexy as a man being a man.

She'd never been turned on by men in ripped jeans, plaid button-up shirts and work boots, but then none of the men who wore the default construction-guy outfit had been Hannes. Even with dirt covering his clothes and sweat dripping down his face, all she could do was imagine him working up a sweat like that while fucking her. She wanted to be the reason he looked like he had put in a hard eight hours.

Zuri was shaken from her fantasies by Silana's comment.

"That man can wear the blue out of a pair of blue jeans."

"Where's the rest of them, Reign? You can't be stingy with the man candy," Aloha said.

"Um, engaged to be married," Zuri reminded her as she tried (unsuccessfully) to grab the stack of photos from Aloha. Of course being a wiry, little five foot something, Aloha got away. Before she could tap her stiletto, the Posse was collectively mmm-mmm-mmm'ing over her stuff.

Yep, deader than dead, she thought as she looked at a smiling and rather unrepentant Reign.

“Did you consider that he might be sensitive about having his picture taken?”

“Yeah, I did, but any choice that boils down to some other person and you, you’re always going to win. And besides, none of those photos is a bad photo and you know it, and if you want to narc on me to him, go ahead. He might be all pissy about it, but he’ll have to admit the photos rock.”

Zuri realized that Reign wasn’t going to fake anything remotely resembling remorse. While Reign might not back off of her stance, she *was* going to back off of her man. “Camera,” she demanded.

Sighing like a martyr, Reign handed over her camera. Being that it seemed she was the only one sans hot-ass photos of her hot-ass man, Zuri scrolled through the digital pics of him. Yep, Hannes looked all kinds of good, and Reign was going to be even deadier than deadier than dead. Anticipating more photos of Hannes looking all hot, she was perplexed when she got photo after photo of his truck.

“Da hell? I know you didn’t waste memory card space taking photos of his truck?”

“It’s a cool truck, Zuri. I can’t wait to drive it! It’s got everything—a lift kit, a wench, a toolbox big enough to hide bodies and stuff, which will come in handy considering how your momma is.”

“And just what makes you think you’ll be doing any driving of *my* man’s truck?”

“Because if he wants to stay in good with *my* sister, he’d better bow down to me,” she said.

“I’m not even surprised at how far over the line you are, being you have that power complex. Did you hack his medical records too?” Zuri asked.

“Don’t answer that, Reign,” Silana and Victorious both advised simultaneously.

“I’m not saying anything, except if you decide to sex him without a condom, nothing on you is going to break out in a rash and then fall off,” Reign said.

“Silana, Victorious, other attorneys in the room, isn’t this where one of you is supposed to say something about privacy violations?” Zuri huffed.

“No such thing as privacy for any man trying to get with one of the Posse,” Victorious said.

“Yeah, what she said,” Atlanta said. “Stop bogarding the pictures and let me see.”

“Yeah, getting coochie from any of the Posse equals all-up-in-your-grill from other Posse members,” Reign said.

“Did you do that to Imax?”

“Yep, and I have photos of him...and his jet...which he should let me drive.”

“Hey!” Aloha protested before asking. “Did you get the angle on the jet that has my name on it?”

It took everything she had not to smack Aloha with the photo in her hand. Her momma must've seen the look on her face, because she issued a warning in that "fed-up-momma" voice. "Do I need to tell everyone to go to separate corners?"

"No, Momma," she said.

"Just Zuri," Reign said.

"No ma'am," the Evil Twins and Victorious said. "But can you tell Zuri to share the rest of the pictures? She's being all stingy."

"Seeing that we're going to be seeing a lot of this young man, you won't need the photos. When are you inviting him over, Zuri?"

"Um..." she hedged, not sure she was ready to share Hannes.

"How about this weekend?" Reign suggested all helpfully. "I hacked into his PDA, and he doesn't have anything scheduled."

"That you know about," Zuri said, even though her gut told her Hannes didn't get out much.

"Hannes never does anything...ever. Every date on his schedule is filled up with work. I checked his odometer, and calculating the distance he drives to work, there are hardly any additional stops. He goes to work and he goes home. That's it. He never has any fun," she said on a sob. "People are so mean to

him, so dismissive of him. And he just takes it," Reign sobbed.

"You like him, Reign?" their momma asked.

"He's nice, Momma, but no one gives him a chance...he doesn't give himself a chance."

Zuri's heart broke right along with Reign's. Hannes' solitude broke her heart, but it was Reign's tears that caused tears to come to her eyes. Reign never cried...not even when she was swinging from that tree a decade ago. The fact that she was crying for Hannes made Zuri love her so much more. Running across the room, she hugged Reign tight.

"He's got us now, so he's going to have something to do *every* weekend," she said.

"Will *you* be the 'something' he does?" Reign said as she hugged her back.

"Maybe," she sassed.

"Don't make me club you both over the head and duct tape y'all together on some flat surface. I like Hannes, and I want you to keep him."

Knowing how much Reign despised appearing mushy, Zuri waited for some kind of smart alecky remark. She didn't have long to wait. No sooner had she thought it then Reign was knee-deep in being ridiculous.

"While you're keeping Hannes, I can drive his truck. Ye-ah!" she said.

“I’m starting to suspect you’re making encouraging romantic matches based on what kind of gear the liaison can give you access to,” Zuri said.

“What? I got a homie with a jet, a homie with a monster truck, a homie with a Cannon Cascade cycle, and a homie that plays the shit out of a banjo.”

“Guitar, Reign. Iain plays the guitar,” Victorious corrected for what seemed like the millionth time.

“Whatever, Victorious. Either way, it’s a stringed instrument, meaning he can pick out the theme song to *Deliverance* next time we have to go on some kind of spree.”

CHAPTER SEVEN:

MEETING THE POSSE

That night in bed, Zuri thought about Hannes—just as she had for the past two months. She was glad the Posse wasn't going to challenge her over her and Hannes' relationship. Still, she suspected *Hannes* was going to challenge her over their relationship. If she'd had anyone other than Reign as a sister, she might've been worried, but she did have Reign as a sister, so Hannes had no chance.

Climbing into bed, she thought about Hannes sharing it with her. The thought of snuggling up next to Hannes was a whole lot more tempting than snuggling up with her pillow. She couldn't help but wonder what Hannes would think of her home—not the house itself, but the things in it...like the mechanical bull she had in the middle of her living room. Zuri had the feeling Hannes was the type of man who would appreciate seeing her ride that mechanical bull for the full eight seconds, especially when she rode it wearing nothing but some silky boy shorts and a “come take me” look. As much as she liked riding that mechanical bull, the thought of riding Hannes had her creaming so hard she didn't think a snowsuit could've held back her arousal.

She smiled for the first time, not worrying about how she came across to a man. Zuri wasn't worried that Hannes would trample her heart or break her spirit. In addition to being a gentleman, Hannes was the kind of man who would love the whole woman, not just worship the exterior.

Hannes had just dragged in from a hard day on the site when his phone rang. Tugging off his shirt, he kicked off his boots before answering.

Recognizing his brother's number on the caller ID, he didn't bother with manners as he answered. "What?"

"Hannes Sighelm?"

"Yes," he said cautiously. "Who's calling, please?"

"Don't ask questions. All you need to know is that you are officially on notice that you're Zuri's man. If I see you creeping around any other chick, there's going to be a misunderstanding."

Before he could respond he had an ear full of dial tone. Of all of the things he expected to hear in relation to Zuri, it certainly wasn't that. Most people would threaten him away from a relationship with a woman like Zuri, not threaten him into a relationship.

Checking his phone, he called his brother back in an effort to see what was going on with his phone.

“Mathis, where’s your mobile phone?” he barked.

“Hello to you too, brother,” Mathis said.

“Phone. Where is it?” he asked again.

“On my belt clip.”

“Then why did I just get a call from it?”

“Couldn’t tell you. All I can tell you is that my phone is on my belt.”

“That may be, but do you even know where your belt is...or for that matter your pants?” he asked.

“I’m not arguing with you, Hannes.”

“Good, because you couldn’t win. When you find your pants, check for your phone. Until then, I’m not accepting any calls from your number.”

No sooner had he said that than his phone rang again. Seeing the DA’s office on the caller ID, he wondered what the hell one of his brothers might’ve done. “Hello,” he said warily.

“Hello, Mr. Sighelm. I’m Silana Toussaint—a friend of Zuri’s.”

His heart dropped. She wanted him to stay away from her. “You want me to stay away from her,” he said.

“While I cannot tell you how to run your life, Mr. Sighelm, I’d strongly advise against that. Zuri likes you. As such, I’m calling to invite you to lunch.”

Though Ms. Touissant’s request was tossed out in a casual fashion, he knew it was, in fact, a demand. He wasn’t being *invited* to lunch; he was being *told* to come to lunch. Taking a seat, he located a pen and jotted down the particulars.

“What would you like me to bring, Ms. Toussaint?”

“Just yourself, Mr. Sighelm.”

“Business attire or casual?”

“Wear whatever you feel comfortable in.”

Zuri’s friends were all protective, but he could respect that. After all, he too was protective. He’d spent less than a full day with her, and yet his heart and body already belonged to her.

Hannes grabbed the cake as he exited his truck. Although he was told to just bring himself, his mother had raised him better than to show up at someone’s home empty handed. Taking one last look at his person in his truck’s reflection, he headed for the door of the stately home. His clothes were casual but spotless and pressed so hard that he was surprised

they didn't creak. He wouldn't win any fashion awards, but Ms. Toussaint had advised him to wear whatever he was comfortable in, and he was a jeans type of guy. Besides, if he was going to be thrown out or roughed up, he wanted to be comfortable.

If Hannes knew how impressive he was in those jeans, white button-down shirt and Timberlands, he would've added a smirk to that outfit instead of the carefully blank look he adopted. He hadn't even climbed the steps, yet he could hear a surprising amount of cacophony coming from the house. Though he couldn't make out words, there was no doubt that the occupants of the house were having a damn good time. Balancing the cake in one of his massive arms, he was reaching up to knock when the door was swung open by Zuri. Seeing her in a black turtleneck, black trousers and black leather boots temporarily robbed him of speech. How she made such a simple outfit look so good, he didn't know, but he envied those clothes.

"Hey, Hannes. Come in," she said as she grabbed his arm and dragged him inside. "This is so going to be an Inquisition. I already went through one because of my big-mouthed sister and friends. so you have to also. You're not offended, are you...not that it matters. If you didn't come here, they would've

brought the Inquisition to you,” she finished while smiling up at him.

“No, Zuri. I’m not offended.”

“Wonderful.”

He was in the process of turning away when the sound of Zuri delicately clearing her throat stopped him. Looking down at her raised brow and hearing the unmistakable sounds of her tapping her foot, he knew she was not pleased.

“You seem to have forgotten something,” she said.

Having no idea what she meant, he simply waited for her to tell him what it was.

“My kiss,” she said a moment before she took the cake box from his hands. She didn’t even get a chance to set it down before another woman came by and snatched it from her.

Reaching up, Zuri pulled him into her embrace and then kissed him gently but with great deliberation.

Though Zuri felt so good, so right, he attempted to keep a respectable distance between them lest he forget where he was and let his shifter talk him into throwing her down and ravishing her. The sounds of catcalls finally hit him a moment before someone pushed him closer to Zuri.

“There’s no six-inch rule here. Go on and grind all on her,” a woman who looked a whole lot like Zuri said.

“My sister, Reign—also known as the thorn in the side of humanity.”

“Ignore her. She hasn’t had sex since the Supreme Court upheld *Kelo v. City of New London*.”

“Reign, please try acting a little less crazy,” a holster-wearing woman said as she approached.

Before he could decide whether or not the dangerous-looking woman was about to cap him, he and Zuri were descended upon by a horde of women who talked very fast and animatedly as they herded him into the den and unceremoniously shoved him into a chair. Having been reared to remain standing until all women were seated, he rose.

“You don’t have to stand for these wenches,” Zuri said.

“But I want to,” he said.

“Leave him alone, Zuri. It’s obvious this young man has been raised right...unlike you and your sister.” Extending her hand, she introduced herself. “I’m Jack—mother to the one who was busy pawing you and to the one busy encouraging you to enjoy it.”

“Pleased to meet you, ma’am,” he said as he tried to figure her out. Though he’d just met her, his shifter picked up on the fact that there was something

decidedly dangerous about this woman, and it had nothing to do with the holster she wore around her hips and everything to do with the look in her eyes and her “about to clean up the wild, wild West” stance. She was pleasant enough, but he would hate to make an enemy of this woman.

He put his musings on hold as an elegant woman approached and introduced herself. “I’m Silana Toussaint.” He immediately recognized her voice. It was as unforgettable and eloquent as the woman herself. “I told you that you didn’t have to bring anything.”

“It was no trouble, ma’am. I figured it was the least I could do, since you offered to feed me.”

“The cake looks lovely,” she said.

“And it tastes delicious. He gets an up vote from me,” another woman said as she rubbed her hands together.

“What kind of cake is it, Victorious?” Zuri asked. “Or should I ask, ‘what kind of cake *was* it,’ being you’re like the cake monster.”

“Don’t know, but it’s officially my second-favorite cake,” she said as she sighed.

“That may be, but don’t get any culinary fantasies involving my man.” Turning back to him, Zuri asked, “So what kind of cake did you bring that has Victorious all aquiver?”

“Death by Chocolate. Is there any other kind of cake?”

“A man who appreciates chocolate. He gets a ‘hell yeah’ vote from me,” one of the Evil Twins said.

“Do you like my shirt?” the other Evil Twin asked as she pointed to her bright orange neon shirt.

“Well, no, but any shirt that isn’t a Duke shirt is okay with me,” he answered, recalling Zuri’s impassioned speech regarding her alma mater.

“That save was as fun to hear as the Scorpion-kick save executed by Colombian goalkeeper José René Higuita Zapata in the friendly game against England was to watch,” the non-neon-shirt-wearing Evil Twin said.

“I do my best.”

Zuri quickly introduced him to the rest of the women. “You’ve met my momma, my sister and Silana, but let me get you acquainted with these other chicks. The Evil Twins are easy to tell apart. The one always rocking something neon is Aloha, and the other one is Atlanta. The woman eyeballing you like she’s sizing you up for her pastry chef harem is Victorious. This serene woman is Indy. Nothing gets her riled up, which is a good thing because the rest of these chicks represent some kind of international incident just waiting to happen.”

“Hello, ma’am,” he said politely.

“Nice to meet you, Hannes,” she said as she embraced him. “I hope you’re well rested, because these youngins will run you ragged.”

The meal Silana served was nothing short of the second best thing he’d ever tasted. The best thing he’d ever tasted was sitting next to him, feeling him up under the table. As delicious as the food and laughter they fed him was, Hannes knew that some questions were going to be asked, some threats were going to be made and some promises were going to be extracted. However, the mass Inquisition Zuri had promised him didn’t take place. During the meal, the ladies simply let him know how they felt by slipping in promises to fuck him up if he acted crazy in between demands to “pass this” or “hand them that.”

Hannes hadn’t been fed so well since...ever. The ladies kept his plate piled high with food, his glass filled with iced tea, and his ears filled with laughter. It was...nice. Much better than the food he consumed in solitude and complete silence.

He didn’t bother being offended for two reasons. First, it was clear that the ladies wouldn’t give a damn if he was offended. Second, from the heated glances Zuri kept sending him, he knew he’d answer anything, say anything, do anything... give anything in order to have the blessing of having her look at him like that

for the rest of their lives. And he said as much to the ladies.

“Zuri is a wonderful woman. Everything you have threatened me with is nothing short of what I’d deserve if I ever did anything to make you follow through on your threats. Know this: If I ever hurt Zuri, you won’t have to come hunt me down, as I’ll present myself to you so you may do as you will with my person.”

“I do like this young man,” Jack said as she hugged him.

Nothing changed after his announcement. It was simply more of the same. More laughter. More conversation. More lingering touches from Zuri. As good as the meal was, the after-meal time was even better. Dragged into the kitchen to help clean up, he felt like part of their group rather than a visitor. They made him feel so at ease that he forgot to be concerned about his face.

Reign cornered him on their way to the den to watch the movie that he was flat out told he’d have to watch with them. “Hannes, I have something to tell you.”

Noting the concern on her face, he used his gentlest tone to ask her what it was. “What is it, Reign?”

“Systems were hacked, things were compromised, and your privacy was violated by me...on several occasions,” she said as she handed him what amounted to a dossier on his life.

Reading through the files and looking at the photos, he was simply too shocked to say anything.

“Are you working for some covert-ops group?” he asked.

“Nope, I’m just a big sister, and though I really like you, I’m not sorry. The Posse suspects what I did, as they saw the photos and got all grabby over them, but none of them knows how deep I got all up in your business. Oh yeah, and your woman cussed me out.”

While one part of him was livid that she would violate his privacy thus, the other part of him understood. Leaning down, he hugged Reign. “Thank you for loving Zuri so much.”

“I’m glad you’re not mad, because I really like you,” she said. “Come on, we’ve got to get in the living room, or Zuri will be out here ready to challenge me over you.”

Hannes couldn’t tell anyone the name of the movie they watched, as he’d hardly taken his seat before the teasing began. They teased him so hard that he looked around for an umpire to invoke the mercy rule and call a halt to it. He didn’t mind the teasing, although he had to correct them on one thing:

their impression that he was German. Despite his father being German, Hannes had nothing against the German people. He simply had a lot of pride for his Austrian roots. In hindsight, however, he should've just allowed them to continue believing he was German.

“Ladies, I’m actually Austrian, not German.”

Winking, Reign asked, “And what’s the difference?”

“Well, Mozart was Austrian, as well as Franz Schubert, who composed nine symphonies, the waltz King Johann Strauß, and Joseph Haydn.”

“Yeah, but if you were German you could lay claim to the musical genius of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, and Wagner,” Silana added.

“Biologist Gregor Johann Mendel and physicist Wolfgang Paul—one of the developers of quantum theory—were Austrian,” he countered.

“But the Germans can lay claim to physicists Georg Simon Ohm, Daniel Gabriel Fahrenheit, Heinrich Hertz, Hans Geiger, and the X-ray guy Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen,” Victorious stated.

“Joseph Pulitzer has Austrian roots,” he’d pointed out.

“Philosophers Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Immanuel Kant,” Silana parried.

“Marie Antoinette, and the current governor of California,” he threw in.

“I’m just going to ignore the fact that you just put Marie Antoinette and Arnold in the same sentence, and add that not only was Martin Luther German, but so is the latest pope,” Indy harrumphed.

“Freud was Austrian,” he said.

“Freud is a bad word in these parts. Freud was a coked-out, woman-hating asshole,” Reign spat and was backed up with a chorus of “hell yeahs.”

“I’ll see your Freud and raise you one Fred Astaire.” Silana smiled.

“And don’t forget Germans have fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld.” Zuri sighed.

“And Karl Benz, Gottlieb Daimler and Rudolph Diesel,” Jack said.

“Most guys named Heinrich,” the ever helpful Aloha threw in.

“Steffie Graf, Boris Becker,” Atlanta added.

“German chocolate cake,” Aloha said.

“Actually, Sam German was an Englishman who migrated to Texas,” Victorious corrected.

“Don’t care. It has ‘German’ in the title, so I’m counting it,” Aloha responded.

“You know the problem is that you guys need to loosen up as a nation,” Silana added sagaciously.

“Austrians are loosened up,” he said indignantly.

“The Brazilians at Carnaval, the people of New Orleans during Mardi Gras, the participants in the Gay Pride Parade, Germans during Ocktoberfest—they all turn to Austria to show them how to kick off a festival,” Zuri teased.

“Are you all experts on Germany?”

“Just Reign—the rest of us boned up on our facts about Germany so we could tease you,” Atlanta answered.

“Yeah, and so we wouldn’t make any *faux pax*,” Aloha threw in.

“Like bagging on you about the inbreeding of the Habsburg Dynasty,” Zuri chimed.

“Or asking you whether you wear boxers or briefs under your lederhosen,” Reign laughed.

“Or asking you to put on your lederhosen and sing a song from *The Sound of Music*,” Aloha added as she broke into the first verse.

“Well, thanks. I think,” he said. There was no way for a single male to win an argument against one woman, much less an entire group of women. So he conceded defeat and enjoyed the teasing of the Posse.

“You know you and Zuri have that repping your city thing down,” Victorious said.

“What does ‘repping your city’ mean?”

Victorious’ eyes lit up as she launched into an explanation. “It refers to people who have an unusually high opinion of the place they’re from, and in doing so render every other place insignificant. People who hail from Texas, New York City, Atlanta and Charlotte rep their places hard, although no one comes close to repping like Texans. According to Texans, the rest of the known universe revolves around them.

“While Atlanteans forget that there’s more to Georgia than their fair city, and New Yorkers only acknowledge other places for the sake of pointing out how those other places fall short of their city, people from Charlotte are right there with them. I’ve actually heard residents of the Queen City refer to New York City as the Charlotte of the Northeast.”

“They’re just still pissed that Raleigh is the capital of North Carolina, instead of Charlotte,” Atlanta interjected.

“They don’t appreciate people from neighboring cities in close proximity saying that they’re from Charlotte. You’re either from Charlotte proper, or you’re merely the unlucky SOB who hails from someplace else. They’re conceited like that,” Victorious teased, knowing Zuri and Reign’s hackles

were rising being that they spent so much time in Charlotte.

“Yeah, I’m surprised that they haven’t rewritten the Bible and renamed all of the places Charlotte and areas of Mecklenburg County,” Indy teased.

“Who reps their place harder? Zuri or Hannes?” Victorious asked.

“It’s too close to call,” Atlanta said, “but at least Hannes is from Austria. Zuri reps Charlotte hard, even though she’s from so far in the backwoods they wouldn’t even film *Deliverance* there.”

“Ha-ters,” Zuri sniffed. “Though I’m not technically from Charlotte, I’m not going to stand by and listen to you malign the city that is home to the NASCAR Hall of Fame.”

Much to Hannes’ regret, Zuri rose from where she’d plastered herself against him. Though he’d ceased being able to feel his arm half hour ago, his body immediately protested the loss of her softness.

“Come on, Hannes. Take me home. We don’t have to put up with this.”

“Hey, why does Hannes have to leave just because no one likes you?” Reign asked.

“Because he has to keep me company in my bed tonight.”

The words that came out of Zuri’s mouth were not the words Hannes had been expecting. While his

body cheered her decision like it was watching the Austrian National Football Team score the winning goal in the World Cup, his mind went haywire. Did she just say what he thought she said...all casual like she was discussing the weather...in front of her mother? Yes, she did.

“You are such a slut-whore,” Reign said. “Did you ever consider that Hannes doesn’t want to spend the night in your bed?”

“Yeah, because maybe he’d like to get some sleep when he goes to bed instead of being kept up all night with you all up on his bits,” Victorious said.

“I don’t think Hannes will have any trouble handling five foot ten inches and one hundred fifty pounds of woman,” Silana said.

“One hundred forty-five pounds,” Zuri said as she hugged her mother before mushing her sister.

“Hannes, I had Reign program everybody’s phone number into your PDA. Call me if you need me to come rescue you from my zealous daughter,” Jack said.

“I—” he started, but stopped. What did one say to that? No one had ever considered that he might need rescuing from anyone or anything, and that included the king’s army.

Before he could finish, Reign pulled him down and “whispered” in his ear. “By the way, the girls and

I decided you have one of the best asses we've ever seen. We think you should wear tighter pants to show it off more. Don't tell Zuri what we said, Hannes, because she's selfish and will make you walk with your back against the wall all the time in a futile effort to prevent us from checking your ass out on the regular," Reign said.

"A—you can't whisper worth a damn. B—all of you are about to get your eyeballs smacked out. C—Hannes has the best ass any of you wenches have seen. D—I'm right here. Damn. Can you at least let me get out of the room before you make love to my man with your eyes...your eyes that I'm going to smack out as indicated in point b?" Zuri stated as she snatched him closer to her side.

"Before you start tossing around threats, think about who drives you so many places, wench," Reign said. "That'd be me. It's going to be kind of hard to drive your butt anywhere with no eyeballs."

"This is true, but I have a new mode of transportation. I don't have to ride in your little tricked-out SUV, because I'm going to be riding large on seven feet three hundred plus pounds of blinged-out Austrian," Zuri said.

"Ooooh, that was below the belt, Zuri. Momma, tell her no taunting just because she's got a Ph.D-rocking hottie over there. Put her on restriction...or

beat her. Yeah, beat her. I vote for beating her,” Reign said.

“Zuri, stop taunting those of us without big German hotties to ride into the sunset. Hannes, take my daughter home before I do have to beat her.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said a moment before the entire Posse descended upon him and bombarded him with a barrage of hugs and kisses.

The drive to Zuri’s house didn’t take any time at all; still, it was long enough for Hannes’ body to work itself up at the prospect of spending the night with her. Though he had an invitation from Zuri and the approval of her family and friends, Hannes debated with himself whether or not he should stay. Zuri was a whole lot of woman...and he wanted her fiercely. She’d made no bones about the fact that she wanted him. Even as he drove she was sitting over there turning him on. Then again, knowing she was in this world turned him on.

Turning into the luxury community, he knew Zuri’s home would be impressive. Not only was the woman herself impressive, everything about her was impressive, including her education, her footwear and her car.

“Turn there,” she said as she slid her leg up and down his calf.

Catching his breath, he turned where she indicated and gasped when he saw her home. He didn’t have to see the blueprints to know that the architect of the understated—but nevertheless grand—home was none other than Mackenzie D. Roberts. Mackenzie Roberts was the Mozart of architects. Though he specialized in log cabins, it was obvious that few if any building materials intimidated him. Taking in the multi-storied, contemporary stone and brick structure, he said the only thing that came to mind: “Mackenzie outdid himself on your home,” he said.

“Yep, but being that I know people who know people, he had to,” she said.

“I was wondering how you got him to work outside of his favorite medium and outside of his home state.”

“I’d like to say it was my charm, but in reality it was a combination of my charm, threats against his person and a reminder of his Georgia Tech ties,” she said as she reached over and snatched his keys.

“Hey,” he began.

“That’s so you won’t take off as soon as I step out of the truck,” Zuri said. “Now come help me out—we’ve got a bed to christen.”

“I’m not sure I’m—” he began again.

“Going to be able to explain to my momma how I hurt myself jumping from this truck because you wouldn’t help me down,” she finished with a smirk.

Zuri had him there, and she knew it. Sighing, he exited the truck and went around to the passenger side and lifted her out. She thanked him, yet instead of allowing him to put her down, she wrapped her incredible legs around him and held on tight. Before he could ask, she activated his alarm and helped herself to his body. Like a cat engaging in all-out rubbing with another cat, she rubbed her entire body against him. The sensual act nearly unmanned him.

“What are you doing, *Liebling*?” he groaned.

“Marking my territory,” she said as she continued her sensual assault. Though Zuri often purred when she spoke to him, that last line wasn’t purred—it was proclaimed. There was no mistaking the seriousness or authority in her tone, just as there was no mistaking the intent of her touch. Zuri wanted him.

She made every graceful movement of her delicious body count. Tunneling her hands through his hair, she filled his ears with the sounds of her pleasure before nipping one.

Pulling back, her next words smacked him in his everything. “You know you’re going to have to lower that truck when I’m pregnant.”

Images of Zuri bearing his children flooded his mind. His heart stuttered. His bear roared its approval. Leaning against the truck because he had to, he caught his breath...and Zuri took it and all of the next ones with her relentless assault on his mouth.

“Not that I’d have a problem doing you against this truck, but being as I plan on doing you for a long time, you’re going to have to move us into the house, Hannes.”

He was trying to get them there. He really was, but Zuri wasn’t helping the situation. It wasn’t that Zuri was heavy, and even if she was, her weight wouldn’t be a problem. The problem was his hard cock. It was hell trying to walk with an arm full of woman intent on driving you to the brink and then pushing you over it, especially when his body raged at him to take her right there, right now, until they were both too exhausted to move. Dredging up strength he didn’t know he had, he made it to the door. Taking her key, he unlocked it, which was hard being that she was currently feasting on his mouth.

“Carry me over the threshold, Hannes, and then carry me to bed.”

Locking the door, the first thing he noticed was the mechanical bull set up in the center of the living room. Damn. Catching his breath, he couldn't stop the groans that fell from his lips at the thought of Zuri riding that bull in nothing but her underthings and her black leather boots.

His fantasies got the best of him, and instead of doing the smart thing and leaving, he allowed his cock to talk his mouth into making a demand. "Take everything off except for your underthings and your boots, then get on that bull."

Though he attempted to be a gentleman, there was nothing remotely gentlemanly about his words. They weren't a request; his words were a demand. And they weren't simply the demand from any old man, they were the demand of an Alpha shifter...in his prime...wanting his mate...now.

Zuri must've noted the change in him, because she shivered. If his scent of smell wasn't so enhanced, he might've worried that she shivered from fear rather than arousal. His *Liebling* was as turned on as he was. Good.

From her next words, he knew she was also the perfect mate for a male like him. "If I strip down to my bra and panties, what are you going to strip down to?"

“What do you want me to strip down to?” he asked as he took a seat.

“I want you in jeans and nothing else,” she said as she unbuttoned her trousers and let them fall to the floor, revealing those glorious legs.

Hannes didn’t need to be asked again. Unbuttoning his shirt, he shrugged out of it moments before pulling his t-shirt over his head. Bending down, he untied his steel-toed boots and toed them off before putting them to the side. Sitting back on the couch, he focused in on her and watched as she removed her turtleneck.

Zuri stood before him proudly, and she had every right to do so. She was beautiful. And when she climbed onto that bull, he almost came in his pants.

“Zuri, do not hurt yourself on that bull,” he warned even as he unzipped his jeans and allowed his cock to spring free.

“Don’t hurt yourself watching me on this bull,” she said as she picked up the remote control and pressed “Start.”

Hannes didn’t know a damn thing about mechanical bulls, but he knew that Zuri looked damn enticing riding the one she was on. Recalling Herbert Hoover’s 1928 presidential campaign message: “a car in every garage; a chicken in every pot,” he immediately tailored it for his purposes. “A

mechanical bull in every living room; a lickin' in her pot."

Before he gave his hand leave to do so, it'd wrapped around his cock and started stroking in time to Zuri's movements. Not familiar with the settings on the bull, he figured it must've been set at: sensual. She rode like she was in slow motion...dipping down before being gently rocked back. The play of light on her muscles only served to entice him more. The sound of her gasps and moans caused his cock to jump. The change in her scent that alerted him to the fact Zuri was about to come had him on his feet. He was across the room in moments.

Taking the remote from her hand, he pressed the stop button. Lifting her off of the bull, he turned her around and laid her backwards on the contraption. Spreading her legs wide, he knelt between them and flicked his tongue over her pink, moist sex.

Zuri knew she was turning Hannes on, and not simply because she'd eyeballed his hard-on through his jeans all the way home. She knew because of the look in his eyes when he gazed at her. His eyes blazed molten gold. Spending an afternoon as close as she could get to him without being on him, it'd been all

she could do to refrain from straddling him and riding him to victory. Everyone in attendance had known that she wanted Hannes—except for Hannes.

Ah, but her Austrian knew it now. Wearing nothing but his jeans and a look that bespoke grim determination, he stroked his cock as he watched her. Zuri enjoyed watching a man pleasure himself—especially when that man was Hannes, and she was the reason he was doing it.

Setting the bull on the lowest setting, she gripped it with her thighs and rode it like she was auditioning for the chance to ride him. Her body didn't let her down. Her years of training kicked in, and she rode with grace and sensuality. She timed her hip rolls to the movement of Hannes' hand on his cock. One Mississippi, roll...two Mississippi, thrust...three Mississippi, arch her back so that her breasts would stick out more. Four Mississippi, she began and stopped when she felt her orgasm upon her. Emitting a groan, she was surprised when Hannes picked her up, laid her on her back and knelt between her thighs. And when his tongue touched her clit, her whole body paused. A moment later it ignited, and she screamed out his name. "Hannes!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Devastated by what Hannes had done to her with his tongue, Zuri could only lay back and recover. His tongue, not his finger, not his cock...his tongue.

Chest heaving, legs trembling, heart all aflutter, she gripped his hair like a lifeline and sobbed. She sobbed for many reasons.

“Liebling?” he asked with concern lacing his voice. “Did I do something wrong?”

Did he do something wrong? Was he fucking kidding?

“You did everything so damn right,” she whispered.

“Then why do you cry?” he asked as he cradled her in his strength.

Because I can do nothing else, she thought as she laid her head against his chest and cried the whole Danube River. “For many reasons,” she said. Reluctant to let him go but needing him closer, needing him everywhere, she raised her eyes to his golden gaze and whispered. “Will you take me to bed, Hannes?”

“I’ll take you wherever it is that you want to go, *Liebling*...even if it’s away from me.”

“No! Don’t say that,” she said. “Never say that,” she begged.

Directing him to her bedroom, Hannes set her on the sink. Reluctant to let him go, she clutched him like a lifeline.

“I’m not going anywhere, *Liebling*,” he whispered.

“You promise?”

“I promise,” he vowed as he filled the sink with warm water. Finding a cloth, Hannes gently washed her face. The more he washed, the more tears she shed. She hated being a crybaby, but this man broke her with his tenderness just as he’d devastated her with a taste of his lovemaking. He didn’t fuss; he simply finished his task, and when he was done he held her to him.

“Bed,” she requested.

Holding her with one hand, he pulled the covers back and laid her on the silken sheets. Taking off his jeans, he joined her beneath the covers. Zuri burrowed into him...and Hannes let her. And she felt safe, she felt loved, she felt at peace. Listening to the steady thrum of his heart, she closed her eyes. On the verge of sleep and aware that she couldn’t fight it, she whispered one word. “Stay.” Knowing Hannes would watch over her, she was asleep before she heard his answer.

For the first time in his life, Hannes went to bed with a woman who not only wanted him but wanted all of him. He couldn’t help but love her. The admission didn’t scare him as much as the knowledge that Zuri

loved him back. Zuri treated him so good he was afraid he'd grow accustomed to her kindness, her humanity, the softness with which she surrounded herself and the laughter she lobbed at him. A being could get used to being treated like he mattered, like he belonged, like he was necessary to another's happiness. And that scared the shit out of him, because while he could live with the insults his peers threw at him, the ostracism communities met him with, and the armies kings set against him, Hannes knew he couldn't survive Zuri taking back her love...or someone taking Zuri from him.

Seeing her weep had broken something in him. For a moment he thought he'd bleed out from the sight and feel of her tears, but then she said his name. Zuri whispered his name like the "Amen" at the end of the prayer. And then she said it again, and it sounded like the whole prayer. Though he couldn't decipher a woman's tears, he had no trouble translating her need for comfort, because he'd prayed for that for many years—until one day he stopped praying for comfort, and then he stopped praying at all.

Watching her watch him humbled him, for she watched him with a look that said she believed he could make whatever it was that pained her better. Feeling her hold on to him like he was the only thing keeping her from drowning strengthened him, for he

knew he'd never let her drown, regardless of where he had to go to save her...even if that journey took him through the jungle of his own conscience.

Sliding into bed with her, he couldn't help but feel. He felt so many things. Reveling in the feel of her flesh against his flesh, feeling softness beneath him, seeing beauty on all sides of him and holding his future in his arms, it wasn't hard to fall asleep. No sooner had Zuri fallen asleep then he felt himself following her. As much as he wanted to remain awake and bask in this moment, his body had other ideas, and for once he didn't fight it. Lying in beauty, the last thing on his mind was a fight.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

YOU CAN FIGHT BUT YOU WON'T WIN

The sun streaming through the windows woke him. Hannes didn't have to look at a clock to know it was well past morning. He'd never slept so long...or so peacefully. Feeling energized, he slowly disentangled himself from Zuri and rose from bed. It was a difficult and lengthy process, as Zuri wasn't ready to let him go even in slumber. Smiling, he made his way to the restroom. Taking care of his needs, he made himself as presentable as he could. Washing his face and gargling, he picked up his pants and slid back into them. Then he rested against the bedroom wall and spent long minutes simply looking at Zuri. Knowing he could spend all day looking at this woman, he left his position. He leaned down to kiss her and whispered words he'd said to no woman other than his mother. "*Ich liebe dich*," he said with every bit of emotion he had. And dammit if that woman didn't smile in her sleep as if the words left his mouth and went directly to her heart.

Though he was reluctant to do so and found every reason in the world to dawdle, finally he left the room. Heading back downstairs, he tugged on the rest of his clothes before setting the alarm and walking out

onto the porch. If he'd been paying attention, his senses would've alerted him to the fact that he wasn't alone, but he wasn't paying attention, which was why he didn't see the gun until it was too late.

Reign had spent many nights sleeping in uncomfortable places. Curious by nature and an adventurer at heart, she'd slept in a canoe on the Amazon covered in nothing but mosquito netting; she'd slept in a tent perched on the side of the Himalayas; she'd even slept at the foot of the Big Jesus statue in Brazil. There was also that one time she'd slept standing on Zuri's shoulders with a noose around her neck, so making a bed out of the bucket seats of Hannes' truck was no problem. It was, however, boring as hell.

Reign had run out of things to do about five hours ago. She'd read and memorized the nutrition information on her stash of juice boxes. She'd made a makeshift shiv out of the mass of straws she'd accumulated from said juice boxes. She'd even hacked back into Hannes' PDA and entered in the information for the itinerary she'd plotted out with the rest of the Posse. She'd changed his ringtone from that waltz to the theme song from the *Dukes of Hazzard*. She'd

even hacked into his brother's PDA and inserted chaos and changed his ringtone to "Short Dick Man."

She'd just about given up on the rest of her day when the sound of footsteps had her reaching for her gun. As soon as the door opened, she had a BFG pointed right at Mr. Sighelm.

"I'm going to need you to get the hell back inside," she said in what she felt was a pleasant tone.

"Reign?"

"Yep."

"Are you insane?"

"Nope, but being that it's the last week in November, I am cold...and bored. So the sooner you get back into the house, the sooner I can get back to my house and to some excitement."

"From the state of the inside of my truck, it looks like you've had plenty of excitement. It looks like you've had a party in here," he said.

"Don't judge, Hannes. Just walk...toward the house, and get back in my sister's bed."

"I need clothes."

"Already took care of it. There's a bag in the backseat. Socks, jeans, and t-shirts. I didn't get you any drawers because I didn't want to overstep my bounds and go rummaging around in your underwear drawer. Besides, it's not like you'll be wearing much of anything except Zuri for the rest of the weekend. The

key to the front door is in the side pocket of the bag, and the temporary security code is your grandmother's birth year, so get."

"Or what? You'll shoot me?" he asked.

Reign didn't care for Hannes' tone. "For starters, and then I'll burn your house down before making your life a living hell."

"I—" he began.

"Zuri doesn't sleep well. She didn't call last night, so I know she slept good. You're the reason why, so get back in there, Hannes."

"Are you going to clean this mess out of my truck?"

"Maybe, maybe not."

Grumbling under his breath, Hannes reached in the back for the bag before slamming the door and returning to the house. Reign didn't care for his back talking, but being he was walking his ass back to the house, she'd let it slide this time. Watching him walk in, she gathered up her stuff and locked up the truck. Shrugging into her jacket, she headed next door to her own house. Once there, she set her pack on the table and nose-dived onto the couch. Dialing her momma, she didn't even wait for the greeting before she began talking. "Subject neutralized," she said before closing her phone and going to sleep.

Hannes waited twenty minutes before sneaking back out to his truck. Here he was a grown damn man, an Alpha shifter, and he was sneaking to his own damn truck. Little Ms. Reign might've had the upper hand, but then she'd lost it when she'd decided he was no longer a threat. Opening the door, he threw the bag in his truck and climbed in behind it. He smirked at his cunning, but the smile on his face practically melted off when he came face-to-face with ...his comeuppance. A moment later his phone beeped, indicating he had a text.

I know you didn't try to play me. Get your ass back in the house. Knowing he was bested, Hannes could only laugh and do as he was advised. Ah, Reign was crazy, but he couldn't help but admire her. Slamming the truck door shut, he didn't even bother locking it. There was no need, being that Reign had taken the steering wheel and goodness only knew what else.

Zuri awoke to the sound of Hannes coming in the room. Actually, she'd awoken as soon as he'd left

the house. She was tempted to chase him down, and perhaps she would've if not for Reign's text: *the great-assed German will be in shortly, so drag your rank ass out of bed and brush your teeth before you melt his face off with your dragon breath.*

Smiling, Zuri had returned her text: *Weirdo. And keep your eyeballs off of my man's ass.*

Ogling your man's ass is like my reward for putting up with your ass. By the way, I'm the oldest.

Only in your dreams.

In my dreams I-20 is lined with billboards featuring Hannes' ass, which I'm ogling right now, so move it, woman.

Zuri did move it, and instead of jumping back in bed and feigning sleep, she waylaid Hannes at the door. Using a move her momma had taught her, she had Hannes on his back lickety-split, and before he could recover, she was all up on his front. And she stayed that way for the next half hour. Finally needing breath and food, Zuri rolled off and cuddled up next to him on the plush carpet.

"What was that about?" he asked.

"Nothing. That's just how a Rangers-Decebel woman says 'good morning' to her man."

"Ah, then allow me to show you how a Sighelm male says it," he said as he spread her out and dipped his head.

Knowing what he was about to do, Zuri tugged him up. Smoothing his hair back, she asked, “Why do you always go down on me instead of kissing me?”

“Do I not please you thusly?”

“You please me in every way,” she responded as she drew him closer and kissed his scars.

Feeling Hannes tremble, she wrapped her legs around him and kept him there as she continued her task.

“Am I hurting you, Hannes?” she asked.

“No, *Liebling*, you are not hurting me,” he rasped.

“But I am causing you pain,” she said matter-of-factly. “Tell me why.”

Catching her hands, Hannes leaned back and looked at her for a long moment before answering. She could see the torment that raged in his eyes. Instead of rushing him, she simply held on to him and gave him the safe space that he needed.

“I don’t have much practice kissing, as I’ve never made love to a female face-to-face.”

“Do you not enjoy kissing?”

“Yes, but I do not enjoy watching a woman flinch from me, so I don’t ask them for that. If I go down on them they don’t have to see my face, and I don’t have to see their disgust, their fear, their pity. I can sit back and listen to their cries of pleasure and pretend that I

am Joe Q. Public instead of one of Dr. Frankenstein's creations."

Zuri was livid. Not even pretending that she wasn't pissed to pieces, she pushed him over and climbed atop him. "First, I will kick your ass all the way back to Austria if you ever refer to yourself like that again!"

"Zuri, I..." He tried to stop her.

"I am not finished. Second, you didn't make love with those women. You simply found release with those women."

"Zuri, I paid those women. Every time I've had sex, I've paid for it."

"Again with the interrupting. Third, I'm not like any other woman you've been with. I'm not just going to *take* from you. I'm going to *give* to you. We're going to make love *with* each other. Fourth, I've seen real monsters, and I flinched because I saw their lack of conscience in their dead eyes. Passion pours from your eyes. Fifth, kiss me and mean it, Hannes."

Not waiting for him to comply, she kissed him...and for the first time kept her eyes open. She wanted to see what she did to Hannes. More than that, she wanted to show him what he did to her.

Hannes didn't know what to expect from Zuri after his confessions, but it wasn't what he got. Zuri didn't flinch from his face or the truth. She'd only flinched from the callousness with which he treated himself. She'd spat fire at him, and instead of burning him, it'd cleansed him.

After "getting him told," she got him fed, and they spent the rest of the day in bed holding each other, caressing each other, getting to know each other. And there was no consummation of their relationship, but he knew it'd come. Busy nuzzling her, he pulled up upon hearing her laugh.

"You cannot still be laughing about that," he said.

"Told you Reign was crazy," she said as she rubbed herself against him.

"That you did," he said. "Reign loves you a lot."

"Yes, she does, and I love her too...but don't tell her I said that, since it's my job as her big sister to yank her chain."

"Reign indicated that she was the big sister."

"Of course, she'd say that. The truth is we were born less than thirty seconds apart, so our birth certificates register the exact same time. Momma won't tell us which of us was really first, so each of us naturally assumes the role of big sister."

“Not even touching that with a ten-foot pole, because I don’t need to be on your mother’s bad side.”

“Or Reign’s,” she said.

“Definitely not Reign’s considering how far she’d go. How is that Reign has no problem breaking into my house?” he began.

“Allegedly,” Zuri inserted.

Hannes simply grunted at that before continuing. “Let’s see. She hacked into all of my personal information—my secure information—and yet she draws the line at rummaging through my underwear drawer.”

“Again allegedly, and she draws the line at going through your underwear drawer because that implies intimacy,” she said as she rubbed herself against him.

“*Liebling*,” Hannes growled.

“Hannes,” she purred in return.

“You’re tempting me,” he said.

“Of course I am,” she said.

CHAPTER NINE:

LET'S GET IT STARTED

Zuri was not a woman who had a lot of doubts. Knowing who she was, she knew *exactly* what she wanted, what she needed, and additionally, she knew the difference between the two. She also knew that she hadn't slept worth a damn last night without Hannes in her bed. Hannes belonged in her bed...all of the time, and frankly, anything else was unacceptable. She'd told him as much yesterday evening when he'd informed her that he wouldn't be coming over.

"*Liebling*, it is not right that I take such privileges," he'd said.

While she heard his words, she also heard the meaning behind them: *until we're married*.

Well then hurry up and marry me, she thought. As the woman in the relationship, she knew she should wait for the man to pursue her, but she didn't have the patience or will to wait on Hannes to realize he couldn't live without her. They belonged to and with each other, and she had absolutely zero doubts about that. Of course, her Austrian was cautious, and she could understand why after hearing the confidences he'd revealed. Oh, she should go back in time and

make some people disappear. How dare they treat anyone like that...especially when that anyone was *her* man?

Her sulk-fest was interrupted by Thorn in her Side's comments.

"Exactly how long are you going to sit over there and sulk?"

"Who says I'm sulking?" Zuri asked as she slid further into her all-out sulk.

"No one has to say it. The fact that the ears on your bunny slippers are flopping so hard I'm catching a breeze alerted me of the fact that you might be sulking. What made me know that you were in fact sulking was seeing your pout. You look like someone took your favorite toy."

"Shut up, Reign. A—my slippers rock. B—I am not pouting. C—Hannes is mine, and he needs to know it."

"You shut up, and A—those slippers would rock if you were a five-year-old girl or a crazy boyfriend getting ready to show up at your woman's job in a pair of swim trunks and a wife beater while professing your love. B—not only are you pouting, if there was a highlight reel of pouting, you'd be on that. C—you're right, Hannes is yours."

"But he's not here, Reign."

“Well, it is Tuesday morning, and the man does have a job.”

“But he’s not going to come here tonight because he’s being all honorable and all,” she said. “And while I normally would balk at chasing after a man, I need him, Reign. I *need* him,” Zuri admitted.

“He needs you too, Zuri, so what are we going to do about it?”

“What’s this ‘we’ thing you speak of?” Zuri sniffed.

“Stop being so damn selfish, Zuri. If Hannes is with you, there’s a chance I get to ogle his ass a whole lot more, and I can drive his truck. I can’t wait to get my hands on that bad boy and take it muddin’.”

“You don’t even care about my feelings. All you care about is the ish you can get into.”

“I do care about your feelings, Zuri, but you know what I don’t care for? Your fucking defeatist attitude. You’re a Rangers-Decebel woman, and you need to start acting like it. While we both know that Hannes is your man, you have to make Hannes realize that.”

“He’s scared,” Zuri said.

“And he has good reason to be scared: he’s got a fucking diva-ass lunatic stalking him,” Reign teased.

Despite not wanting to, Zuri couldn't help but smile. "Thanks for that, Reign. It's always good to feel all stalkerish."

"I have eyes," Reign said.

"Only until I smack them out of your head for looking at my man," Zuri interrupted.

"Hannes looks at you like you're everything, Zuri, but other people—when they do bother looking at him—look at him like he's a monster."

"I hate them! Hannes isn't a monster," Zuri said.

"I hate them too, and while we know Hannes isn't a monster, Hannes doesn't know it. You don't need to just say you want him; you need to make him know it. While he has the option not to love you, you need to make him understand that he doesn't have any say in whether or not you love him."

"You're right," Zuri said.

"Like that's a news flash," Reign said.

"Whatever. Since you pointed out my deficiencies in getting Hannes to my bed, put your evil genius mind to good use and help me plot."

"Ah, Zuri-son, we evil geniuses don't just give our knowledge to anyone. Worthy of the Rangers-Decebel name you must prove that you are. Strong enough to be Hannes' woman you must show me."

Did Reign just go all Pat Morita-Yoda on her? Oh hell no. Before she even had a chance to think it over, Zuri dove on her sister and wrestled her to the ground.

They spent many minutes wrestling. Though she'd had the element of surprise and had taken her down, Reign was as skilled as she was and thus fought back with a vengeance. While at various points in the match each gained the upper hand, neither could keep it for long. As every wrestling match they'd ever had ended in a draw, they might've grappled with each other all day if their momma hadn't walked into the room and dragged them apart. It was times like this that she regretted giving their momma a key to her house and an invitation to come over anytime she wanted—not that their momma needed either to get into a place.

“What the hell is wrong with you two?” their momma asked as she took a seat.

“She started it!” both of them yelled simultaneously.

Well, maybe they didn't yell so much as they gasped it. Their momma interrupted their argument with a request. “Since you have all of that energy, one of you go get me some iced tea, and the other get me a backup glass of iced tea. This century,” she said when neither she nor Reign made an effort to move.

They weren't trying to disrespect their momma. Both of them were simply too jacked up to move with any kind of speed. It was all either of them could do to simply lie on the floor and try and drag air into their overexerted lungs.

"Reign punched me in my breast," Zuri complained.

"Zuri bruised my fallopian tube," Reign countered.

"While I understand your pain, I want my tea," their momma said all unconcerned with their myriad aches and pains.

Knowing there'd be no sympathy from her, Zuri made sure to dig her elbow into Reign's ribs as she used her body to gain leverage and drag herself up. She was almost to her feet when Reign yanked her ankle, causing her to fall back down. Though they were all set to reengage the smack down, their momma's throat clearing convinced them both to get their asses in gear. They were in and out of that kitchen and back with their momma's iced tea with speed a cheetah would've envied.

Handing their momma the glasses of tea, they waited until she'd tasted both and indicated that their paltry offerings were acceptable. Getting a nod of approval, neither she nor Reign wasted time sliding to

the floor to recuperate. Their momma wasted no time telling them off.

“I was pregnant with you heathens for about two years, and y’all are just fucking each other up like you didn’t use my body like it was a five-star hotel. I still have nightmares about the type and quantity of food I consumed due to your wants and needs. Do you know I slept three quarters of the day in the last trimester because y’all took so much of my energy?”

Like Reign, Zuri knew better than to interrupt their momma. Though they’d both heard this story a million times, they were humbled every time they heard it. They’d seen the pictures of their mother during her pregnancy, and neither of them knew how she’d managed to walk around being her stomach was so big. Despite the circumstances of the pregnancy, their mother had never looked so beautiful, so happy, so serene. Unlike right now, when she looked like she was one step away from handing them their asses.

“Reign’s sorry, Momma,” Zuri said as she glared at her sister.

“And if anyone would know about being ‘sorry,’ it’s Zuri. Out of respect for you, I won’t beat her anymore...today,” Reign said.

“Why are y’all fighting this time?” their momma asked.

“Because Zuri’s not living up to the Rangers-Decebel name. Hannes is out there all alone, and she’s in here sulking.”

“Is that true, Zuri?”

“I might’ve sulked for a moment, but I have a plan of action, which I was going to tell Reign as I was beating some respect into her,” Zuri answered.

“Ah, that sounds Ranger-Decebel like to me, Reign. I’m going to leave you two to work out your little plan. I expect to have Hannes as a son-in-law sooner rather than later. Understand me, girls?”

“Yes ma’am,” they both replied.

“So what’s the plan, Tattle Tale?” Reign asked. “How are you going to get Hannes over here?”

“It’s not what *I’m* going to do to get Hannes over here; it’s what *we’re* going to do to get him here,” she said.

Looking into Reign’s eyes while she laid out her plan, Zuri couldn’t help but feel pleased upon seeing the glint in Reign’s eye. Rubbing her hands together, Reign smiled. “Worthy you are of the Rangers-Decebel name. Pleased I am to have you as a sister.”

As fucked up as those words were, Zuri smiled, because that was high praise indeed from Reign.

Reign couldn't help the spring in her step as she went about Operation: Hannes Ain't Going to Know What Hit Him. Zuri had done well with this one. Satisfied that her gear was in order, she waited for her sister to get her leather-clad ass in the vehicle. Loving surprises, she was anxious to get started, because she couldn't wait to see the look on not just Hannes' face, but the faces of everyone around him when Zuri strutted up to the job site. Nobody could stop men in their tracks like her sister, and that included the entire year's worth of Playboy centerfolds. *Go Zuri! Go Zuri!* she chanted for her sister.

CHAPTER TEN:

GIRL POWER

Though he was famished, Hannes was too busy trying to get Demyan Vice off his ass to stop and eat. After reviewing Vice's project and investigating the site, he'd given the man his professional opinion on the proposed construction. While the structure he wanted was indeed beautiful, the design as it was posed what he considered an unacceptable risk due to the threat of sinkholes. A sinkhole in Georgia might start off being ten to twelve feet in diameter but could quickly expand to hundreds of feet. Thankfully, Vice had listened to him and found an alternate site. However, the new site required a change in the foundation. While it wasn't a super structure, the smaller structure didn't allow for a code-based design.

Aware of his hands-on experience in construction, Vice had insisted on his presence on the site, although he had a perfectly good construction crew overseeing the plan that Hannes had dubbed Vice's Temple to Himself. Not wanting to step on the toes of Amyntas Kallikrates, the CEO of Kallikrates Construction, Hannes had in fact informed Vice of this only to get dressed down in a most ruthless fashion. Pissed to a level that he rarely went to, Hannes gritted

his teeth but remained silent. I-Sigh Engineering needed this. Hell, all of them—Kallikrates Construction, I-Sigh Engineering, the work crew—needed this; otherwise any one of the men would've happily fed Demyan Vice his teeth for breakfast. Though Vice didn't seem to have any kind of humanity for any of them, he took special pleasure in testing Hannes.

The number of times he'd wanted to beat the hell out of Demyan Vic had climbed into the triple digits after only twenty minutes of suffering the man's presence. The little man was not only condescending, he was a prick. If Hannes hadn't needed this job, he would've told Demyan Vic in no uncertain terms where to go and how to get there, but he did need it. It wasn't the money *per se*; it was the professional ties.

Every day Vice had found some reason to talk down to him, and every day Hannes answered his insults with silence.

Though Vice didn't brook anyone standing up to him, it obviously riled Vice that he wasn't able to move Hannes to emotion. Their work relationship had turned into a battle of wills. In the competition of Vice's money and connections vs. Hannes' equilibrium, so far Vice was on the losing end. And that bothered Vice, who tried to outdo his insults each day. Today had been the worst, but Hannes retained

his cool. He did it by thinking of Zuri. He didn't have room for anger when he thought of Zuri's softness, her righteousness and her beauty.

Resting on his truck bed, he sipped his water and wondered if he was going to bother going to get something for lunch or have Mathis bring him something back. Having five minutes to decide, his musings were interrupted by a commotion. Wolf whistles split the air and were joined by a chorus of "damns." Looking up from his blueprints, he got an eye full of the woman who'd taken up most of his thoughts lately: his *Liebling*.

Knowing she was about to straight up mack her man, Zuri smiled as she slid into what she dubbed her "super heroine" outfit. No super heroine anywhere had anything on her, and she knew it, because Reign's weirdo friends whistled themselves hoarse every year she accompanied her to the comic convention. Though she'd looked good in those skintight catsuits and capes, this outfit was special...and it was all for Hannes. She had plans for him, and when he saw her in the black leather corset, black leather pants and black leather stiletto boots, he and everyone in the vicinity would know what those plans were.

Being trained by the best, she didn't just strut up to the worksite, she sat in Reign's black Range and waited while her sister turned on all of the high-tech gadgets and looked and listened...and got ten kinds of pissed. And so did Reign.

"I know you're not about to let that shit stand," Reign said.

"And you know that right," Zuri returned as she went about getting even. Pulling out her cell phone, she made a call to the First Lady of Atlanta. And by First Lady of Atlanta, she didn't mean the governor's wife—she meant Ms. Corinna P. Drystan, wife of Nigel Drystan, who owned three-quarters of Atlanta, including the bank that was financing that mean little man's loan. After being properly reassured that the matter would be seen to with all due haste, Zuri thanked Ms. Corinna and got back to Operation Hannes Ain't Going to Know What Hit Him.

Nodding to Reign to drive, she waited as Reign drove the truck up closer and parked. Freshening her lip gloss, Zuri checked to insure that the ringlet curls falling to the middle of her back shook good and proper before exiting the vehicle. And then she strutted through the worksite with a sensuality that would've done the late Eartha Kitt proud. With her D-cups lifted high, her pants cupping her apple-bottom ass, and her attitude set on No Retreat, No Surrender,

she was every man's walking fantasy. While that compliment was awesome, it was useless. The only man's fantasies she wanted to fulfill were those of the big Austrian sitting alone. And fulfill them she would.

Zuri knew Hannes had heard the commotion her entrance caused, but it was a moment before he spotted her and realized she was the cause of the ruckus. As soon as he spotted her, he smiled a moment before his golden gaze went supernova. *That's right, Hannes—you belong to me*, she thought as she made a beeline to him. Glad that he was already standing, she executed the one move that, until Hannes, no man had been worthy to receive: the Shara. Jumping up, she wrapped her legs around his waist. Kissing him, she made a proclamation: "You're mine, Hannes."

Before he could recover from the kiss or her words, she maneuvered her right leg around his left shoulder before following through and placing her left leg on his right shoulder. Knowing he could smell her arousal being that her coochie was all up in his face, she wiggled right before executing a back flip off of his person and landing into a split.

Though she'd practiced that move in her head and knew she could pull it off, she'd never realized it'd work so beautifully...or turn her on as much as it did the man she was doing it for.

“Zuri,” Hannes called her name in a voice laden with desire.

Knowing he was stunned, she gracefully rose from her split and threw herself at him.

“Hannes,” she said as she backed him up and toppled him onto his truck bed. Not caring where they were at, she climbed atop her Austrian mountain and kissed the breath out of him. She could’ve kissed him forever, but the annoying and rude voice of Mr. Demyan Vice cut through her desire.

“What is the meaning of this?” he asked.

He went on to ask some other rude things, but she couldn’t be bothered listening. Gripping Hannes’ hair tighter, she continued to rain kisses across his face. Damn, he smelled so good.

From the way he tensed, she knew he was also livid.

“Zuri,” he said as he attempted to put her off of him and see to Mr. Vice.

Zuri had no intention of allowing that to happen, being that she wouldn’t be able to have her way with Hannes if he was in lockdown due to killing that little man.

“Hannes,” she whispered in his ear as she slid against him.

“*Liebling*, please,” he begged.

“I will please you if you just give me the chance,” she said as she grinded herself against him.

“You’re going to kill me.”

“No, I’m going to love you, Hannes...and you’re going to let me,” she said.

“I will, but first I need to teach Mr. Vice that he does not speak to you or of you like this,” he said a moment before setting her gently aside and stalking up to the man.

Afraid that Hannes really was going to kill the little man, Zuri scrambled off the bed of the truck and wrapped her hands around Hannes’ waist. She knew that though he was mad, he wouldn’t risk any kind of injury to her. Resting her head on his strong back, she listened to Hannes dress down the man.

Instead of the roar she expected, Hannes threatened the man in a quiet but deadly voice. “Cease speaking to her.”

Hannes’ tone might’ve been soft, but his demeanor was anything but. Demyan Vice wisely backed away. Unfortunately, he did not shut up.

“You’re fired. I-Sigh Engineering is finished!” he shouted.

“So be it,” Hannes said as he turned his back on the man. Gently taking her hand, he bent down and softly kissed her lips. “Come, *Liebling*, let’s go.”

“Hannes,” she said breathlessly. Wrapping herself around him, she reveled in the feel of him. “I love you.”

“I know, *Liebling*,” he said as he rested his forehead against hers. “I know,” he repeated. “And though I don’t know why, I’m so glad you do, because God knows I love you. *Ich liebe dich, Zuri*.”

Seeing Reign’s thumbs-up, she allowed Hannes to put her in his truck. Knowing Reign had her back she was free to focus all of her attention on Hannes. And what a lovely task.

Reign was a nice person...she really was, but she didn’t like people using their privilege, power, or position to pick on other people. And she sure as shit didn’t like Demyan Vice. She’d never cared for the man, who was just too self-absorbed with his new wealth and supposed greatness. There was no law against being a pantywaist, though, and being he didn’t bother her, she didn’t bother him. And then today happened. It’d taken everything she had to refrain from putting the truck in gear and running that bastard down when she heard how he talked to Hannes. And her beautiful brother-in-law to be simply sat there and took it. From his body language

it was clear that Hannes was tempted to level the man, but he didn't. Instead, he did the second-best thing: he looked through the man. That had to hurt Demyan's pride. Hurt pride was fixing to be the least of Demyan's problems.

Strolling up to the man, she stopped about ten feet short of him and called his name. "Demyan Vice."

Turning, he looked at her with a sneer. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"I'm Hannes Sighelm's sister, and what I want for you to do is go fuck yourself."

"You are trespassing," he said. "This is my property."

"Actually, it's the bank's property. And being that our homie's husband owns the bank, you're about to have a problem," she said a moment before his phone rang.

From the look on his face, he was getting his ass chewed and good. Smiling, she walked back to her truck whistling. She didn't know what Ms. Corinna had told him, but you could bet your sweet ass that whatever it was, it was going to put a hurting on Demyan Vice the likes of which he'd never seen. *Ah, it was good to be in the good graces of good peeps.*

CHAPTER ELEVEN:

PILLOW TALK

“Where am I taking you? Besides some place to put some more clothes on?” he said as he took off his sweatshirt and handed it to her before turning up the heat.

“To your house,” she said as she shrugged into the massive shirt.

“My den’s not up to your standards of comfort,” he said.

“Will you be there?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll be comfortable.”

“Okay,” he said as he drove.

Knowing from the information Reign had provided that Hannes lived out in the middle of nowhere, she was still taken aback at just how far out in the middle of nowhere his house was. Turning onto a dirt road, Hannes drove for two or three miles before coming to a stop in front of a plain, small white house. Waiting for him to come around and help her out, she didn’t let him put her down. Instead, she held on extra tight to him.

Waiting for him to unlock the door, she shivered when they stepped inside. “Heat,” she demanded as

they stepped into the house. "And give me a tour," she said as she allowed him to set her down.

"There isn't much to see," he said.

"Can I look around?"

"Help yourself," he said as he stood back.

From the look on his face, it was clear he expected her disapproval. Zuri wasn't going to disapprove of his lack of creature comforts, but she was going to say something about his bed. Sitting on it, she called him.

"Hannes," she called as she removed her boots.

"Yes?" he said as he entered.

"Get your ass over here and keep me warm," she said as she attempted to peel her pants off.

Seeing her struggle, Hannes came over and helped her with her pants before helping her with her bustier. At least he attempted to help her. Showing him where the clasps were, she sighed when she was freed before sliding right back into Hannes' sweatshirt.

"What?" she asked as she slid under the cover.

"You can't wear that out, Zuri. You cause too much ruckus."

"I didn't wear it out. I wore it *to* you. Hurry up and get in," she said as she patted the cover.

"There isn't enough room for both of us," he protested even as he stripped out of his clothes.

“Yes there is, because I’m going to lay on top of you.”

Waiting as he got in, she did just as she’d said. Making herself comfortable, she tucked her head in the area between his thick neck and muscular shoulder and breathed in. Hannes’ scent did something to her.

Feeling his arms wrap around her, she smiled.

“Are you mad?” she asked.

“How could I be mad at such a spectacular display of claiming? My brothers will all be jealous.”

“As they should be. You’re way better than them.”

“Being quintuplets and similarly situated in terms of education and genes, I’m sure that they’d disagree.”

“Be that as it may, they’d still be wrong.”

“Ah, Zuri. You do wonders for my ego.”

“I do wonders for my own ego, so I know how you feel.” She laughed.

They spent the rest of the day talking...that is, after Hannes finished talking to Ms. Corinna, who from the sounds of things took him over just like she did everyone else.

“You’re amazing,” he said.

“Yeah, I am,” she agreed as she tasted the peach cobbler they’d ordered from Dréa’s.

"I have to work tomorrow. Are you spending the night with me, or do I need to bring my stuff over here?"

"You'd stay here?" he asked, surprised.

"I'd stay anywhere with you, Hannes."

Not feeling right about living under a woman's roof, Hannes invited Zuri back to his house. And surprisingly, she came. More surprisingly, she didn't try and fix up his den or him. She simply took them and, judging from her expressions, enjoyed them as they were.

He really was going to have to get a better place, he thought as he held Zuri that night.

"Hannes," she whispered.

"Yes, *Liebling*?"

"Do you want to go on a date with me?"

"I would love to go on a date with you, but I believe that as the man, I should be asking you on a date."

"If I waited on you, I'd still be sitting by my phone waiting for you to call me. And by the way, you may say 'yes' at any moment."

"Well, then 'yes,' since I take orders so well."

“Hannes, I don’t believe for one moment that you take orders well.”

“Well then, perhaps it’s merely you that I take well.”

“I’d better be the only female you take period,” she replied, “especially since you have yet to take me.”

“In due time, *Liebling*. I want you to be sure.”

“I am sure,” she said before giving him the details about their upcoming adventure.

“Why are we going to another man’s house to see Aloha?”

“Because word on the street is that Ianikut has a hundred-inch plasma, and Reign’s chomping at the bit to get her grabby little hands on it. Plus, we have to make sure Aloha’s not hurting Ianikut.” She laughed.

“Don’t you mean the other way around?”

“Nope—Aloha’s one of the reasons society made safety scissors.”

CHAPTER TWELVE:

GET YOUR GROOVE ON

After dominance challenges were thrown about, the afternoon at the vampire's house was entertaining. He wasn't even surprised to find the Posse had a vampire and a berserker in their midst.

"Are you collecting Otherworldlies?" he'd asked.

"Nope, I've got all the man I need right here," Zuri had said. "We're just so cool that Otherworldlies keep gravitating towards us."

Hannes hadn't realized how lonely he had been until he started hanging out with Zuri, which meant he also hung out with the Posse. And as he'd quickly learned, there was no saying "no" to the Posse. Being as his phone had been hacked by Reign, he had a calendar jam-packed with events, most of which seemed to revolve around food.

Even he and Zuri's private time revolved around food. Though neither of them had previously spent a lot of time cooking, they frequently discovered themselves in the kitchen amidst cooking magazines, trying out various dishes. Some were hits; some were misses, but he even enjoyed the misses, because they always had some Dréa's in the fridge.

A few days later, while he was enjoying the comfort of the new bed Reign had delivered (along with a bill) and the feel of his Zuri in his arms, she mentioned the upcoming engineer's convention. "Are you going to the engineering convention?"

Surprised she knew about it or even cared, he answered, "Yes—why do you ask?"

"Are you going to take me?"

Right now, if you don't stop tempting me, his body responded. "You want to attend an engineering convention?"

"Not at all, but an engineer is part of who you are, and I need to check you out in your natural environment," she teased.

"I appreciate that, but we engineers are a stodgy bunch. And there's nothing to buy," he teased back.

"Most of you engineers might be stodgy, but not all of you. Have you ever meet Njarðar Valdason's wife, Isoke?"

"I can't say that I have," he said.

"Well, there's a lot of words I'd use to describe her, but 'stodgy' ain't one of them."

"Ah, you like her because she's a lot like you, then?"

"Well, yeah. Plus, that chick is badass."

“Despite the discovery of some non-stodgy engineers, there are no shoes for sale at the convention,” he said.

“I should hope not,” Zuri cried. “But I won’t be there for the shoes, I’ll be there for you...and I’ll pass my time checking out your ass.”

“Perhaps I should charge women for the pleasure of looking at my ass.”

“You should, although you should comp me, because otherwise you’d bankrupt me.”

“*Liebling*, you’re good for a man’s ego. Of course you may come.”

“Like there was any doubt about you letting me tag along. And since you’re being all amenable to me, we’re throwing Aloha and Ianikut a pre-wedding party the third weekend in December.”

“I apologize, but I won’t be able to make that, as I’ll be out of town on a consulting project for Mr. Drystan.”

“Fine, but you have to make sure your calendar’s clear the second weekend in January, because you’ll be escorting me to their wedding.”

“I can do that.”

Second week in January 2009, Florida

Hannes had seen Zuri in all manner of outfits, from tailored business suits to body-molding leather, sheer lingerie, and even nothing at all. Though she looked beautiful in everything she wore or didn't wear, seeing her in a flowing gown with the works was almost too much. Hannes went immediately hard. Because all of his blood was busy trying to make his cock rip through the material of his dress trousers, he wasn't thinking properly and voiced the first thought that popped in his feeble mind.

"No."

From the "oh-no-that-motherfucker-didn't" look that lit Zuri's eyes, he knew that was the wrong thing to say. "I know you have a y-chromosome, but you might want to start explaining yourself," Zuri said.

"You are not allowed to go around looking that damn beautiful. Every male in attendance is going to look and want you."

"Well, I'm hot, so what's wrong with that?" she asked.

"Nothing's wrong with it, but I'm sure Aloha will take exception to me beating the shit out of half of her wedding guests."

"Actually, she might like that. Knowing her she'd jump in and help you kick ass just on GP," she said.

"But—" he began.

“But nothing, Hotness. Come on, we’ve got a wedding to get to,” she said as she dragged him out of the bedroom they shared in Sojourner Carrington’s Jupiter Island guest home.

The wedding and reception was a typical Evil Twins event, meaning there was a whole lot of chaos. Still, despite the chaos, it was beautiful to witness the love that flowed between Aloha and Ianikut. The happy couple had just sped off like they were participants in “The Cannonball Run.” Having done her duty and made sure there were no fatalities, fights involving grievous bodily injury and the like, Zuri dragged Hannes to the dance floor.

They’d been slow-dragging for ten minutes when Hannes spoke.

“They’re all watching.”

“They should be. We make a stunning couple. Let those bitches wonder what they’ve been missing.”

“And if they’re bold enough to ask?”

“Then I’ll be bold enough to tell them how wonderful you are in bed and out of it.”

“But you don’t know how well I make love.” *Yet*, his cock piped in.

“I might not know how it feels to have you inside of me, but I know how you make love, Hannes, because you make love to me in so many other ways. You make love to my mind each time we talk. You make love to my body every time you touch me. I know how you make love, Hannes, and what I don’t know I dream about each night.”

“*Liebling*,” Hannes said. “Do you have any idea what you do to me?”

“Do you have any idea what you do to me?” she parried.

“I’m learning,” he said. “Now tell me about these dreams.”

“I usually have you screaming out my name in decibels that the human ear can’t pick up,” she said as she shot him a look full of challenge.

“I’m not usually the one doing the screaming when I’m at the helm,” he responded.

“That’s because you’ve never been loved by me,” she returned sassily. “Now since you are my dream come true, shake your groove thing,” she demanded.

Zuri loved being in Hannes’ arms. She felt safe there, she felt loved there, she felt at home there. Dancing with him was a treat. Knowing he had some

moves from the first time they'd danced together in the Mad Clatter, she kept him on the dance floor. They'd spent most of the time slow-dragging before the band played a waltz. Hannes danced the waltz beautifully. She never wanted that dance to end, but alas, it did. Just when she was set to leave the dance floor and give Hannes a break, the orchestra struck up the first chords of a tango.

"Do you know how to tango?" Hannes asked.

Did she know how to dance the tango? There were multiple variations of the dance, and she was familiar with *all* of them.

"Do you know how to work the quadratic equation?" she countered.

"Almost as well as I dance the tango," he said as he pulled her to him.

Hannes danced the Argentine Tango, which in her opinion featured the most sensuous choreography. The Argentine Tango featured a much looser *abrazo* (embrace), continuous contact of the upper body, and steps that were more freestyle than staccato. The dance was like a horizontal courtship featuring an Alpha man going after his woman, which was evident when the male stepped into the female's space.

Zuri didn't know who taught Hannes to dance, but that chick was obviously one hell of an instructor, because Hannes danced the tango as easily as he

breathed air and as flawlessly as he worked out mathematical equations. He danced it like he invented every move in it. He danced it like he meant it.

Though she was pleased to have such a skilled partner, her inner diva demanded she show Hannes that despite the number of women he'd had in his arms, none fit him as well as she did. Tossing back her hair, she hooked her leg around his massive body and worked it out. Five steps into their dance, she was wet, and from the way his eyes darkened and his nostrils flared, she knew he was aware of that fact.

Hannes already held her so close she could feel his heartbeat through his chest. Zuri didn't know how long they danced; she just knew that when the dance concluded she was breathing hard, her breasts were crushed against Hannes' chest, and her hands were tunneled in his hair. Lifting her, he took her mouth in a kiss that was as passionate as summer nights in the Northern Hemisphere were hot.

Hannes moved her. It was as if he were a spoon and she a glass of water that he tapped. Her mouth released a litany of lyrical moans, and her body vibrated with need. So affected by their tango, she couldn't seem to catch her breath. She couldn't let Hannes go...at all...anymore.

When his *Liebling* was in his arms, the rest of the world seemed to fade away. Zuri commanded his attention in a way that few things ever had. She didn't have to be in the room for him to know she was near. Her scent permeated his nostrils, her love permeated his heart, her existence permeated his life. The more time he spent with her, the more integral she became to existence. And he wouldn't have it any other way—a telling admission if there ever was one. He treasured this woman who treated him like he was the most important part of her world and touched him like he was cotton wool...except for moments when her passion demanded its head.

Like now. Though he'd enjoyed their dance in the Mad Clatter, "enjoy" was not the word that described what he felt now, just as "dance" was not the word for what they'd just done on the floor. Their tango had been nothing short of vertical sex...and he had the hard cock and aroused woman in his arms to prove it.

The scent of her need was so strong, it was all he could do to calm his beast. Though he tried, his bear would not be calmed. It smelled its mate and it wanted her. Instead of abating, Zuri's passion intensified. Tipping her head back, Hannes was surprised to see

his own passion mirrored back at him. He had to get Zuri out of there before one of them lost all control. Though he was a shifter, from the way she was looking at him, he couldn't be certain he'd be the victor in that battle of wills. Claspings her to his chest, he hustled her away from the dance floor before some other male with a death wish did something foolish like look at her. While he could talk his bear into waiting, there was no way he could withhold retribution should anyone even consider interfering with his mate.

Hannes had her ensconced in the limo in record time. Lifting her fingers to his face, Zuri stroked his angular jaw and marveled at the look on his face. Passion had replaced the stoicism he usually wore, and what a beautiful, moving and humbling thing it was.

Wanting him more than she ever did, she breathed out his name even as she arched her body, offering him access to everything. "Hannes."

"*Liebling*," he rasped as he gently spread her legs. Stroking her through her panties, he pushed them to the side before sliding his fingers inside of her.

Though he stroked her slowly, it was enough to push her into immediate orgasm. She rode his fingers

like a true adventurer: with complete fucking abandon. And still he gave her more...more fingers, more pressure, more pleasure, more everything. Moments later she was grabbing onto the beginnings of another orgasm. Tearing her mouth from his, she screamed out her pleasure before collapsing back onto the seat, limp with exhaustion.

Zuri was a composition of pure fire and hot, creamy silk. Hannes hadn't meant to go that far, but once he saw her face shatter from pleasure, he couldn't stop. He wanted to see that look again...and again...for the rest of the night before seeing it for the rest of their lives. Feeling how fast her heart beat and hearing her medley of moans and gasps, he allowed her a respite. Never breaking eye contact, he brought his fingers to her succulent lips. "Open," he ordered. Placing his fingers in her wet mouth, he issued a second demand. "Suck." Growling low in his throat, he watched as she closed her eyes and sensually lapped her nectar from his fingers. Fascinated with the play of her tongue and succulent lips, he grew harder.

Watching her respond to his passion was as provocative as her submission to his demands was empowering.

“Hannes,” she whispered. “Please.”

“I will always please you, *Liebling*,” he vowed as he carried her back into their room.

Setting her before him, Hannes deftly removed her gown, leaving her clad in nothing but her bra, panties and garters. Needing to be skin-to-skin with Zuri, he toed off his shoes before making quick work of his suit jacket, shirt and tie. He was reaching for his belt when Zuri smacked aside his hand and stroked him through the material.

“Mine,” she growled as she reached inside his underwear and cupped him. The feel of her cool hand on his sac felt so damn good.

“So good,” he rasped as she massaged the underside of his sac before pushing the rest of his clothes down and pleasuring him with firm, steady strokes. Kicking free of the material, he enjoyed a few more moments of her pleasuring before the tremors became too much.

“Zuri, please,” he said when she reached up and flicked her tongue over one of his flat nipples.

Hannes hadn’t felt anything so good since the last time he’d allowed Zuri to touch him. Her touch was just right. All he could do was take her stroking

and licking and growl his pleasure. Feeling his pleasure rise to a dangerous point, he snatched her to him and marched them to the bed.

Laying her down, he assumed the dominant position. Though he growled at her in a display of dominance, Zuri didn't flinch. Instead, she rolled him over and growled at him. His bear admired her strength even as it demanded he reassert dominance.

Reaching up, he took her lips in a fierce kiss even as he clamped his hands around her hips and rolled her onto her back. Pulling his lips away from hers so they could both drag in much-needed air, he spread her thighs and brushed a finger over her clit. Feeling her tremble, he smiled and added another finger.

The next morning

Holding Zuri in his arms, Hannes watched the play of light on her skin as the sun crested the sky to herald a new day. Despite not having slept a wink, he was invigorated. Zuri did that to him. Not only did she make him feel alive, she made him thankful for life.

For so long he'd looked in the mirror and seen a monster and looked within himself and seen nothing. He'd felt like he was no one, yet Zuri saw someone she

not only liked, but wanted to invite in her life. She invested care in him and built him up, making him believe he was indeed somebody. And Zuri didn't just use words to get her point across—she used her life.

Zuri renewed him with her acceptance, she soothed him with her caresses, she honored him with her love, she humbled him with her trust. She believed in him so much, loved him so good, and defended him so passionately. He smiled recalling the last time she'd "got him told" about something.

"I'm the Doc Holliday to your Wyatt Earp—without the bad habits, addictions, and fatal tuberculosis. I will defend your ass whether you like it or not, whether you want it or not, and there isn't shit you can do about it."

Zuri liked him when no one else bothered. She loved him without reservation. It was no wonder he loved this woman. As he'd told his mother, Zuri was his mate.

"Then why haven't you mated her?" his mother had asked.

It wasn't only his mother who'd asked; everyone had asked, including Zuri. He hadn't mated her because he had not yet proven to himself that he deserved the honor. Hannes didn't want their courtship to consist of her fixing him up; he wanted their courtship to be all about her. Too many women

(including his mother) got mated without the benefit of marriage and got married without the benefit of love. Zuri would not be amongst them.

The foyer of Zuri's home, Atlanta, GA

“You’re not going to stay?”

“No, *Liebling*.”

“Well, then I can come stay with you,” she said.

“You have a full schedule, and I won’t have you driving all the way out from the middle of the woods during early morning or late evening hours,” Hannes said.

Though he spoke in a low, even tone, Zuri knew he would not be budged from this stance. While one part of her appreciated his consideration, another part of her rebelled at the thought of spending evenings alone in her bed.

Chuckling, Hannes addressed her displeasure. “I’m trying to be a gentleman, *Liebling*.”

“I understand that and appreciate it, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it,” she said as she wrapped her arms around his waist. “So how long do you think you can be a gentleman?”

“Right up until the moment I slide into your delicious body.”

“Why then?”

“Because I might be a gentleman everywhere else, but in the bedroom I’m a beast,” he said as he slid his fingers into her sex and stroked her to pleasure.

“Hannes,” she moaned as she gave herself over to his ministrations.

“Give it me,” he demanded, and her body obeyed.

Zuri clung to him as pleasure spiraled throughout her body.

“You devastate me,” she said when she regained her voice.

“As you do me,” Hannes confessed as he licked his fingers. Deftly sliding her panties down her legs and stuffing them in his jeans pocket, he whispered “good night” before leaving.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN:

WTF

February 2006

Zuri had never had a January so full of crazy. Not counting Aloha and Ianikut's wedding in Florida, they'd all flown to Russia for what turned out to be a historical day for the EVN—Eastern Vampire Nation. They'd gone to Russia with a small but powerful contingent of warriors who'd all vowed to lay down their lives for them...and meant it.

January had been a month of reveals. She'd discovered how crazy Hannes got when she was in danger, that Sojourner Carrington wielded her Bible better than any soldier wielded a weapon, and what a Scotsman wore under his kilt. She'd learned that vampires cried blood red tears, that despite how far away from home she was, Indy could not outrun her calling, that underneath the “aw shucks” attitude, Iain had enough CWB in him to scare the shit out of an assembly of Otherworldlies, and that Vsevolod Aleksandrovich feared, loved and respected his son in equal measures. She'd also learned that she was about to be an aunt three times over, as the Evil Twins and Victorious were all with child.

She'd also re-learned some things that day. A—nobody rocked a leather trench coat, cowboy boots and a Stetson like her momma; B—no one did subterfuge like Reign; C—Mathis was an asshole.

Later, she'd learned that Papa Everglades, Grandmomma Rika, and her godfathers Dawson hadn't stayed behind like they were supposed to but gone on ahead and waited in the wings to tear the EVN a new asshole. Seeing their gear—which was unmistakably the creation of their aunt Naira—and their plans, she shuddered thinking how close Vsevolod Aleksandrovich had come to having an extra asshole. And by “asshole,” she wasn't talking having Mathis dumped on him, but having a big, wide, gaping crater full of shit where the EVN used to be.

Yes, she'd learned many things, but foremost she'd learned that going one more evening without Hannes in her bed was pissing her off. Not willing to do it anymore, she'd rearranged her showings so she wasn't out too early or too late for Hannes' overprotective tastes. Having already packed a suitcase, she was about to drive out to his home when she received a text from Reign. Knowing from experience not to ignore a text from Reign, she opened it up and, after getting over the initial shock of the text and attached photo, she fell on the floor laughing. Leaving her suitcase by the door, she kicked off her

shoes and went to the kitchen for a drink before she dialed Reign's number. Zuri wasn't surprised when Reign's voicemail picked up.

"Just in case I haven't said it lately, you, Reign, are the craziest bitch I know and the best sister any person could have."

It'd been a hard day at work but a good day. Thanks to Zuri's word with Mr. Drystan, he had more work than he could handle. While he normally jumped at the opportunity to work with/for anything associated with Drystan, he didn't want a handout. He'd told Mr. Drystan as much over their meeting.

His words were met by the steely-eyed glare of the older man. "Son, do you think I made my first ten billion dollars by being stupid, falling for sob stories or get-rich-quick schemes? Do you think I'm a sucker?"

"No sir," he answered.

"Good. Zuri is a good woman, a damn good head on her shoulders and an even bigger heart. My wife likes and respects her, and after seeing Zuri in action, I can understand why. I've seen that little lady spend eight hours walking a picket line at the height of summer wearing four-inch heels. If she vouched for you, there's a good reason why she did. I've read your

CV and am impressed. I've talked to those who've worked with you, and they had nothing but the highest praise for your work ethic. I'd be a fool not to want you on my team."

Humbled by Drystan's words and Zuri's faith in him, it took him a moment to find his voice.

"Thank you, sir. There's just one thing I have to correct you on: Zuri's not simply a good woman; Zuri's the best woman."

"Nope, my Corinna is the best woman, but Zuri's not half bad," Drystan said with a smile.

"Flattery will get you everywhere," a soft voice behind him said. "Hello, Hannes. I'm Corinna Drystan."

Standing, he offered his hand to Mrs. Drystan only to be grabbed up in a warm and loving embrace. While he didn't normally touch people, he couldn't help wrapping his arms around this woman as she hugged him like his own mother.

"Hello, Ms. Corinna. Pleased to meet you."

"I know," she joked. "Now make sure you greet me like that every time you see me. And we have a family dinner every Sunday afternoon, so I expect to see you and your brothers at least once a month, being you're family now."

"Thank you," he'd said.

That'd been the beginning of the first of many new friends he'd suddenly made. Everyone wanted to work with the nephew of Mrs. Corinna P. Drystan.

Knowing he had a fridge full of food from various restaurants in the Atlanta area thanks to Reign, who came by with a care package every other day, he headed straight home so he could hurry through a shower and dinner, then call Zuri and fall asleep with the sound of her sultry voice in his ear. At least that'd been the plan...until he drove to the end of his driveway. It wasn't the sign so much as what *wasn't* there that had him smacking his head in utter fucking disbelief.

Knowing he'd need proof, he put the truck in gear, grabbed the sign out of the ground and threw it in the truck bed before taking a photo with his phone. Dialing Zuri and getting only her voicemail, he tried Reign. After getting her voicemail, he tried the number of every Posse member programmed in his phone. They all went to voicemail. Not knowing if Reign had hacked the entire cellular phone system, he sighed and dialed Mathis.

"I'm coming over," he said without preamble. Climbing into the cab, he shook his head and turned around, heading back to the city.

Mathis looked at his brother and laughed in his face. So did Gevehard, Lothair, and Konstantin. When Mathis was so helpful as to call their mother, she added her voice to the chorus of laughter.

“Okay, okay, tell us again.”

“Reign stole my house!” he explained for the thousandth time and pointed to the photo of the cinder blocks that were the only remaining evidence a home had ever been there.

“How do you know it was Reign?” Konstantin asked.

“The sign,” he said as he shook said sign in front of them. It read: “Home you must go, Hannes-son. Baby Jedi nieces and you must make.”

“Who else but Reign talks like this?” he asked.

“Yoda,” Lothair said helpfully.

“Pat Morita,” Gevehard tossed in his two cents.

“I hate all of you—not you, Mother,” he quickly amended. “Until further notice, I’m taking one of your six guest rooms, Mathis,” he said as he stomped upstairs.

“Are you going to tell me where you put his house?” she asked Reign.

“That would imply that I know something about Hannes’ missing house,” Reign replied.

“So I’m going to take that as a ‘no’ then.” Zuri laughed.

“I can neither confirm nor deny how you should take it; however, I would advise you that Mathis lives in beautiful home in Vinings that has six additional bedrooms and seven total baths. Being that he’s the most girl-like of the brothers, I’m guessing the bedroom on the northernmost side of the property—which happens to be the farthest away from Mathis’ own bedroom—would be big enough for you and Hannes.”

“Hypothetically speaking, right?”

“Of course, and word on the street is that Dréa’s made a delivery to a 123 Carolina Blue Circle a half hour ago.”

“Well, it looks like I’m headed to Vinings, being that I’ve developed a sudden craving for barbeque.”

“Good deal. See you later, Zuri.”

Disconnecting the call, Zuri threw her suitcase in the passenger seat and turned her Murcielago in the direction of Vinings.

Mathis knew for a fact that Reign had stolen Hannes' house, not because he had any proof, but because Reign was the only person crazy enough to pull off something so damn spectacular. He also knew there was a good chance Zuri would be coming to his own home, and if Zuri was coming here, there was no way in anybody's version of hell that he was going to stay in this house. Hannes loved him, but Hannes was an Alpha male shifter who'd cut down half of the king's army at the tender age of eighteen. He shuddered imagining the kind of violence Hannes could be moved to by having another male in proximity to his unclaimed mate. It might be his house, but he could get another house. Spleens, however, were hard to come by. Going upstairs, he packed several suitcases and went to his living room and waited for the doorbell to ring.

When it did so twenty minutes later, he simply opened the door and walked past a startled Zuri. "Tell him I've gone to stay at Lothair's."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

OPERATION HANNES DOES KNOW

WHAT HIT HIM BUT HE CAN'T DO ISH

ABOUT IT

It'd been two weeks, fourteen days, a fortnight, and Zuri had become bolder in her actions, more open with her love, more deeply entrenched in his heart. He was supposed to be courting her, and yet, despite his best intentions, she was the one fully in charge of this courtship. She simply pretended to let him have the lead.

And the universe had aligned to assist her.

Not only had Mathis given her a key to his house along with the security code, Lothair and Konstantin had told him in no uncertain terms that there was no way in hell he could crash with either of them because they suddenly had houses full of berserkers and vampires. And then there were the barbarians, who simply looked at him and laughed their asses off.

He thought he might find refuge with Ms. Corinna, but the crafty woman had apologized for her lack of chairs and thus the need for Zuri to sit in his lap. Seeing his distress, she'd offered to have Zuri sit on the lap of one of the other males, which had been

all it'd taken to get him to shut the hell up. Of course, Zuri didn't behave. Because Ms. Corinna had run out of cutlery, he'd had to feed her, and of course the only way he could do it without making a mess was to allow her to straddle him. That too had been Ms. Corinna's "suggestion."

On a positive note, he did find his house. Well, that wasn't technically true. He received a card from a woman thanking him for the donation of the house, which had come just days before the city was coming in to forcibly remove her from her condemned home. The enclosed photo showed her and her new baby standing in front of his house. Reign, being all helpful, had included the photo of the home she had been living in. All he could think was that calling the structure a "home" was a downright lie, just as describing it as "condemned" had been a euphemism. Taking note of her address, he instructed Lothair to go see what else she might need and make sure she had it.

He couldn't hate Reign for taking his home. Hell, he couldn't hate Reign for anything. She was fun, she made him laugh and she had his back just as hard as her sister. While he couldn't hate her, he could get her to help him, being he seemed to suddenly be in need of a house.

Knowing it was only a matter of time before he mated Zuri, and not wanting the first time they made love to happen under someone else's roof or a strange roof, Hannes had spent several days surreptitiously looking at suitable homes. Though he'd looked at many, only one truly appealed to him. The only problem was that it wasn't for sale. If anyone knew how to get around buying a house that wasn't for sale, it was Reign. Girding his loins, he'd met her for lunch.

"There are a lot of houses in Atlanta. Why do you want *that* one in particular?"

"Because Zuri smiles *every* time we drive past it."

"She also smiles every time she goes past a mirror, a shoe store, or an Italian clothier."

"Yes, but she really likes that house."

"Who cares what that witch likes?" she'd said around a mouth full of burger.

"I care," he'd said.

"Bleeding heart liberal...just like Zuri. I'll help you, but you have to do *exactly* what I say. I don't want to hear a whole bunch of 'how comes,' 'whys,' or any comments about legality."

Gritting his teeth, Hannes had thought it over. And Reign had used that time to weaken him. Waving the photo of that house under his nose, she'd taunted

him. "Think how happy Zuri would be in this house with you."

"You're not going to strong-arm some old lady or young kids out of their home, are you?"

"I might kick an old lady down a flight of stairs, but I'd never strong-arm one out of her house." She'd winked.

"Fine."

"And you have to sign a nondisclosure form."

"Okay," he'd said.

"And recognize me as your Jedi Master, which means you have to convert to Jedi."

"That's going too far," he'd said.

"Fine then. You're the one who cares about making Little Miss Spoiled Brat happy."

In the end, he'd agreed to her terms, signed her agreement, and converted to Jedi. He didn't know what she'd done or how she'd done it, but two days later he received a text telling him to get his ass in a suit and meet her at the courthouse. He'd done it, of course. Waiting where she'd told him to, he got the surprise of his life when she came strutting up in not just normal-people clothes, but a tailored business suit.

"How do I look?" she asked.

"Almost human," he said.

“Let’s get this show on the road. Follow my lead, Hannes-son. And remember, if you narc on me, I’ll joog your ass in the throat...every time I see you...after my momma breaks me out of foreign prison.”

He didn’t even balk. He simply signed and dated everywhere she indicated, nodded when told to and smiled a lot. Hannes had lost track of the statutes they’d broken, but in the end he had that house. When the time was right, he was going to carry Zuri over that threshold and begin their lives together...that is, if she didn’t kill him first.

The Rangers-Decebel sisters were driving him crazy. It was a crapshoot which sister was pushing him closer to the edge. And then Zuri waltzed her beautiful, naked behind past him.

For some reason, Zuri couldn’t seem to find any bed clothes. “It seems someone took all of my nightwear,” she said as she slid her glorious, naked curves next to him.

After suffering that first night, he went straight to the store and bought her twenty sets of pajamas. And wouldn’t you know it: someone “broke in” to Mathis’ house and stole them. Every day for a week. Zuri was killing him. Somehow her voice had become

more seductive. Her breasts had become perkier, her hips had become more flared and her ass had become a tad bigger. Her hair shined more, her strut was slinkier, her legs longer. Of course, she had to accidentally touch him all of the time. And he meant *all* of the time, because somehow her Murcielago had suddenly needed work, and she could either ride with him or with one of the unmated berserkers or vamps. That was a “hell no,” so she rode with him to work and back.

His cock was so hard he thought he was going to burst. His nose was so open he was sure everyone could see straight up into his brain. His bear was so hungry for his mate that he had to concentrate in an effort to stop shifting. Zuri had won...and he knew it. But he was a male and thus stupid, so he didn't simply marry her and mate her with the quickness. He'd soon learn that denying a Rangers-Decebel woman could only go bad, especially when all she trying to do was love you with everything she had.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN:

AH, SOOKIE-SOOKIE!

Zjxadrâzqué'an Empire, Present Day

It'd been a long time coming, but finally Zjxadrâzqué Zjxoch had found the one thing he'd coveted out of all of existence: his family. He'd cut a swath across the universe, crushing galaxies one by one to find them. He'd battled through sickness, he'd battled through injury, and he'd come near death in an effort to get to his family. He knew they were out there, for he felt them. After over two decades of tearing up the universe looking for them, they'd finally been found. When his brothers Nyx and Ferro had told him, he'd done what no Zjxadrâzqué before him had done: he'd showed the Empire his emotions. Unashamedly, he'd wept, and his tears had created a new ocean.

Zjxoch didn't care if his tears made him appear weak. He'd searched so long, so long, so long. Every night he went to sleep with the image of the only female who'd been strong enough to match him strength for strength. And then the universe had ripped them apart. Though he couldn't feel her, one day, he'd felt life within her, and he knew their love

had created it. Girls. He had twin girls. Though he had no way of knowing what they looked like, he found that if he meditated deeply enough, he could touch their minds. He also discovered that when they were in distress, he could touch their minds and reassure them, access their pain and alleviate it, feel their weakness and loan them his strength. That ability didn't come without cost, and thus, that was part of the reason he'd lain in a healing chamber for so many years. He had to watch over his babies as best he could, even if it cost him his strength, his health, and his very life. No injury had come close to paining him like the injuries his babies had received a decade prior. And no insult would receive a more devastating revenge.

That day had been a living nightmare. Thankfully, nothing like it had happened since. He hadn't felt a spike of emotion that strong until...now. Zjxoch didn't know which of his daughters was in distress, but now he knew where his daughters were. Already en route, he lay down and opened himself and loaned both of his daughter his strength. Pouring every bit of love he had into his words, he then recited Psalms 91 over them, knowing the verses always soothed his daughters.

The events of this afternoon had taken their toll on everyone...and included in that equation were her two girls. Being a twin herself, Jack knew that Reign was affected by Zuri's earlier distress. Knowing that Hannes was doing a good job taking care of Zuri, she took care of Reign. Since she was too old to be lying on anybody's floor, Jack ordered Reign off the floor.

"Off the floor, baby. Come over and sit by Momma."

Hearing the sigh and seeing the put-out look, she executed the momma eyebrow and shut down Reign's protests before they even got past her lips. Sitting beside her, Jack laid a pillow in her lap and pulled Reign down. Kissing the top of her head, she wrapped her arms around her and told her to rest.

"Sleep, baby. Momma's got you."

"Love you, Momma," Reign said. And so softly Jack almost missed it, she added, "Love you, Zuri."

Reign's love for her sister brought tears to Jack's eyes...and memories. Bitter memories. Bitter memories that needed avenging. Jack didn't realize her jaw was clenched tight until Silana's soft voice cut through Reign's snores.

"You certainly wouldn't know that child wasn't sleepy from the volume of her snores."

"She gets that from her papa Everglades."

“And she gets her fearlessness from you. You look like you need to take a ride around the estate. Go on. The bears are here, and I’ve got a vamp and a berserker guarding the entrance of this room.”

“Thank you, Silana,” Jack said as she put more pillows under Reign’s head before kissing her and exiting the room.

Jack felt hinky...not threatened, not on the edge, not angry, but hinky. She’d only felt this way a few times in her life, and each of those times had heralded a XLE—Xiloxoch Level Event. While she wouldn’t classify the events as “bad,” she wasn’t about to take any chances. Jack hadn’t survived everything she had by playing ostrich. Climbing in one of the side-by-sides, Jack went on a patrol of Silana’s property.

What a property it was. Surrounded by mature trees, the twelve-thousand-square-foot antebellum mansion had over three thousand square feet of porch. The porch was a great place to sip iced tea and take in the sheer awesomeness of the fifteen-hundred-acre spread. There was a lot to do at Silana’s place. The hundred-acre lake, the eighty-acre duck pond and creeks, made for good fishing, as well as excellent duck, quail, deer, and turkey hunting. The cleared

trails, the addition of a lighted sporting clay range, and the renovation of equestrian facilities that included two twenty-acre pastures, a riding ring and barns that had a combined total of forty stalls made for a good time for the youngins. While she had plenty of room in the main house, when the girls got too crazy, she could put them in any of the five guest homes that were spread over the property.

Riding the property soothed Jack, as the wildness reminded her of her native North Carolina. Hell, the wildness of her Posse reminded her of home too. Their ever-expanding Posse would fit right in with the residents of Nonzerosum. Who would've thought their Posse would include vampires, berserkers, a crazy white boy, barbarians, and now shifters? For that matter, who would've thought she and her daughters would've still been alive, considering all the people who'd been after them?

Parking the side-by-side in front of one of the work barns, she grabbed the cooler and went inside. Taking out her thermostat, she poured out a measure of sweet tea and pulled out her worn copy of *Women Who Run with the Wolves*. It might look like she was just relaxing, but she wasn't relaxing at all. She was waiting...and not just on anybody, but on the second-most conniving, dangerous badass motherfucker she knew: Her twin Naira (aka Raven Sinclair).

Jack didn't have to look around to know Naira had made an appearance. She was her twin, and thus she was able to feel her. Seeing Naira snatch up the sweet tea and down it like a thirsty man drank water, she smiled. It didn't matter that it was ten degrees cooler than the average February temperature; it'd never be too cold for Naira to drink iced tea—heavy on the sugar and heavy on the crushed ice.

"You still pretending to read that book?" Naira asked when she finished chugging down the tea.

"You still pretending to be dead?" Jack asked.

"It has its uses," Naira responded.

"I'll take your word for it," Jack said as she put her book away.

"You feel hinky, don't you?" Naira asked.

"Yeah."

"Me too, which is why I called the original badass mofo's," Naira said.

"Maybe it's just me being a mother and all, but I'm pretty sure you shouldn't refer to our parents as 'mofos,' and if you must, you should say it with a whole lot more awe in your voice," Jack said.

"Are you saying Momma and Daddy aren't badass mofos?" Naira asked.

"Hell no, I'm just saying you shouldn't refer to our parents thusly."

“Dammit, then what am I going to say in the Christmas cards?”

Jack couldn’t help it; she burst out laughing. Naira might be smart, but she wasn’t much on social niceties, as proven by the greeting cards she’d sent out one year bearing the message: *Happy Holidays to one badass Mofo from another badass mofo.*

Naira was straight batshit fucking crazy, and Reign took after her.

“Hannes is a nice boy.”

“He is, and he has unbelievably quick reflexes, for which I’m thankful. That child damn near cut her face off, Naira,” Jack cried.

“But she didn’t,” Naira said as she hugged her.

“Thank the Lord.”

“I’ll ‘Amen’ that.”

“I need you to leave the bat cave and come inside.”

“Being I’m deep cover, who am I supposed to be—Naira Rangers-Decebel or Raven Sinclair?”

“Raven Sinclair had her uses, but she’s not my sister. I need you to be my sister and the girls’ aunt. Please, Naira. I’m too old to be coming out in the middle of the woods to your underground hideout to see my twin.”

“That’s a lot to think about, little sister. I’ve spent a long time running.”

“I should’ve stopped you a long time ago, Naira,” Jack said. “I was scared...scared for my babies, scared for me if something else happened to them. But by being scared I forgot the first rule of our family: we don’t run from shit. We run to it,” she said as she exited the barn, leaving Naira to think some more about what she’d spent the last decade considering.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN:

ABOUT DAMN TIME

Rising early, Jack couldn't help but smile at the smell of barbeque and sweet potatoes. Having a house overflowing with guests, Silana obviously hadn't wasted any time setting up her grills—yes, *grills*, plural not singular. No gas grills for the God-fearing Silana Toussaint. Silana might have new-school ideas regarding feminism and religion, but she was old school when it came to grilling. It was charcoal or nothing.

“You want help?”

“No thank you. I want you and the girls to go to Me, Myself and Sigh and get the works. Be back in time for dinner.”

The fact that Silana wouldn't look at her was her first clue that something was up. Silana didn't speak on it, but Silana sometimes “saw” things. Having a father with Native American blood coursing through his veins, a mother who studied myths and legends, and a daughter who specialized in conspiracy theories, Jack didn't bother questioning it; she simply nodded and waited for her daughters.

Hannes woke to the feel of something wonderful covering him: his mate. Sometime during the night, his *Liebling* had climbed atop his back and made herself at home there. If he wasn't sure she wasn't scared of him, that cleared up any remaining doubts.

His pride had made him a fool...and not just any kind of fool, but a damn fool. He'd put off marking Zuri, and she'd almost paid the price for his stupidity. Never again, though. Never again would he be the cause of danger coming toward her.

Needing a few more moments before he faced her, he lowered his mental shields and reached out for his brothers. *"Is all well?"*

"Yes," they all replied.

"Silana has ordered the Rangers-Decebel women to the spa," Mathis said. *"They leave as soon as your woman awakens."*

"Silana has ordered a contingent to accompany them."

"While we're protecting them, who is going to protect us?" Lothair asked.

"Stop being a pussy," Konstantin admonished his brother.

"Why don't you come over here and make me?" Lothair returned.

And thus began another day in the Sighelm family. Hannes wasn't annoyed at his brothers' bickering. Bickering meant that everything had returned to normal. His musings were interrupted by Mathis. "*This might be a good time to go get our sister-in-law a ring,*" Mathis said.

Hannes didn't respond. He simply growled in Mathis' head. He'd ordered Zuri a ring two weeks ago, and his brother knew it. Zuri was right: Mathis was an asshole. When the ladies went into Atlanta for their spa day, he'd swing by the jewelers and pick it up. If time allowed, he'd kick his brothers' asses on GP.

Having decided on a plan of action and knowing his arm was fully healed, Hannes shifted back to humanoid form.

"Hey," Zuri protested.

Gently rolling her beneath him, he responded. "Hey yourself, *Liebling*. I know you slept well being you had a most wonderful mattress."

"I did," she said without a trace of remorse.

"And you'll have to do it again. In fact, you'll have to do it every night," he whispered in her ear.

"That better be a proposal," she said as she arched her curves into his angles.

"I don't have to propose; I marked you. You're mine," he said as he gently rocked against her.

“Does that mean you’ll get all crazy boyfriend and show up at my job in bunny slippers, swim trunks and a wife beater?” she smart-mouthed.

“I’m a whole lot more than your boyfriend, *Liebling*. And I’d want everyone to know it, so I’d have to amp up my outfit. I think a speed-skater bodysuit, a tuxedo jacket, a pair of ballerina slippers and night-vision goggles would be a good foundation for the crazy I’d kick off. And just to kick it up a notch, I’d wear pink sponge rollers in my hair.”

“That’s crazy on a whole new level,” Zuri said.

“That’s the kind of male I am. While I might tolerate a lot of things, anyone interfering with my mate is not one of them.”

“If you want to have the right to wild out at my job, I’m going to need a proposal.”

“And you’ll get one...after I get my apology.” He punctuated his statement with a growl.

“I’m not apologizing for Reign. Momma is the one who let that crazy woman loose on society.”

“While Reign does indeed owe me an apology, she’s not the Rangers-Decebel woman I need to hear one from at this moment.”

“For what?”

Hannes didn’t immediately respond. Instead he took a few moments to once again watch the play of the sun on Zuri’s skin—that flawless skin that she’d

almost butchered to prove to him how far she'd go for his love.

"For attempting to injure my beloved."

"Would you have loved me less if I'd cut my face?"

"I only know of one way to love you—with. Every. Single. Breath."

Zuri was touched by Hannes' words because she knew he meant it. "You'd better keep it that way, because I love you the same way."

"I know, Zuri. I know," he said.

"I'm sorry I hurt you, Hannes," she said as she stroked him. "I thought I was going to die when I realized how badly I hurt you. There was so much blood."

"Shh, *Liebling*. I didn't die, and further, I don't want to now that you've showed me what it is to live."

"I can show you some other things too," she sassed as she rotated her hips.

"Zuri," he whispered.

"Hannes," she returned.

"As much as I'd like to take you up on that, we'll have to postpone your pleasure, as you've been ordered to the spa."

“When?” she gasped as she arched into his caresses.

“As soon as you’re ready,” he replied as he inserted a finger into her sex.

From the ease with which his thick finger slid into her, Zuri didn’t think it was possible for her to be any more ready than she currently was.

“Don’t want to go...” she began.

“Shh,” he said as he grinded his hardness against her softness. “You need to go. And while we’re out, I want you to pick out an outfit you really like and buy two of them.”

“Two of the exact same outfit?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“So that you’ll have a backup as a reminder of the one I ripped off of you on our wedding night.”

“Oh damn, Hannes. You cannot say that if—” she began.

Hannes didn’t even allow her to finish that thought. Instead he marked her again, this time on the opposite side of where he’d marked her yesterday. Working his way down her body, he gently nipped both full breasts then each hip before turning on his side and pulling her against him. “Two of the exact same outfit,” he reiterated. “And clear your calendar for the rest of the week.”

“What if I don’t want to clear my calendar?” she sasssed.

“What if I show up wherever you’re at and palm your breasts through your clothes before lifting your skirt and sinking my big, hard Austrian cock into your warmth?”

“Please, Hannes,” Zuri pled.

“Please what? Please show up at your job and claim you in front of anyone who happens to be there? Please take you right now? Please lick you to orgasm?” he said as he pulled her against him and reached around and played her sex with his fingers.

“Yes,” she moaned. “Yes, to all of it.”

“And you’re going to get all of it,” he said, “after I give you a spanking for spending the last four months tempting me.”

“When did I ever tempt you, Hannes?” she asked as she ground her lushness against him.

Responding to her taunt, he spread her legs with his and palmed her mound while ravishing her mouth.

“Only every moment of every day,” he said when he pulled back from their kiss.

Having enjoyed a hot-rock full-body spa massage and had her locks washed, tightened and

styled, Jack sat back and sipped on iced tea in between bites of the strawberry shortcake that Iain supplied to select local establishments. While she never would've paid the fifty-dollars-per-cake fee, she could see why people did. Iain knew how to love him some Victorious, sing the shit out of country songs, and make some strawberry shortcake. And he also did CWB real good when pushed. If he wasn't so in love with Victorious, she would've made him marry one of her girls.

Speaking of girls, she looked over at them and smiled indulgently. Even at a resort known for being relaxing, they argued. If the spa had been owned by anyone other than Serengeti Uhuru, the lot of them would've been tossed out a long time ago. As it was, Serengeti was as crazy as her kids...even going so far as to egg on their teasing.

They'd been at it all morning. Not only had they argued during their massage, they'd kicked each other as they sat under the dryer and saluted each other with middle fingers. They'd argued during the manicure and pedicure, and now they were arguing over the light lunch that came with their package.

If she didn't feel the affection beneath their taunts, she would've stepped in. As it was, she couldn't help but enjoy their bantering...especially as she'd been doing the same with her sister all morning.

“You’re a weirdo. Only you would spend your whole message text messaging,” Zuri accused Reign.

“At least I don’t need the help of multiple agencies to get my man to marry me,” Reign returned as she sent yet another text.

“That’s because you don’t have a man because you’re in love with a nine-hundred-year-old, three-foot-tall, bald green alien.”

Upon hearing that particular insult, Reign actually stopped texting. “Talk badly about the Jedi Master, you must not. Obviously, strong with the dark side you are, Zuri-son.”

“They get that from you,” Naira said from beside her.

“They get it from *us*,” she corrected.

Hannes couldn’t do much with his scarring, but he allowed Indy to take him to see Armistead Kennesaw to get his split ends seen to. Perhaps “allowed” wasn’t the right word, being that a—he had no vehicle, being that the Rangers-Decebel women had commandeered it; b—as soon as he’d successfully talked Silana into believing he couldn’t eat anymore, Indy had dragged him off.

“We have some things to see to,” she’d said.

Among the “things” he had to see to was a crash course in Marriage 101, which essentially boiled down to “marriage isn’t a play toy” and “don’t act crazy.” Assuring Indy that he had no intentions of dishonoring the sacrament of marriage or of acting crazy, he got her to drop him by the jewelers, where he picked up Zuri’s ring.

“What do you think?” he asked as he showed her the two-carat round solitaire set in a channel-set band.

“I think you have good taste and that Zuri will be lucky to have you. I also think that woman’s so in love with you that you could put a candy ring on her hand and she wouldn’t be any more pleased.”

“So I should take this back and get her one of those?” he joked.

“If you think you can survive whatever Jack, Naira and Reign will do to you for such a thing, go for it.”

“No thank you,” he said as he shivered at the thought of what those women could come up with.

“From all that pinging your phone’s been making, I’m guessing you have some other places you need to go. So are we going to Reign’s house first or the office?”

“How’d you know I needed to go there?”

“Because she downloaded the same itinerary on my PDA as she did yours—minus all the swear words she used in yours.”

Knowing there was no need to argue, he decided to go to the office before going to Reign’s house.

Silana had outdone herself, and she told her so.

“Well, I could do no less, being this is an engagement party,” Silana had said.

“He just asked me for Zuri’s hand five minutes ago, Silana.”

“Maybe with his mouth, but that boy’s been asking for Zuri’s hand since the moment he met her.”

Shaking her head, Jack simply looked out at the sea of food that crowded the granite counters. Platter after platter of ribs, chicken, steak, burgers, and hotdogs were joined by industrial-sized trays of baked beans, macaroni and cheese, potato salad, greens, five kinds of cake, two types of pies and pitchers of iced tea and lemonade. It was times like this when Jack understood why seven hundred square feet of Silana’s house was taken up by the kitchen and why her kitchen resembled ones in many upscale restaurants. Not only did she have a walk-in refrigerator and freezer, there were several under-counter

refrigerators. There were two granite-topped bake islands just waiting for some dessert to be rolled out on them and multiple forty-eight-inch stainless steel ranges with electric conventional ovens, gas burners, griddles, and grills. And then there was her backyard grilling area that would make any master grillers fall to his or her knees and weep.

From the spread that was offered, Jack wondered whether or not Silana had gone to sleep at all last night. To say there was a lot of food on hand was an understatement, being that there was still enough food to feed a small army despite the presence of men who ate like they were getting ready to enter hibernation. There was no way they could've eaten all that Silana had prepared, but they gave it their best.

Making Silana sit down, she supervised the cleaning up of Silana's kitchen. Familiar with the pristine conditions Silana demanded, it was a full ninety minutes of working until she was satisfied. During that time she'd heard several of the Otherworldlies bandy about the word "slave driver." They could think what they would, but as long as they wanted to eat Silana's food, they'd better be willing to clean up the mess.

With the kitchen once again looking like it was about to be featured on the Food Network, she collected a glass of iced tea and joined the others in the

living room. She smiled as she passed the barbarians. Standing with their hands on the hilts of their swords, they actually looked happy. She wasn't naïve enough to think they were happy about the pending wedding; most likely their joy stemmed from the fact that Silana had allowed them to wear their swords in the house again.

"Just until we hear what we need to hear," Silana whispered when she took her seat beside her.

No sooner had she sat down than Hannes approached her daughter and dropped to his knee.

"Zuri, will you do the honor of marrying me?" he asked as he slid the ring on her finger.

The last syllable hadn't even fallen from Hannes' lips before he had an armful of Zuri.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:
OH. MY. GOODNESS. DAMN.
KA-POW. WHOA!

Hannes prayed on the drive to the house where he was going to begin his life with Zuri. He knew she'd like it. Still, he was nervous how she'd react to the way he'd gotten the house. Driving up the cobblestone-lined drive, he waited with baited breath for her to react.

"Zuri?" he asked upon seeing her jaw clench.

"Not one word, Hannes. Come lift me out and carry me over the threshold."

"I don't want to fight with you on our first night in our house."

When Hannes pulled into the drive of the one house in all of Atlanta that she truly loved, Zuri had come close to losing her ever loving mind. Too overcome to form a decent sentence, she remained silent. Hearing the concern in Hannes' voice, she reassured him, as she didn't want to fight either.

“Okay then, we’ll fight on the way into the house,” she said as she opened her phone and used the voice dial function. “Weirdo.”

“Yes, Zuri?”

“You sold my house!”

“As a licensed realtor, selling houses is what I do.”

“You’ve sold exactly two houses in your illustrious real-estate career. You only have a license as a front.”

“Regardless of how many houses I may or may not have sold, I followed every protocol, including giving the buyer a tour of the premises and disclosing all potential drawbacks to purchasing the property.”

“What drawbacks? This property is exquisite!”

“Yeah, the house might be flawless, but the woman who comes with it certainly isn’t.”

“How did you pull it off?”

“Let’s see, I threw on an outfit that was two sizes too small, puffed up my cleavage, dropped my voice two octaves, and oh yeah...I’m your fucking identical twin, that’s how I pulled it off, you nutcase.”

“You sold Hannes my house, Reign.”

“And I made a fat commission too!”

“Why?” Zuri asked, knowing the reason but wanting to hear it.

“For the same reason I stole Hannes’ house. And also because that crazy German is old-fashioned and wants to come to you correct. He loves you, Zuri, otherwise I wouldn’t have squeezed my ass into four-inch heels and hot-combed my hair to pull it off.”

“Fine. How’s your hair now? One big giant afro puff.”

“I’m kicking your ass next time I see you,” she said.

“Not if the big German puts it on you right. Now go make my niece or nephew. The Force needs new Jedi, and your womb’s just sitting there taking up space.”

Hanging up, Zuri nodded to Hannes, who’d stopped short of the threshold.

“You’re just as crazy as my sister. You know that?”

“I’ll take that insult as long as you love me as much as you love your sister,” he said.

“I do. Now take me inside, and then take me,” she challenged.

Watching Hannes’ eyes blaze, Zuri couldn’t help but smirk and hum Haydn’s String Quartet in C, Opus 76 Number 3, “Kaiser.”

Though she’d lived in this house for over a year, Zuri had never made it to her room so fast. Then again, she’d never had a seven foot tall Austrian with a

hard cock carrying her there. She was just thinking how Hannes' desire turned her on so good when she suddenly found herself on her back, covered by three hundred pounds of Alpha male.

Having waited for twenty-three years for this man, Zuri was in a hurry to have him. Pulling his dress shirt from his trousers, she wrapped her legs around his hips and caressed his muscular back.

"Zuri," Hannes pled.

"Yes, Hannes," she said even as she raked her nails over his nipples.

Feeling him tremble, she continued to touch him just the way she'd dreamed for the last five months.

"You have to stop, *Liebling*. I'm too close," he said as he tried to pull away from her.

"Good, now get closer," she demanded.

Knowing he was minutes away from mating the one female who completely owned his heart, who completely owned him, he took great gulping breaths in an effort to calm his bear. Dipping his head, he nuzzled his mate and breathed in the scent of undiluted temptation. Stepping back to free himself of his clothes, he kept his eyes glued to the expanse of beauty before him...and shuddered at what he saw.

Her eyes were filled with want and her body vibrated with need. And it was all for him. Him—the scarred man with the brusque personality who was eschewed by almost every breathing thing. He had no business wanting a woman like her. Zuri was all of those things little girls dreamed of being and grown men waited their whole life for. She was beautiful, sophisticated, classy, and all his. HIS! Though she wore his marks, and his ring, Hannes still couldn't believe it. Perhaps after the wedding he'd grow more accustomed to it, but he knew in his heart that fifty years from now, he'd still be amazed that she'd chosen him.

Finally free of all of his clothes, he stalked to her with the intent of unwrapping her. Ducking as a stiletto flew by his head quickly followed by a silk shirt, his ego rose to the surface. While one part of him protested Zuri unwrapping his present, another part of him roared in triumph. His *Liebling* was particular about her clothes, so for her to treat them so shabbily meant that her desire matched his. The picture of her need coupled with the scent of her aroma compromised the strength of that proverbial straw. The single strand of control he was holding on to became a microscopic strand. Reaching down to stroke himself, he watched her finish tearing off her clothes...and he loved every moment.

Though she was familiar with Hannes' form, Zuri was on fire for her man. Need coursed through her veins, heating up her body that felt too empty without him on it.

"Hannes, get your fine, hot naked ass over here," she said as she slid out of her pencil skirt.

"Yes, *Liebling*, but you must know something. This is not a game to me. Forever means forever. While you may take my ring off, you will never be able to remove my marks. I'm a selfish bastard, Zuri. I don't give up anything that is mine without a fight."

"I'm a Rangers-Decebel woman—I know a little something about fights," she said as she rose from the bed and stalked him.

Recalling his confession about always making love in the dark, she reached for her smart remote and entered a code. "Let there be light," she said when every light in the house blazed to life.

Placing her hands on his shoulders, she looked him in the eye and used all seven feet of him like a stripper pole. And Hannes let her...for all of two seconds.

"You bring out the beast in me, *Liebling*," he growled as he stopped her upwards shimmy.

“Good,” she said as she stroked him. “I can’t wait to hear what you sound like when you roar.”

“You’ll purr long before I roar,” he promised as he picked her up and placed her in the center of their bed.

Hannes didn’t immediately follow her onto the bed. Instead, he took a moment and looked at her. He looked at her with intensity and set her ablaze with his desire.

“*Schön* [beautiful]. *Du bist schön, Liebling*,” he rasped with such truth in his voice that tears fell from her eyes.

“*Danke*, Hannes, *danke*,” she whispered.

“Never thank me for the truth, *Liebling*. Always expect it,” he said as he gently clasped her right hand with his left and touched his forehead to hers.

“*Schön*,” he said once more before beginning an exploration of her terrain. Hannes didn’t rush. Instead, he took the time to explore every inch of her—just like he always did. Starting with her mouth, he breathed “I love you’s” into it before kissing his way down. Gently, he nipped her neck, her collarbone, and the swells of her breasts before taking a breast fully into his mouth.

“Hannes,” she moaned as she held his head to her breast to prolong the pleasure.

“*Ja, Liebling*,” he mumbled around his treat.

Zuri liked the way Hannes always answered her as if he lived only to make her dreams come true.

He smiled against her before moving on to her other breast. She could do nothing but give herself up to the exquisite touch of Hannes and revel in the love he put into every caress. Tangling her fingers in his hair when he left her breast and trailed kisses down her stomach, she sighed in time to his breaths.

Feeling him settle between her legs, all she could do was gasp as he kissed her intimately. And then a few moments later, when Hannes propelled her into pleasure, all she could do was hold on to him as she soared. Involuntarily, her hips left the bed and screams left her mouth. Her sounds of pleasure didn't deter him from giving her more. In fact, they seemed to simply spur him on as he continued his gentle assault on her person. Screaming out his name, she collapsed back onto the bed.

As he crawled back up her body, he gently spread her legs with one of his massive thighs and brushed her sex with the tip of his cock but didn't enter her. He may not have entered her, but from the determined look in his eyes and the veins in his neck standing out in bas relief, Zuri had no doubt that he wanted her fiercely.

She knew Hannes would never hurt her and while one part of him might roar to take her hard, fast

and now, the gentleman held him back. The beast roared to possess her, but the gentleman lived only to please her.

Taking a deep breath, she urged him on. "Please, Hannes," she begged even as she dragged him closer.

"*Liebling*, I don't want to hurt you," he whispered.

"And you won't. Don't hold back anything from me. Give yourself to me, Hannes."

"You have all of me," he said as he slowly entered her.

Though she was flexible, Hannes was a whole lot of male and one hundred percent hers. Looking deep into his eyes as he entered her, she held him tighter and pulled him in...inch by delicious inch.

"Do you know what I liked best about this house, *Liebling*?" he asked.

Before she could respond, he told her.

"This bed and the fact that I'm the only man who's been in it."

Touched deeply by his words, she stroked his face. "You know what I like best about your heart? The fact that I'm the only woman who's been in it."

One of Hannes' favorite musical pieces was Mozart's Symphony Number 30, but nothing he'd ever heard compared to the sounds of pleasure and the words of love that came from Zuri. No opus touched his soul like hearing her say his name...every time. He wanted her to always say his name with that breathy, sultry voice, welcoming him...wanting him...loving him.

Hannes wanted this moment—hell, *every* moment—with Zuri to last forever. Though his libido rode him relentlessly, he took his time with Zuri.

“*Liebling*,” he whispered in her ear. “You feel like...life. I’m so thankful for you, so blessed to have you, so undeserving of you, but I cannot let you go. Thank you for letting me in.”

“We seem to have a ways to go,” she breathed.

“I’ll wait for as long as it takes for your body to accept me—even if it takes the rest of our lives.”

“Do you mean that, Hannes?” she asked in a voice that broke his heart to pieces.

“I mean every word I say to you, *Liebling*.”

“And I love you so much, Hannes.”

“Then why do you cry?”

“Because you get all up in the spaces I let few people in, and you fix things I didn’t know was broken. You’re so good to me, Hannes. So. Damn. Good,” she said as she arched into him and took the rest of him.

The things Zuri did to him. The things she made him feel. The man she made him strive to be. He loved this woman, he thought as he fully seated himself within her tight, welcoming sheath. Keeping his eyes locked with hers, he made love to her gently and savored every breathtaking moment.

Hannes lost track of time when he was in her body. He lost track of everything except the woman in his arms...this woman who remembered the things he'd confessed to her and slew the dragons that had enslaved him. How could he do anything but love this woman? How could he not do all within his power to make her happy? Though it took some time for her to take him, once she could she did as she'd promised. She didn't simply take his lovemaking; she made love with him.

Zuri was so responsive to his touch. She shuttered when he stroked her. She trembled when he caressed her. And when he took too long to touch her, she dragged him closer and demanded his touch even as she touched him.

Zuri made no secret of the fact that she took great pleasure in touching him. She was always touching him. His *Liebling* loved him with her hands and built him up with her smiles.

With their home flooded with light, their bed filled with their laughter, sighs and moans, and their

hearts bursting with love, he finally gave in to his body's demands and poured his future into her. And just like his *Liebling* did everything else, she welcomed him with grace. And what did she say when they'd consummated their love? She thanked him and held onto him tight.

Hannes knew that she truly meant every word...knew she meant every touch. He could not speak. He could only stare at her in wonder and thank his God. *Danke Gott. Danke für diese Frau* [Thank you God for this woman]. *Eine Rippe war solch ein kleiner Preis, zum für solch ein Geschenk zu zahlen* [A rib was such a small price to pay for such a gift].

When he was finished thanking his God, he thanked her. *Ich liebe Dich, Zuri. Ich liebe Dich. Du bist meine Welt.* [You are my world]. *Danke für das Lieben ich* [thank you for loving me]. *Nun da ich Sie gefunden habe, werde ich ließ Sie nie gehen* [Now that I have found you, I will never let you go].

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN:

DAMN. SHIT. FUCK.

DAMN SOME MORE

The thirty-minute drive to her home gave Jack plenty of time to consider the day's events. Today had been a big day for the Rangers-Decebel women. Zuri was all but married, Reign had a new convert, and she'd gotten her sister back. And she'd gone to the spa. Jack didn't often indulge her feminine side, as there was no reason to, but the spa treatment had left her feeling decidedly feminine...even under her jeans, boots and holster.

Unloading the two family-size coolers that Silana had insisted she take home, she thought it was a good thing she had an extra-large capacity refrigerator and another in the garage, otherwise she never would've been able to shut the door for all the food Silana had sent her home with. She was a good woman, that Silana.

While she should be tired, she discovered she was too charged to even think about heading to bed. Stretching out on the couch in her living room, she contemplated whether she should start a fire or just turn on the heat. Deciding that central heating was the most convenient route, she reached for the universal

remote that controlled everything in the home and turned it on. That seen to, she dimmed the lights and enjoyed the view of the wooded acreage that surrounded her log cabin.

Ah, her woods were beautiful no matter the time of year. The location was what sold this house. Well, that and the floor-to-ceiling fireplace in the two-story living room. She'd just snuggled in good when her doorbell rang. Da hell? Though it was not yet six p.m., the only visitors she usually received consisted of her Posse.

Checking her guns, she tossed back her locks, adjusted her holster and headed to the door. Swinging it open, she was met with a sea of warriors flanking both sides of the staircase and surrounding the wraparound porch. Jack had been waiting for this moment for the last decade. Knowing her sister could feel her and would watch out for her babies, she unholstered her guns and did what Rangers-Decebel women had always done: took the fight to their enemies. "Live free or die!" she shouted as she jumped off of the porch.

Jack jumped, but she did not land. Held in midair by an invisible hand, she could only watch as every warrior kneeled but for the three warriors who approached. Finally, stopping at the bottom stair, they too kneeled before her. Feeling herself float back

to the ground, she was all set to blast everything. And then she saw another warrior approach. She knew that walk, she knew that smirk, she knew that look in her eyes even though it'd been twenty-five years since she'd last seen him.

Everything in her body went haywire. Her heart stopped for a second before beating out the rhythm of Carnival. She was angry, furious, happy, joyful, moved, thankful, pissed...all at once. Not knowing which emotion to settle on, she picked them all.

"I was pregnant for two fucking years, you asshole!" she yelled right before she jumped in his arms.

Zjxoch didn't know what kind of reception he'd receive. He only knew that he had to find her. Feeling her in his arms, he could only breathe in her scent and thank the One who made the universe for this woman.

Just as he thought, she hadn't been impressed with his title, his warriors or his power. His brothers and warriors, however, had been impressed by her. As they should be. Zjxadrâzqué'ia Xiloxoch Rangers-Decebel was the catalyst for the existence of the Zjxadrâzqué'an Empire as the citizens of the Empire knew it today.

How he loved this woman, he thought as he held her naked form to his. After going so long without her, he didn't want anything between them. Glad to have her tucked up under his heart—right where she belonged—he couldn't wait for tomorrow to see and hold his daughters.

The next morning

Zuri's whole body tingled. She loved the feeling of being loved by Hannes. Wrapping her arms tighter around his heavily muscled back, she sighed. She knew she had stars in her eyes and a dreamy smile on her face. She knew she looked well and truly loved because she was, and damn if she was going to try and hide it.

"Oh my goodness, can you get a room? You've been all up under the man for two days," Reign asked with just a hint of disgust in her voice.

"Nope," Zuri said, not even trying to hide the "I don't give a damn" in hers.

"You are such a slut-whore, and you're totally taking advantage of Hannes. I'm telling Momma when she gets here," Reign said.

"Go ahead. It's my house. I can do what I want in it," Zuri said.

"It is not *your* house; it's Hannes' house."

“And Hannes is my man, and I can also do what I want with him,” Zuri said.

“But I am his Jedi Master.”

“Since when?”

“Since he converted to Jedi.”

“You did not convert my man to Jedi!”

“Did too,” Reign said.

“Is this true, Hannes?” Zuri asked.

“Yes,” he ground out.

“That’s it. Ass whipping, little girl,” Zuri said from somewhere beneath Hannes.

“Bring it on, little sister,” Reign said, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “I haven’t kicked your ass in a long time, and you are so overdue for some beat down.”

“Are they always like this?” Zjxoch asked.

“Yep. Obviously, they get that from your side of the family,” Jack said as she pushed open the door and announced herself.

“Zuri, Reign, go to your separate corners,” she said.

“But Momma, Reign converted my man to Jedi.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing. Heathen, you are Zuri-son,” Reign said.

“And she sold him my house,” Zuri said.

“Hannes cannot speak on that due to a nondisclosure agreement,” Reign said.

“And she called me a slut-whore,” Zuri cried.

“Because she is, Momma. Look at poor Hannes looking all worn out because she won’t keep her grabby little paws off of him.”

Knowing this could go on for hours, she simply lifted her momma eyebrow. There was immediate silence. So caught up in their arguing, neither had noticed the male behind her until they walked farther into the room.

“Who are you?!” both her girls asked as they ran and thrust her behind them.

“And if we don’t like the answer, you’re going to be limping to your demise,” Zuri said.

“For that matter, if we like your answer you still might be limping to your demise,” Reign added.

“I’m Zjxadrâzqué Zjxoch, your father.”

Not many things broke him down, but seeing his daughters did. They were so damn beautiful. And so much like their mother in temperament. Viewing the shock in their eyes, he stood back and waited with baited breath to see if they would accept or reject him.

“Proof,” Reign demanded.

“Good proof,” Zuri backed her up.

There were a lot of words he could’ve spoken, but he settled on the familiar: Psalms 91. He began with the first two verses.

“¹You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, ²will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.’”

Reign took verses three and four: “³For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; ⁴he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.”

Zuri took five and six: “⁵You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, ⁶or the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday.”

Though there were ten more verses, none of them recited them. Instead he dropped to his knees and opened his arms, and his daughters ran into them, screaming the one title that was even higher than that of Zjxadrâzqué: Daddy.

They hugged for what seemed like hours before the girls started peppering him with questions. “Can I

see your spaceship? Can I drive it? Do you have some BFG, and can I shoot it?"

"There you go being selfish, Reign," Zuri said. "Daddy, Reign has always been selfish."

"That's because Zuri has always been fast. And it's my daddy, and I can drive his spaceship if I want to, so you shut up."

"Why don't you make me?"

"I will right after I tell Daddy on you. Daddy, see that boy all tired and weak over there? Zuri had her wicked way with him."

"I understand that you are not yet married, and yet you're touching my daughter?" he asked.

"As you're touching mine," a deep voice said from behind him. "Do you know that my baby was pregnant for two years?" Everglades Decebel asked from the doorway.

"Papa Everglades! Grandmomma Rika!" his daughters screamed.

****JL****

Thank you for trusting me to deliver your prose.

While I do write to supplement our incomes, I appreciate the investment of your time. I hope that you enjoyed the adventures of Zuri and Hannes.

You can read more about the Posse in the following books:

The Wild, Wild Mess: Atlanta

The Wild, Wild Anybody's Guess: Aloha!

The Wild, Wild Nothing Less: Victorious

Killer Crossover: Hot up in the Capture (coming soon).

For more information on the Jeanie and Jayha universe, please visit our Web site:

www.jeanieandjayha.com.

About Jayha

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! Yessssssssssssss!*

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.