



Beautiful Trouble Publishing

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The Bible Scriptures quoted [Song of Solomon 6:3 and Ruth 1:16-17] are from the NRSV of the Holy Bible.

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To all the men who put it down in their own special ways. And to Dréa who asked: “*will you marry me and be my non-sexual life mate and write me erotic tales?*”

And since we’re talking about Dréa, we recommend you check out her prose. If you want to suck up to her before she goes all Hollywood and then no longer has time for you plebes, drop by her website.

<http://drearileyandlauraguevara.com/>

Dréa Riley’s books:

- “Fit to be Tied” in the *Smack It, Flip It, Rub It Down* anthology
- “Flippin’ the Script” in the *TAG! You’re Writ, volume 2* anthology
- “How do Firemen make Love” in the *FLAME ON!!!* anthology
- “It’s all Fun and Games until Someone Falls in Love” in the *Tag! You’re Writ, volume 1* anthology
- “Private Dick” in *Ride It Like You Stole It* anthology
- “Tropical Storm” in *Second Helpings—Stormy Weather Lovin’*
- It’s all Fun and Games until Someone Falls in Love (single story from the Tag, volume 1 anthology)
- *Tempted & Torched* (available at lulu.com)
- *Tzara’s Heart* (available at lulu.com)

Thank you Aunt Donna for the information on Georgia and
thank you Chandra for the information on Switzerland.

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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.

Authors' Foreward

Not that I (Jayha) am admitting any guilt, however the character Andreas Tomaschett, may have, in the heat of the moment been allowed to be dibs'd by Nicole, which was a violation of the original dibs of Dréa Riley. In lieu of Jayha settling this dispute by killing off a whole series of books which will not only endanger the sanctity of Dréa's eBook hero harem but might also result with several readers having to be busted out of foreign prison, the following agreement has been made and agreed to:

In exchange for acknowledgment that Andreas is hers and hers alone, Dréa will relinquish the remaining three swankers (Loic von Leuzinger, Sébastien Götsch, and Yves Reiman) along with one of her other coveted dibs—not a clone but the full-fledged dibs to Nicole. In addition, we will create a hero for exclusive dibs by Nicole.

Prelim Work

Like the rest of the residents of Delice-Patrale, Georgia, Luxor “Cleo” Winston was the bee’s knees when it came to education, fucking people up, and not giving a damn when she did. Unlike the rest of the residents, she was a bona fide, died-in-the wool weirdo. Now outsiders might say all the residents of Delice-Patrale were weirdoes, and they’d have a point, but only Cleo was a weirdo who defied explanation, hence the tagline, “Don’t Fucking Ask.” Of course people did ask, and they were always sorry. Always.

Nothing about Cleo was normal. Not her hat collection, which was best described as “a damn shame.” Not her career, which people described as “that shit with guns.” Not her nickname, which contrary to popular belief wasn’t short for Cleopatra. In fact, Cleo wasn’t short for anything.

Christened Luxor by a momma who had an Egypt fetish (her brothers were named Cairo, Memphis and Thebes), it would’ve made way more sense for her to be named Alexandria, but her momma had fallen in love with the Valley of the Kings, and thus her name was Luxor. And while

Luxor was nice, being named Luxor was a burden in the South, where people nicked your name simply because it was a day that ended in “y.” And the only way you could halfway nick Luxor was to call her Luke. While she didn’t have anything against the name Luke, having had a serious crush on Bo Duke, there was no damn way in anybody’s hell that she was going to allow anyone to call her Luke. At five years old, she’d decided to rename herself. She’d picked the name Cleo because she saw it on some literature her momma had. It was only after she had the art of reading down that she realized CLEO was actually an acronym for Council on Legal Education Opportunity. But it didn’t matter by then, because ever since that day she’d asked her momma what that word was, she’d refused to answer to anything but Cleo.

She might refuse to answer to anything but Cleo, but damn if she ever stopped talking. She never ran out of shit to ask, never stumbled across a “why” she was afraid to ask, a gun she didn’t like, or a challenge that made her back down...which was why her daddy threw himself a party when she’d survived to adulthood...and every year she managed to not kill herself in some kind of misadventure.

And make no mistake about it—Cleo’s whole life was a misadventure, starting with her secondary job. Despite the fact that she had a Ph.D., and she

lived in an area pretty much free of alligators, Cleo was an alligator trapper. She didn't just play one on the weekends—she had the license and the arsenal to prove it. Everybody in Delice-Patrale had tried their damndest to talk her out of buying the A-SQUARE Hannibal 577 Tyrannosaur rifle...and with good reason. At thirteen pounds, it was flat-out the most badazz sporting gun in existence—well, at least on planet Earth. Shooting 750 gr bullets at 2700 feet per second, it could easily stop charging rhinos, hippos and elephants.

She didn't need that rifle in her arsenal...she just wanted it. The first time she fired it, she almost dislocated the whole right side of her body due to the powerful recoil. She loved that rifle. Actually, she loved all of her weapons, but that rifle made her cream her panties. And don't get it twisted—she wasn't some gun-happy yahoo just wanting to shoot everything that moved; like her momma and aunts, she was a hunter. Hating the taste of store-bought meat, she actually ate what she shot...well, the animals, not the people. Yes, she'd shot one or two people, but they'd had it coming, and the ABC agencies had cleared her of all charges.

Yep, Cleo was a weirdo...with a linguistic skill that was impressive, eyesight that was better than 20/20, aim that would've won her medals...and Napoleon Syndrome. To normal people she wasn't

short, but Cleo wasn't normal...she was a Winston woman. While every damn one of her cousins was at least six feet tall, she was a measly, shrimpy 5'11 1/4", and she didn't appreciate that shit at all, which was why she wore heels with everything. Ever-y-thing. She wore heels with more shit than the character in her favorite Dr. Seuss book had ways he didn't like green eggs and ham. She even wore heels with pajamas, which was weird and wouldn't have been necessary if Teijana (Delice-Patrane's resident evil genius) could come up with some kind of formula to give her an extra three-quarter inches in height. Alas, she was still sub-six feet, so she rocked her heels for the times she needed to look her cousins in the eye as she told them in Mandarin Chinese, German or Italian (the three languages she was fluent in) to kiss her whole, entire ass. And considering who her cousins were, she found that necessary a whole helluva lot.

Chapter One: Welcome to the South

Being relatively well off, it wasn't uncommon for any of the four males to pilot an expensive vehicle; however, it was a rare occurrence for any of them to drive a vehicle this large. Over six thousand pounds, the Lincoln Navigator L 4x4 easily accommodated the four of them. Aesthetically, it was a work of art being that they'd selected the monochrome limited edition package, which boasted the upper chrome grill, ebony wood trim, and the camel trim seats with black piping. And being males who enjoyed their toys, it had all of the bells and whistles that the elite package provided, including the power moon roof, the kickass audio system, the voice-activated DVD-based navigation system, mirror-based reverse camera system, and the rear seat DVD Entertainment system.

Even the 120-plus cubic feet of cargo space behind the second and third rows boasted the best of the best. Gear from their weekend at Augusta National Golf Club filled the cargo space. Among the customized clubs were four sets of the costliest golfing threads that money could buy, along with one pair of customized Armani golf shoes. Vorn

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Investments, LLC wasn't established enough (yet) for its four owners to have memberships, but the people they did business with were important enough to have memberships. Yeah, the truck had everything...including two flat tires. Fuck.

It wasn't that they didn't know how to change a tire, it was that a) they only had one spare; b) they were on the edge of the edge of God only knows where, which meant their cell reception was iffy at best, and right now it was nonexistent; c) though it was technically still morning, it was already sweltering hot. Though they'd often visited America, they'd been drawn to the trendy parts—Beverly Hills, New York, San Francisco, South Beach (Miami). They'd even visited Atlanta, which was why they'd chosen to establish themselves there. What they hadn't visited, however, was backwoods Georgia...in August...during a drought.

Andreas Tomaschett gritted his teeth as he maneuvered the big vehicle off the road and onto what looked like it used to be a road...back in the 1800s. Damn detour. They were going along fine. It should've been a straight shot down I-20 West all the way from Augusta back into Atlanta. Even if they'd veered off course, their navigation system should've quickly re-routed them. It had re-routed them, but

none of them had trusted the detour, which seemed to take them by way of the left bank of Hades. They'd quickly nixed that as a group and made their own way, which explained how they'd ended up somewhere near the middle of no fucking where. Their best guess was that they were located somewhere between the beautiful, historic city of Madison and the ends of the universe. They could've taken the other exit that led to a town called No Trespassing, but that was a definite "hell no."

Ändreas sighed. Only his reputation as the most got-it-together—a.k.a. serious—of the group and his tightly held self-control kept him from bashing his head against the steering wheel in frustration. This was simply an inconvenience, not a tribulation like the many he'd overcome growing up as a *secondo* in Switzerland.

His grandparents' families, all proud Italians, had immigrated to Switzerland shortly before the outbreak of WWII. Although he was born in Switzerland, he was still considered a *secondo* even though he was a third-generation Swiss. He'd had it bad, but it was nothing like what his parents had to go through. Though Swiss-born, his parents did not have the rights to citizenship. Along with massive discrimination, they could barely find jobs. Luckily, his parents were not forced into a life of crime as

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many *secondos* were, but their life had not been easy. They sacrificed so much so that he and his siblings could have a chance at a decent life, even going so far as to send the rest of their children (all of whom were at least a decade younger than him) to Italy to finish high school. Unlike the rest of his siblings, he had steadfastly refused to leave Switzerland and had thus graduated from Swiss high school and then Swiss university before trekking off to America.

With his brand new degrees in his hand, he'd headed off to America for the opportunity to work. He'd quickly discovered that the best jobs were most-often reserved for the children of the elite, whose primary credentials included being born into wealthy families. Finding himself in his familiar role of outsider and down to his last few thousand dollars, he'd worked in the fields suckering tobacco—i.e., removing growths from tobacco stalks in order to allow the plant to grow. And that was where he'd learned the true definition of hard work...and that his master's degree didn't mean shit.

Suckering tobacco was the most-hated task in the tobacco fields, and then there was the added bonus of constant threats including black widow spiders, snakes, and heatstroke. He did that from sunup until four in the afternoon, went home and showered and reported for duty to his second-shift

job at a meat-packing plant where the dangers were considerably less. There he only had to worry about losing digits in the fast-moving machinery. Not the best job, but at least it was air-conditioned (well, it was supposed to be). Regardless of how iffy the massive box fans were, it was still less hot than the inside of the sun, which was indeed a step up from the tobacco fields.

He worked like that for two straight summers before landing a construction job in the college town of Charlottesville, Virginia. College towns always had massive building campaigns, so there was always work. That was where he'd met up with a fellow by the name of Iain. They'd shared a dive for a while before they'd both decided to try their hand at a more lucrative job, and thus they'd headed off to the last American frontier: Alaska.

On the Bering Sea they both learned shit best left unlearned, like how uncomfortable it was to sweat in sub-zero temperatures and how to stay awake for two days straight with nothing but black coffee and grit to keep them going. They'd also learned what it felt like to almost die all the time, as the fishing season was never ending. In January and February they fished for snow crab; in April and May it was herring; from June-July it was salmon; from August-September it was halibut; and, in October

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and November it was crab once again. It was back-breaking work, but as hard as it was, fishing in the dangerous Arctic didn't come close to suckering tobacco in the cauldron that masqueraded as tobacco fields in the South.

No telling how long he would've stayed on the boats if not for Iain's future mother-in-law—the venerable Dr. Mrs. Jefferson...and yes, she was referred to by everyone as “Dr. Mrs.” That woman was the truth, and though he was a foreigner, he'd been in America long enough to know not to mess with her. She'd come and fetched Iain (in a most impressive way) and decided to fetch him too while she was there.

Dr. Mrs. had dragged him to her home. When she'd discovered that he'd busted a few ribs and was working through the pain, she'd divided her time between cussing him out and cussing him out some more...all without ever actually uttering a cuss word. She momma-ed him so thoroughly that he couldn't help but wonder if she had some Italian in her.

After she pronounced him fit, she'd set him up with a job in his field, and a spot in the cushy D.C. townhouse of one of her best friends. She'd introduced him as her nephew, and no one asked any questions. When you carried a stick as big as Dr. Mrs. and rolled with a woman like Ms. Grace Ellen K.

Jones, challenging you was the last thing that should cross anyone's mind.

With her guidance, he'd turned the pile of money he'd made into piles of money. Originally, he'd tried sending money home, but his parents refused to take it, thus he'd thrown it all in the bank. Since his parents wouldn't take any money, he'd set up accounts for his siblings, and each summer he had the privilege of flying his siblings out for vacations. Just as he had, his siblings had fallen in love with America, specifically the West Coast. Though his brothers made Rome and Milan home, his sister had promptly fallen in love with California, and after scoring well on her *Matura* (final exams taken at the end of secondary education) and receiving a glowing recommendation from Dr. Jefferson, she was now in her sophomore year at the prestigious Scripps College in Claremont, California, where she was studying organismal biology.

Since graduating from high school he'd been working nonstop. He'd only been on a handful of dates, having neither the money nor time to dedicate to women. He'd only recently indulged in a new wardrobe. Though he was Italian-Swiss and therefore had that undeniable sense of style, he'd been in America and in blue-collar jobs long enough to adapt to the American sense of casual dress. He'd guessed

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he'd have to revamp his wardrobe when Dr. Mrs. Jefferson's right eye had begun to twitch upon noting his ensemble. He *knew* he'd have to change for sure when she flat out told him she didn't know if it was a white boy gene that made him think khaki pants construed dressing up, but if he was going to be her nephew he was going to dress in a manner appropriate for such a position. Well, actually, there had been no *if* about it. She flat out told him that he would dress in a manner appropriate for her nephew.

He'd gone a long time without indulging in anything for himself, but wearing khaki pants and cotton button-down shirts instead of his customary pleated trousers and cufflinks had been worth it. In Switzerland, he'd always worn nice clothes, not because he'd had money—because he hadn't. No, he'd had nice clothes because his mother had made them, and she'd taught him to make his own clothes.

Though he hailed from a long line of alpha Italian males, he could tailor his own suits with his eyes closed. He had such a steady hand and good eye that he could take off-the-rack clothes and make them appear hand-tailored. Sure, he had some name brands in his wardrobe, but most of his pieces were made by his own hand. And though he'd been friends with Yves, Loic, and Sébastien for a long while, none of them knew his secret.

He wasn't ashamed; he was simply a man and didn't relish the thought of feeling so exposed, especially in light of the fact that for so long he hadn't been in the same socioeconomic league as his friends. The years of back-breaking work had put him in the same economic league, but until Dr. Mrs. had taken him over, he hadn't felt like he was in the same social playing field. He'd always felt like he should be working for people like his partners, mostly because he'd spent his youth working for people like them. He'd cleaned and done all manner of unskilled labor for people who ran in the same social circles as his partners. He smirked thinking on how he'd gotten the job in construction.

As he was foreign and spoke Italian as his first language, many southerners had simply thought he was Mexican and figured they could pay him badly. They'd quickly found out he had a head for numbers, so though they couldn't screw with his pay (or the pay of any of his colleagues), they'd taken great pride in fucking with him. Though his work visa had clearly stated his name, people had kept calling him José or Juan, and sometimes things that should've been classified as straight out racial slurs.

Instead of fighting and demanding that his bosses call him by his given name, he'd kept his mouth shut because he couldn't jeopardize his visa.

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His pride had to take a backseat to his siblings' future. Though his brothers would work, never would they have to haunt the thrift stores for clothes and then spend all night re-pleating the cuffs or changing out zippers. Never would his baby sister have to consider picking fruit as her only option in order to earn spending money.

Seeing his siblings thrive had been worth every drop of sweat and every sacrifice. His siblings had opportunities that they wouldn't have had in Bisbald. He had to work not to grimace as he recalled his village of Bisbald. Bisbald was aptly named. Translated to English, Bisbald meant "later" or "goodbye." And that was what most kids did when they came of age. They said goodbye to it. Situated in the middle of Switzerland where the three founding *cantons* (states) of Uri, Schwyz and Nidwalden are located, Bisbald was a tiny, almost-all-the-time-overlooked village. It was so tiny and overlooked, in fact, that the only way to describe it to individuals who hailed from any other place (including native Swiss) was in relation to the only slightly bigger, but intensely more populous village of Stans.

Stans was the hometown of his three friends and partners Yves Reiman, Loic von Leuzinger, and Sébastien Götsch. Like Bisbald, Stans was a picturesque place—the stuff postcards were made of.

If one didn't know better, one would think that Bisbald was a part of Stans due to the lack of physical boundaries between the two villages. Though there might not be any physical markers separating the two villages, the cultural differences that existed were more imposing than the Glarner Alps and deeper and colder than Vierwaldstättersee (Lake Lucerne). Though surrounded by the countries of France, Germany, Liechtenstein, Austria, and Italy and having three official languages (German, French and Italian) and one unofficial language (Romansh), Switzerland, like virtually all other countries, wasn't immune to a little bit of xenophobia...and Stans led the pack when it came to their distrust of outsiders.

Stans was as unique as it was beautiful. A politically conservative village, it was comprised primarily of farmers and blond males...alpha blond males at that. The residents had a fierce dedication to family, so much so that they rarely allowed outsiders into their midst. An outsider was anyone from any place else.

A throwback city in many ways, Stans didn't seek to remake itself in the image of the metropolitan European cities such as London, Paris or Rome, nor did it seek to become Americanized. Its residents were secure with who they were and proud of it. In fact, they still had an annual *schwingen* (Swiss

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variant of folk wrestling) contest between the village men. No one fucked with the residents of Stans...because it just wasn't worth it. You didn't just fight one man; you fought the entire village.

As renowned as Stans was for holding onto the old ways, it was also famous for its blond males. Stans had the highest density of blond males in all of Switzerland. Though many individuals tended to think Switzerland was full of blue-eyed blonds, the fact was that most Swiss were not fair haired. Swiss women tended to prefer dark-haired males, and in fact, blond males were often the brunt of cruel jokes and were even shunned.

Ändreas couldn't help the smile that came to his face at the irony. He himself had spent a lot of his youth being shunned for being a *secondo*, and Yves, Loic, and Sébastien had spent the majority of their college career in Zürich being shunned, which had been a first for them. They shouldn't have been friends—well, Yves, Loic, and Sébastien naturally should have been friends, being that they hailed from the same village, but the three of them shouldn't have been friends with Ändreas. For all that he was, ultimately Ändreas was an outsider. Then again, Yves, Loic, and Sébastien were admirable men. They made their own way and stayed the course, even if no one but them was on it.

They'd silently admired each other whilst growing up, and university had only deepened that admiration. Zürich was a far cry from both Stans and Bisbald. It had brought them together like nothing else had. After being thrown together they stuck with each other throughout their bachelor's and master's studies. They'd each studied for the Bachelor's of Arts UZH in Economics and Business Administration with a specialization in Banking and Finance at the prestigious Universität Zürich and had gone on to complete their Master's in the same field, also at Universität Zürich. And though they'd gone their separate ways after university, they'd never lost touch. They'd each worked their asses off, and now after many, many years of studying and hard work, they were together again and had set themselves up as the stereotypical Swiss bankers...and proud of it.

Dragging his attention back to their predicament, Andreas grumbled.

"I distinctly recall saying we should wait until winter to make our move, being that Georgia was so damn hot."

"And how would that help our situation?" Yves Reiman, self-appointed lady's man, grumbled as he wiped an imaginary speck off his outfit. "My Armani shoes would still be touching red clay mud."

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Ändreas shook his head at Yves and his Armani obsession. Though Yves made no pretense of his preference for Armani, his friends were all Armani men. He had to admit that Armani indeed cut a fine suit, but he preferred Hugo Boss if he had to go with a name brand because their suits tended to fit his large frame better.

“I like how your footwear takes precedence over our current situation.” Loic von Leuzinger, the consummate flirt and group-appointed charmer, smiled.

“Hey, these aren’t just any shoes. These are Emporio Armani printed lizard bluchers.”

“Oh yeah, so obviously you were either a girl in a previous life...” Ändreas began.

“That or Imelda Marcos,” Sébastien Götsch, the quintessential glass-half-full kind of guy, stated with his usual smile.

Yves went on as if they hadn’t interrupted. “If things were as they should be, I’d be wrapped up in the arms of at least two bikini models whose foremost concern was pleasing me, rather than dealing with this clay. With all of this clay, I feel like I should be wielding a racket and setting up serve at Roland Garros instead of heading for our business meeting,” Yves grumbled.

“And there goes his mention of his second favorite thing. Why can’t you be a proper European male and rave about soccer instead of the genteel sport of tennis?” Sébastien asked. “You’re going to make American women think that European men are soft.”

“Not that I don’t understand how that would indeed be a preferable option than our current situation, but can you get your mind off of women for ten seconds and help us come up with a solution?” Andreas asked.

“You’re the solution man, Andreas; I’m the ladies’ man,” Yves returned.

“That may be, but after we find a solution, then you can go back to your dream of winning the French Open,” Loic placated.

“I can just see it now—there Yves is, serving the game for the French Open trophy wearing a three-piece Armani suit and black wingtips.” Sébastien laughed.

“And I’d look damn good,” Yves said.

“So what do we do?” Loic asked.

“Hey, can you call your country/western friend?” Yves asked.

“If we could call him, then it would stand to reason that we could also call a tow truck.” Andreas sighed.

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“Well, since we’re here because of him, he should at least have one of those walkie-talkie things,” Loic grumbled.

Ändreas had to stop himself from banging his head against the Navigator. Instead of giving himself head trauma, he simply looked at his three friends, who were all looking worse for the wear as they stared at the troublesome wheels upon the vehicle.

“You are watching way too many *Dukes of Hazzard* reruns. Iain doesn’t have a walkie-talkie, and stop referring to him as Country/Western,” Ändreas threatened.

“Oh yeah, don’t mess with Ändreas’ little friend,” Yves said.

“Yeah, don’t,” Ändreas returned.

“Or what? You’ll tell on us?” Sébastien teased.

“No, I’ll tell his mother-in-law, his beautiful wife, or her crazy posse, whom I assure you that you don’t under any circumstance want to tangle with.”

“So what’s the game plan? Because I’m sure this place is just going to spontaneously combust any moment,” Yves complained.

“We wait—there’s bound to be someone who drives through here,” Ändreas said as he scraped his luxurious shoulder-length hair from his forehead, where it was beginning to slowly flatten against his scalp with sweat. Though he’d always kept his hair

unfashionably long, for about the tenth time that day he considered cutting it. All four men re-entered the vehicle and turned the air conditioning unit on high and did just as Andreas had suggested. They *waited*...and if somewhere in the background they all heard the theme music from the movie *Deliverance*, well then, that might just be in their heads...maybe.

Being southern, it wasn't uncommon for any of the four females to pilot a big ass truck. In fact, they all had trucks...the same model, just different colors. The Ford Expedition XLT 4x4 easily accommodated the four of them. Aesthetically, it wasn't much to look at, meaning that it didn't have chrome, wood trim or leather. It had standard rims, a plastic dash and charcoal cloth seats. You couldn't even tell the color half the time because the black clear coat was always covered in dust, dirt, and mud. The only accessories it boasted were the splash guards, luggage rack, satellite radio and an electric winch. Being southern, however, one could argue that those things were necessities, not extras.

It wasn't much to look at, but what it lacked in looks it more than made up for in extras. Extras such as the 4x4 off-road package, the all-season tires, and the heavy duty towing package that allowed them to tow up to fifteen thousand pounds. And oh, the

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things they pulled. Being southerners, it was a given that they pulled northerners out of ditches on the rare snow day, but then there were their toys. Among their favorites was their twenty-seven foot power boat that did have all the extras; and their PWCs that went from zero to fifty mph in a cool 2.9 seconds. Then there were the toys that didn't require towing, including the bikes they all rode.

The top of their SUV held two ice coolers packed with ice and their catch. Their cargo space was filled to overflowing with stuff. Gear from their weekend alligator hunting in Douglas filled the cargo space. Among the stuff were four pairs of camouflage waders and neon orange safety vests. There were also snares and snatch hooks for catching the gator. Then there were the machetes and their handguns for killing the gator after capture. Basically, they preferred machetes, but they kept their handguns for protection. After all, they were females alone, in the woods with a whole bunch of good old boys with weapons. Nothing had ever happened, but they never planned on being caught with their pants down. Their rifles were also back there...just in case. They didn't plan to use them; then again, none of them planned to die by foul means. They'd all seen horror films, and if they heard the first strain of classical music, it was fucking on. Of course along with their rifles were the

shotguns. They preferred rifles to shotguns when hunting, but when it came to shotgun weddings, well, shotguns were needed, which was why they'd packed them.

Cleo Winston sat in the backseat of Tarana's SUV wondering what she should say. It wasn't her fault...that much. She snuck peeks at the other occupants of the truck. Turning her head slightly to the left, she peeked at Nandi to see if there'd be any sympathy. After all, being the dealmaker, Nandi was the most reasonable (read: the one least likely to go the fuck off) of her cousins. Nandi might be the most reasonable, but from the way her sneaker-clad foot was swinging back and forth, she was real close to blowing. There would be no sympathy there.

She looked at the back of Jakira's head and noted that her normally quiet cousin was in deep cover silence instead of her customary semi-deep cover silence. No sympathy there either. She took a chance and looked over at Tarana, the cousin who took being over the line to a whole new level. Tarana caught her eyes in the rear-view mirror and gave her a look that would've made lesser individuals consider jumping from the truck despite the speed with which it was barreling down the road. As tempting as that option was, she wasn't a lesser individual, plus she'd

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tell Tarana's momma if she tried anything. Tarana might be mean, but she wasn't mean enough to fuck with Aunt Dallas. Then again, Cleo doubted that National Guard was mean enough to fuck with Dallas Winston.

Damn, the chicks had had several hours to get over their anger. They'd been in a rage all up Highway 441 from Douglas to Milledgeville, where they'd stopped to refuel and gotten off on Highway 129. They'd been highly pissed off from Milledgeville to Madison. Once they'd gotten to Madison, their anger was at a simmer, which was good being that their next stop—the city of Patrale—was no more than ten minutes away. Patrale wasn't just a suburb, and neither was its sister city Delice. Patrale was a magical place and boasted an unusually high number of fine men, people with the title “Dr.” preceding their names, and women who just didn't give a fuck. In Patrale the men were alpha and the women straight kicked ass, whether it was in hand-to-hand combat, hunting, or starting business empires. There was also an unusually small percentage of female children in comparison to male children, which made the men extremely protective of the women.

Beautiful enclaves Patrale and Delice were tight-knit communities that were damn particular about whom they allowed in. As small and cloistered

as Patrale was, Delice was even smaller...and a whole lot freakier. But both of them paled in comparison to the even freakier community of No Trespassing, which for the most part allowed no one in. And everything paled in comparison to Kennesaw Territory, which was a whole 'nother kind of place inhabited by a whole 'nother kind of people.

Patrale was magical, and eventually they'd all return and settle down there, but right now they needed to do their own thing, which was why they lived in the Atlanta city limits. Though they needed a respite from their families, they often trekked home because home was home and all of the good things were there. It was hard to be in a bad mood after throwing down on their daddies and uncles' barbeque, peach iced tea and old-fashioned pound cake.

Then there was the matter of the wedding. It wasn't everyday that one could combine a hunting trip with a wedding, but when the opportunity presented itself one simply had to take it. Their crazy-ass cousins Abeni and Tinashe were getting married off in a double wedding ceremony, which meant their shotguns were needed...and possibly the National Guard and a legion of superheroes to stave off most of the shit those two could get into. Of course, if that didn't work, their Aunt Ngozi wouldn't hesitate to

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switch their behinds. Of course that would mean Uncle Aodhfionn had to be unconscious, because he spoiled those girls so rotten it didn't make any kind of sense. Though Uncle Aodhfionn didn't hesitate to lay waste to anything with a penis, nothing but cotton wool could touch his baby girls.

Chapter Two: The Family that Fights Together, Might Together

Cleo thought that the combination of good food, good music, and an even better family would've calmed her cousins down, but noooooooooo, her cousins were like the world-record holders in holding a fucking grudge. And they were damn good at acting, because no one was the wiser that they were one step away from trying to do her bodily harm. *Try* being the key word. She might be smaller than them, but she'd learned to fight from the same place they did: from their mean-ass brothers and cousins and their crazy-ass mommas and aunts. Plus, they needed her. Oh, they may've labeled her the most flighty—and indeed she might be—but she could floss just as hard as the rest of the Winston chicks when it came to academics.

She was more than the licensed alligator agent-trapper that she told everyone she was. Like her cousins, she'd done her undergrad in Atlanta. Just because she pretty much refused to wear pantyhose and absolutely refused to work more than five hours per day didn't mean she was lazy or stupid. On the

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contrary, she made damn good use of her B.S. in International Affairs and Modern Languages. Her cousins might say that she talked crazy, but she could talk crazy in many languages. She was also fluent in ways to make money hand over fist, thanks to her MBA with a concentration in Global Business from Georgia Tech and her Ph.D. in Organization and Management from Emory University.

Yeah, her cousins might be mad at her, but they needed her. She was an integral part in their business empire. Everything and the Kitchen Sink, LLC was the shit because of all of the different skills that she and her cousins brought to the plate. With Nandi as the architect, Jakira as the real estate attorney, Tarana coming out of her silent partnership status and acting as the “convincer” when needed, and her acting as the translator and business head in the business, they were like your one-stop shop for getting shit bought, built, sold, or constructed in Atlanta...or anywhere in Georgia for that matter. They didn’t do every job, but they hooked people up with the most badass people to do the job.

Looking at her cousins, she couldn’t believe these chicks were still holding on to their anger over such a little thing. After all, these women had faced down so much more pressing things every day in the business world. Yet here they were, still seething with

anger even after they'd spent the last two hours having a damn good time.

They'd had a long day, coming fresh out of the woods from hunting and then spending the last few hours celebrating. As soon as Abeni and Tinashe had said their "*I do's*," or rather their "*yes, okay, if I must, fines*," they'd promptly threatened Coinneach and Eòghan Francisco Stiùbhart (Abeni and Tinashe's husbands), told them how they'd dispose of them should they fuck up and made a beeline for the food. Hell, they were ravenous. After eating their fill and grabbing some cake, they'd hugged all and sundry and hopped into the truck, not even bothering to change out of their gowns. Looking down, she couldn't help but laugh at their footwear. The rest of her cousins wore athletic shoes with their bridesmaid gowns. She wore high-heeled Tims. She and Nandi wore Carolina blue gowns, while Tarana and Jakira wore gowns in red (*Abeni called in MIT red and Tinashe called it Cardinal red, but it looked like NC State red to her*). Carolina blue and red didn't go together worth a damn, but since they represented the colors of Abeni and Tinashe's alma maters and their daddy gave in to whatever his babies wanted, Carolina blue and red were the colors. And somehow it all seemed to work.

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In her not-so-humble opinion, she thought that they all looked pretty fucking spectacular. How could they not with Aunt Ngozi behind the wheel? Aunt Ngozi had the hookup, and thus the wedding was storybook. Only Aunt Ngozi could fly in a whole damn entourage of internationally acclaimed hairstylists, dressmakers, and accessories designers.

Despite all the fun they'd had, and despite her cousins being mad at her, Cleo had been glad when they'd finally started rolling towards home. Taking their customary backwoods shortcut, they'd connect to the I-20 exit in no time and then be on their way back to the ATL. Hopefully, her cousins would be back to their usual mean selves once they were home. Maybe she should say something to break the silence before they got home.

"Don't even think it about it, Cleo," Nandi warned.

Cleo sighed and crossed her arms, making sure to add a pout.

"You know you only have yourself to blame," Nandi said as she pushed her spectacles up higher on her nose.

Cleo looked at Nandi. Nandi may look all innocent and librarian-like, but she was far from it. Cleo wasn't going to forget the bloodthirsty look on Nandi's face when staring down a potential kill. Of

course, being an architect, Nandi spent a lot of time with dudes, so maybe that was to blame for her attitude.

“Why? Because I don’t want to kill squirrels? How could you kill squirrels? They are, like, in so many cartoon movies. You know why? Because they’re cute. Plus we weren’t out to kill squirrels. If that makes me the enemy, then so be it,” Cleo harrumphed.

“You *knew* we were going hunting, Luxor Winston!” Jakira threw in. “You made a promise and you broke it.”

Cleo rolled her eyes at Jakira’s use of her actual name. Jakira might be the quiet one, but they were always the ones you had to watch out for. Her watchfulness combined with her shiny law degree from Pennsylvania made her really, really, really good at her job being a ~~shark~~, ~~piranha~~, attorney.

“I so did *not*, Jakira Naeemah Winston!” Cleo hurled back. “I killed my gator and helped you kill yours. I did not, however, sign on for the killing of cuddly little squirrels.”

“Bleeding heart liberal,” Tarana accused from the driver’s seat. Cleo sighed again and leaned her head back against the headrest. With anyone else she would argue, but there was no way in hell she’d win an argument against Tarana, who besides being a

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straight-out ball breaker, was hands down one of the best convincers she'd ever crossed words with. Instead of arguing, she flipped Tarana off and called her a fascist in head.

"Just for the record, not only did I kill my gator quicker than the rest of you wenches, I have more kills overall, so there," Cleo said aloud before mumbling to herself. *"Going to try and act like I'm not the shit. Dammit, I'm a licensed nuisance alligator trapper."*

"You always bring up the fact that you're a licensed gator trapper, yet how many gators are roaming around Atlanta?" Nandi asked.

"I know! I know!" Tarana shouted. "Absolutely fucking none, which is why we have to road trip to get them."

"Well as soon as I get my nuisance bitch license, I'll hunt all I want in Atlanta. In fact, if I had such a thing, I could make three kills right here in this truck," Cleo spat.

"Bring it on, 'Little Bit,'" Jakira taunted.

"I. Am. Not. Little," Cleo protested. Just because those bitches were all over six feet did not make her short.

"Okay, maybe 'short' is the wrong term. I'm going to put a sign on my truck that says *'you must be this tall'* to ride this ride." Tarana laughed.

“You should’ve had one of those for your last lover. What was he, like, five feet tall...with the four-inch stilettos on...standing on his tiptoes?” Cleo asked.

“A, that was a long time ago and even though he was short, he was tall enough to eat the coochie without getting an ache in his neck, thank you very much...and guess what, Cleo? He was still taller than you, tiny,” Tarana responded.

“You know what, as soon as you see somewhere semi-private, pull the fucking truck over and I’ll show you just how tiny I am!” she shouted.

“You’re going to take on all three of us or one at a time?” Nandi asked.

“Whatever,” she said.

“Such aggression,” Jakira said. “It must be that Napoleon-syndrome short people have.”

“Must be. Hey, was Caligula short too?” Tarana asked.

“Joke all you want. As soon as this truck stops, ass whippings for everyone,” Cleo said as she cracked her knuckles. “I might not be a squirrel assassin, but I’ll fuck you bitches up.”

“The not killing of the squirrels is not the issue, Cleo. The issue is you pelting all of us with clay dirt. If we hadn’t had on hats, you would’ve fucked up our

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hair, and messing with a sister's hair is a cardinal sin," Nandi tried to reason.

"But you did have on hats, so what's the problem?" Cleo asked.

"You know if you point a gun at a person and pull the trigger but miss, it doesn't negate the fact that you tried to shoot them," Jakira said.

"Are you going to be all attorney-ish when I'm beating your ass?" Cleo asked.

"Nope, I'll just be all attorney-ish on you when I tell Aunt Autumn and Uncle Malachi what you did to us," Jakira responded.

"You'd tell on me?" Cleo asked.

"Yep," they all said.

"After we get in some licks," Tarana added.

"Well then, I'll just make sure to bust you all in the mouth so you can't do shit but mumble," Cleo said.

"You know, don't be getting all cocky. Napoleon was all cocky too...right before he tried that ill-fated march into Russia," Tarana said.

"I'm not Napoleon, but you wenches are kind of like Russia: big and composed of a lot of barren wasteland," Cleo added.

"That's it, I'm granting your wish. The back road that leads into Patrale before it veers off and leads to No Trespassing is up ahead. That will give us

plenty of room to teach you some manners and give you enough privacy to lick your wounds away from anyone who might be happening by. As soon as the truck is in park, it's on, little girl," Tarana said.

"Well, kick in the afterburners, because I'm antsy to hand out some beat downs," Cleo said.

"Bring it then, little mama," Jakira said.

"No hitting in the face or below the belt," Nandi said as she removed her spectacles.

"But most of Cleo is under the belt," Tarana taunted as she stomped on the gas.

Careening around the bend like a stunt driver from *Starsky and Hutch*, Tarana was about to bring the big truck to a stop, but another vehicle was blocking the rarely used access road. It was a road that could barely be classified as such.

"What the fuck?" Tarana exclaimed.

"What's a Lincoln Navigator doing way the fuck out here?" Jakira asked no one in particular as Tarana expertly eased the Expedition to a messy but controlled stop behind the Navigator.

"What's *anything* doing out here?" Cleo whispered. No one came into the area uninvited...and lived, that is. The residents of Patrale were right particular, but the residents of No Trespassing

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were...different. Real different and real dedicated to their privacy.

“Arm up,” Jakira instructed.

While Tarana was maneuvering the truck to a stop, Cleo reached in the back and handed them their handguns. She already had a gun strapped to her thigh. Thank goodness the dress she wore was gauzy and loose, otherwise she would’ve had to explain that small bulge. Her handgun wasn’t big in size, but it was big in the wallop it packed. Her friend Teijana had seen to that.

“Rifles,” Nandi demanded as she waved off the handgun. “We’re not wearing pants or holsters.”

Cleo took back the handgun and rummaged around for their rifles. She didn’t take her rifle, as she was quicker with smaller arms. Still, until she found out what was going on, she wasn’t letting down her guard. Grabbing the bat from the back, she jumped from the truck, being sure to leave the doors open, and headed over to the truck. Though she was shorter than her cousins, she walked faster than all of them. She’d quickly caught up with them and was about to overtake them when Tarana reached out, snagged her and pushed her behind her. Dammit, now all she could see was her cousins’ backs. She heard the windows slide down, she heard her cousins ready their weapons, but she couldn’t see a damned thing.

Ändreas heard the sound of something big coming their way. By the sound of it, it was also going extremely fast. He hoped they weren't going so fast that they failed to see them.

"Finally, another vehicle," Yves commented.

"Let's hope they see us," Sébastien said. "Do you think it was smart to park so far off of the road?"

"We're going to have to change two tires. I don't want to chance being hit by another vehicle while doing it," Ändreas answered just as an Expedition pulled up.

When the other vehicle pulled up, Loic jumped in. "Well, I guess the fact that someone has stopped answers that question."

Seeing the women who exited the vehicle halted all conversation. It wasn't simply the fact that they all wore formal gowns. It was the fact that they were armed to the teeth and wearing gowns that caused them pause. "Fuck," Ändreas muttered.

"Okay, am I the only one hearing horror film music?" Yves whispered.

"Unfortunately, no. Don't make any sudden moves, and try not to be an asshole, Yves," Ändreas said. "We need to let them know we don't mean any harm."

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“They’re the ones with all the weapons,” Yves returned.

“But we’re on their turf, and unless we count your overpriced wardrobe and acid tongue, we’re unarmed,” he said as he rolled down all the windows and put his hands on the steering wheel in plain sight. For a moment, he thought of some of his African-American male friends who said they dreaded being pulled over. He hadn’t understood their paranoia; then again, he’d never been pulled over, and until now, he’d never had anyone approach him with weapons.

“I was going to ask why you’re here. Then I noticed the flat tires,” the tallest one said.

Ändreas nodded.

“Do you have a spare?” she asked.

“Indeed we do—one,” Ändreas answered evenly.

“Guess you’ll be needing our spare too then,” the woman wearing glasses said.

“We can pay you for the trouble,” Sébastien jumped in helpfully.

The rifles were thankfully being lowered at that particular moment, but then the cold inside of the Navigator was nothing in comparison to the arctic look that swept across the tallest of the three women’s features.

“We didn’t stop for your money, boy,” the woman with the constant frown said angrily.

Andreas was about to offer his apologies when the shortest of the four women elbowed her way between the frowner and the bespectacled women.

“Damn straight,” was her helpful comment.

Andreas noticed that the other women rolled their eyes but didn’t say anything.

“We’ll get you the spare. Here, Cleo,” the tallest woman said as she handed the shortest woman her rifle.

Cleo slung the high-powered rifle over her shoulder with an ease that said she was accustomed to handling weapons and grinned at him.

“Let us help,” Sébastien said as he exited the Navigator with Yves and Loic in tow.

All of the other women ignored them, and two headed to the back of their truck. One stepped back but kept a steady hold on her rifle. Her look clearly said, *test me*. Andreas had no intention of doing any such thing.

“Sooooo, what’s your name, babe?” Cleo asked the only brunet in the group of men. As soon as he got out of the SUV, she realized she was going to have to stretch in order to keep looking him in the eye.

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Cutie had to be at least six foot six. Dammit, why was she constantly surrounded by people taller than her?

“My name is Andreas,” he said, his deep voice awash with an accent she couldn’t place.

Cocking her head to the side, she looked up into his dark eyes only to realize that he’d adjusted himself and was now leaning against the Navigator so she didn’t have to look so far up. Cleo was surprised by his actions. Tall people usually didn’t think of that sort of thing.

“I’m Cleo. Those bitches are my cousins. The one with glasses is Nandi. The tallest one is Tarana, and the one giving your friend her ‘*I should make an example out of you*’ look is Jakira.”

Cleo studied the man named Andreas as she introduced herself and cousins. She noticed that he didn’t say anything as he looked at her cousins, but she also noticed that his gaze didn’t linger over her beautiful cousins either. Smart man, unlike the dudes with him. They had roving eyes, and if they kept it up, they were going to have dirt in their eyes and an ass whipping to go along with that. Oh well, she thought as she returned her gaze to Andreas.

When his gaze returned to her, Cleo was almost hypnotized by the look in his gold-flecked green eyes. She could’ve gotten lost in those eyes, and would’ve but for the sudden expression in them. He

looked...*sad*? No way a man who looked like temptation and from the looks of him and his ride had plenty of money should be sad. Hmm. Andreas was a puzzle to be solved, and obviously he needed a friend.

“The three men are my business partners. The gentleman who is getting the warning look from Jakira is Sébastien. The gentleman who looks confused by the wheel brace Tarana is holding is Loic, and the gentleman who is ogling your cousin Nandi is Yves,” Andreas told Cleo.

Cleo’s hazel eyes sparkled up at him, and he found himself relaxing in her presence. She gave off such a warm feeling he had at first believed it was just the sensation from the sun, but he quickly realized the warmth came from Cleo.

“Would I be correct in assuming that your full name is Cleopatra?” he asked.

When she grinned up at him, he felt something similar to a squeezing sensation in his chest. Even though he’d only been standing out in the direct sun for a few minutes, perhaps he was getting heatstroke.

“Nope, it’s just ‘Cleo’,” she said with her grin intact. “So tell me about you, Andreas. Any siblings?”

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He smiled as he thought of his own siblings. “Yes, I have younger twin brothers—Marc and Serge, and a beautiful sister, Annaliese,” he said proudly.

“Okay, from the sound of you, you totally spoil your sister, as you should. And you have twin brothers? Lucky you. I always believed that I was a twin; I was so disappointed to find out that I wasn’t,” she said with a shrug. “Since my family is overrun with boys, I have to make do with these wenches.”

Ändreas couldn’t help but smile at her words. She had a contagious sense of humor. Looking around, he realized that her cousins and his business partners were all crowded around the back of the vehicle.

“Perhaps we should go assist,” he offered.

“Um, no. They have it, and by the sounds of it your friends are fixing to get cussed out.”

Before he could raise the first objection, they heard the heated words from the other side of the Navigator. Cleo was right—he didn’t want to get involved in *that*!

“So Ändreas...am I saying it right?” Cleo asked him.

“Perfectly.” He nodded.

“I try to get people’s names right. It’s so annoying when people fuck up such a beautiful name, you know?”

Ändreas nodded, not knowing at all, but just watching Cleo speak was an experience. Speech didn't simply roll off of her tongue; she got involved. She used her hands, and her beautiful caramel face lit up with the smile that was always implied. He couldn't take his eyes off of her. Okay, it may have had a little bit to do with the fact that she was still holding the rifle her cousin had handed her, but *that* was only a tiny part of why Ändreas was unable to look away.

"You think I have a beautiful name?" Ändreas asked.

Cleo grinned at him as she answered.

"Yeah, and you're kinda hot too. So where are you from, Ändreas? Because the Lord knows you're not southern in the least."

Ändreas found himself smiling again. "Me and my business partners are from Switzerland."

"Wow, really? No wonder I couldn't place your accent. Don't y'all have like three official languages there?"

"Yes, and one unofficial language," he answered, surprised at her knowledge of his country.

"And I bet you speak all of them fluently."

"I do," he responded, still somewhat in a daze.

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“That’s what you’re supposed to say when my uncle asks if you take me to be your lawfully wedded wife.” She smiled up at him again.

Lawfully wedded wife? Before he could stop himself, he imagined her walking toward him in a white gown. The gown would be exquisite even if he had to make it himself. Hearing her laugh, he pulled away from his thoughts and refocused on her.

“So how long have you been in the U.S.?”

“Oh, for a few years now. I came here right after graduate school.”

“So you’re fine and intelligent. Keep racking up the good qualities, and I’m going to have to call DIBS! on you. So what kind of business do you have here?”

“We are financiers,” he said in a bit of a daze. Cleo switched subjects frequently and it was hard to keep up, not because of the language barrier but because she touched, she laughed, and she kept saying things that had him imagining them together as a couple.

Cleo’s laughter brought him back to the moment.

“Oh goodness! You guys are the stereotypical Swiss bankers,” Cleo chortled happily.

Andreas couldn’t help but see the humor in it. Nodding his head, he joined in her laughter. Before

he could ask her what she did, he turned his attention to the warning Tarana was issuing.

“Dude, if you push up on me again I’m gonna straight cold cock you! I know you’re foreign, but there’s such a thing as personal space.”

“It was only a matter of time,” he heard Cleo say. He watched as she reached out and grabbed his arm. “Let’s go prevent another senseless fatality.” She smiled up at him.

Ändreas was pretty sure he shouldn’t be smiling at any sentence that had the word “fatality” in it, but here he was, hot, lost, and with one of the most engaging women he’d ever met, just feeling all casual in spite of the danger his partners might be in.

After the initial violence was avoided, the two tires were quickly changed, and the Winston Amazons were getting back into their truck to head home. Hearing Cleo yell “shotgun” had him and all three of his partners hitting the ground. It wasn’t until he saw Cleo run to the passenger side of the Expedition that he understood she was calling preference for seating, not warning them that they were about to be picked off by a sniper.

Brushing the red clay dust off his suit, Ändreas approached their vehicle cautiously.

“Ladies, thank you so much for your help. Might we buy you dinner to show our gratitude?” he asked formally.

A chorus of *yeses* was broken by Tarana’s *hell no*. Being that Tarana was glaring at Loic, he didn’t take her objection personally. Still, he didn’t know how he should proceed. Andreas looked quizzically at Cleo, who rolled her eyes.

“She’s overruled by the majority. Here’s our office number,” she said.

Andreas reached into his jacket and typed the digits into his PDA, not that he needed help memorizing seven digits. He was, after all, a business major, and therefore had an affinity for numbers. Still, he punched in the digits so he could look at something other than Cleo’s lips. Her lips were slicked with a lip gloss he could practically taste, and he found that he wanted to. It didn’t help that Cleo, who was half hanging out of the passenger window, had yanked him up close to her so they were touching. She was oblivious to the fact that from this vantage point, he had a healthy eyeful of her bountiful cleavage and a nose full of her intoxicating scent. Andreas couldn’t help the instant hard-on that filled his trousers or the little voice in his head that demanded he pull Cleo from the truck and take her

with them. Only the fact that all of the women were obviously well-versed in handling arms stopped him.

As soon as he finished inserting the numbers into his phone, Cleo demanded his number.

“Give up the digits,” she said. “I know that your boys already exchanged numbers with the scourge of Atlanta here, but I want it for my personal file.”

Rattling off his number, he watched her put it into her phone. As soon as she was done, she showed him the screen. “See, it’s right here under ‘Swankers.’”

“Um, what is a ‘swanker’?” he asked.

“Short for Swiss Bankers, but see how I have this little emblem next to it? That’s the symbol for fire because you’re hot.”

Before he could respond, Tarana interrupted them. “Hey, maybe since you’re all up in his grill you can ask him his social security number, his home address, and his dick size.”

“I don’t need to, smarty pants. He’s foreign, so he wouldn’t have a social security number; he’d have a tax ID number, which I can easily find out being that they are a business in the U.S. and you know, we’re friends with Reign. His home address is public information, and I could easily find that from running his license plate. Being that his plate begins with the letter Z, I’m betting he lives in the Buckhead

region of Atlanta. And since he's a little taller than you, I'm guessing his dick's about four inches longer than your own five inches."

"You're just mad because I won't let you blow me," Tarana shot back.

"Hey, just because we're southern doesn't mean we have to live up to that incest stereotype. And even if I did girls, I don't do butch girls. And though I do do men, I don't want no short, short man."

"There's still plenty of daylight left for me to kick your ass, Napoleon," Tarana teased.

"Go for it, bitch," Cleo said as she settled fully into the front seat and faced off with Tarana.

"Um, ladies, perhaps—" Andreas began.

His protests were cut off by a chorus of "shut the fuck up"s. Andreas was no fool. He shut the fuck up. Still, he was concerned about Cleo. Though she was a good-sized woman, she was small in comparison to her cousins. And perhaps just a little more vicious, he noted when she picked up the thick book that was lying on the dash. It was obvious she meant to smack her cousin with it.

"You guys know the rules," Nandi interjected before he could. "No hitting in the face or below the belt."

Nandi sounded as if she said those words often. Being that neither she nor Jakira seemed surprised

or upset about the impending fight, Andreas decided that maybe they could handle it. Famous last words, he thought as Tarana hurled an insult at Cleo.

“You know why you’re the shortest person in our whole entire family?”

“I am not short!” Cleo yelled back.

“Because you were adopted. We’re not even sure you’re all black. Since all of our parents already had female children, they voted and let Aunt Autumn and Uncle Malachi have you. Too bad they got the runt of the litter.”

“That’s it. You have absolutely no shame. Well, no more Mr. Nice Guy,” Cleo said as she jumped out of the truck. Stomping around to the back, she rummaged around before slamming down the back of the truck. Besides a large carryall bag, a rifle and a shorter gun of some sort, she had something else in her hand, but he couldn’t see what it was. Whatever it was, she threw it full force at her cousin.

“Since you like squirrels so much, take this,” she said as she let go like a major league pitcher.

Oblivious to the threats Tarana hurled at her, she grabbed the bag she’d thrown on the ground (she never relinquished her hold on her weapons) and marched over to him and grabbed his arm.

“Come on, Andreas. I’m riding with you.”

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“Not that I wouldn’t love your company, but, um, your cousin is coming,” he said.

“Good—maybe busting her nut will put her in a better mood,” she said as she opened the driver’s side door.

“Um, what are you doing?” he asked.

“Driving. Now hurry up and get in,” she ordered as she turned and unloaded water from the smaller gun she had.

“Back off, or I aim for the hair next,” she cautioned.

Funny how the real, high-caliber rifle in her possession didn’t faze the taller women, but the threat of water had them all backing up, slow and easy.

“Cleo, we don’t have a bench seat in the second row, we have captain’s chairs,” Andreas noted.

“And?”

“There are already four of us in the vehicle.”

“Well then, one of you has to get out. And since I like you, you’re staying. And since Tarana seems to really hate Loic, I vote for Loic to ride with those bitches.”

Turning to Loic, she gave him a look and a decree. “Get out or else, and I guarantee you—” she began.

Loic didn't have to hear anything else; he was out of that truck so fast that he kicked up enough red clay to lightly dust his suit.

"Get in, Andreas," she ordered.

Seeing that Loic was safely buckled in the seat she'd vacated, he got in.

"Buckle up," she said as she revved the engine and took off.

Andreas had never seen anyone turn the ignition, put the vehicle in gear, and take off in one motion...until now. Thankful that he had his seatbelt on, he looked on in amazement as his little Cleo flipped her cousins the bird and left them in the dust. He wasn't sure how they got back to Atlanta; he only knew they got there a helluva lot faster than they should have.

After asking him if his overpriced piece of crap had four-wheel drive, she put it to the limit. It was only after they were on I-20 that she bothered to talk. Of course she did that whilst turning his radio to ESPN so she could hear her sports updates. He learned a lot about his Cleo during that drive. First, every shiny thing caught her attention. Second, she tended to talk about fifty things at once. Third, apparently a *Hot Now* sign at Krispy Kreme was like a homing device for her. Of course he only discovered that when she cut across five lanes of traffic and

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zoomed into the drive thru like Jim Carrey in *Ace Ventura*. Fourth, the last thing Cleo ever needed was a whole lot of sugar. Fifth, she had a story for everything. Sixth, that story usually involved her cousins. And seventh, any story that involved her cousins usually involved weapons, a fight, somebody going missing or all three. When she finally brought the Navigator to a halt, he was exhausted. Cleo took a lot of energy.

Flouncing out of the truck, she gave him a hug, grabbed up her stuff and tapped her sneaker-clad foot whilst waiting for her cousins to pull up. Recalling his first encounter with their Expedition, Andreas thought it prudent to give Tarana a wide berth. He tried to get Cleo to stand farther away from the park she was in front of to no avail. Cleo simply remained in the space, calmly eating another glazed doughnut. Ten seconds later, Tarana pulled into the space and stopped two inches from Cleo. Andreas thought his heart was going to stop; however, Cleo just stood there, calmly brushing bits of glaze off her gown.

When Tarana and the other two women jumped out of the truck, he thought for sure they were going to do bodily harm to Cleo. He couldn't have been more mistaken. Tarana went around and grabbed Loic up by the collar and dragged him from

the passenger seat, while the other two women stood by the second row door on the right side of the Navigator, preventing his partners from exiting the vehicle.

“You okay, Cleo?”

“Yep,” Cleo answered calmly.

“Well then, I guess we don’t get to kill Loic here.” Tarana sighed as she pushed Loic toward him as if they were doing a hostage exchange.

“Get in, little girl,” Tarana ordered.

“Wait—my doughnuts,” Cleo protested.

“We’ve got it handled. When have we ever gone past a *Hot Now* sign and not stopped?” Tarana asked as she inspected Cleo for any damage.

“Kay,” Cleo said as she hopped up into the passenger seat.

“Bye guys,” she said as she buckled herself in and took the box of doughnuts Nandi offered her.

With a polite wave, they peeled off, unaware that four pairs of eyes watched them until they could no longer see their vehicle. How they managed to look so good despite their ordeal, Andreas didn’t know. He only knew that they did. Okay, Cleo looked good. He couldn’t even recall what her cousins were wearing. Climbing into the passenger seat, he finally looked at Loic.

“Did they hurt you?”

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“Not as much as I hoped she would. After their initial threats, they fed me and otherwise treated me well. I’m not sure about Nandi and Jakira, but I think Tarana is attracted to me,” he said right before reclining his seat and closing his eyes.

Chapter Three: Cleo Will Love Him, and Squeeze Him and We Will Call Him Yours

It had started as a normal day. He'd been in the midst of discussing an investment with Sébastien when his personal assistant had buzzed him and announced that his appointment was here and waiting. Not recalling any scheduled appointments, he checked his calendar and frowned when he didn't see anything. Curious to see who'd dared to wrangle their way into his office without the courtesy of making an appointment, he made his way to the door and got an eyeful of Cleo Winston. That was when all hell had broken loose.

Cleo had pushed her way past him and strolled into his office like it was her personal hangout. Sébastien stood and held a hand out for her to shake. Cleo promptly balled his hand into a fist and knocked it with her own before winking a greeting and going on a walkabout around his office, making comments here and there. Sinking into his leather chair, she commented on its comfort before spinning in circles. All he and Sébastien could do was look on at the chaos she brought with her.

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“So how’s it hanging, guys?” was the first question in her well-stocked arsenal.

They didn’t even get a chance to answer before she bombarded him and Sébastien with question after question, barely waiting for them to finish their response before pressing on to the next one. He’d been mid-interrogation for five minutes before it crossed his mind to wonder why he and Sébastien continued answering her questions and if she’d ever run out of them. Before he could finish that thought, she had him by the arm and was waving ’bye to Sébastien.

“Ändreas is taking me to lunch, so don’t wait up for us,” she warned.

He didn’t even get a chance to protest before he was dragged past an office full of people wearing inquisitive looks. Of course Cleo (in what he soon learned was typical Cleo fashion) ignored everything that didn’t add to her excitement level.

Ändreas was savoring the apple pie at Dréa’s when he learned that he was the official *new* best friend of one Cleo Winston. That bit of information floored him. Wasn’t there supposed to be some kind of timeline on which activities were performed together, trust built, and confidences exchanged before the title of “best friend” was bestowed and/or accepted? And more importantly, what happened to

her previous best friends? Of course, he didn't get a chance to ask, as she'd promptly dragged him off shopping as soon as their bill was settled.

"So what do you think, Andreas? And don't give me a pussy answer. We're best friends now, so you can be as brutally honest as you need to be," Cleo said as she pulled him by the arm to stand beside her in front of a mirror.

He had no idea how the hell lunch had turned into shopping and how the hell he'd turned into her shopping caddy, but here he was holding bags, sitting on a too-small chair being asked to give an opinion. All of this was new to him, especially the him giving an opinion part, as Cleo usually told him what his opinion was going to be and waited rather impatiently while he acquiesced.

Clearing his head, he focused in on Cleo, who was posing in front of the mirror, bringing one foot forward and then the other. Obviously, he was meant to comment on her trousers. They were your average black trousers, but they fitted her well.

"I think they look lovely, *Meine Dame*," he answered.

Cleo turned, giving him a spectacular view. Her hands were on her hips, her legs slightly spread, and all he could think was how much he appreciated the way the material of her trousers smoothed over her

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abundant curves, accentuating *all* of her positives. Feeling a tingling sensation in his groin, he crossed his legs and rearranged the purse on his lap.

“What about the ones with the silver buckles? They look good too, right?” Cleo asked him as she turned and bent at the waist while fiddling with something on the boots she was wearing.

Ändreas knew he was meant to be answering a question, but his mind was occupied staring at Cleo’s ass. Inhaling, Ändreas balled his hands into fists to stop himself from tracing the outline of Cleo’s womanly curves. When he realized that wasn’t enough to talk his body out of such an action, he busied his mind. He was busy reciting the rules of banking in German when Cleo straightened and looked at him.

“You okay?” she asked.

Ändreas heard the question and opened his mouth to answer when he was thankfully interrupted by someone calling Cleo’s name. Automatically, he went to shield her, wondering if the authoritative voice belonged to the police. They hadn’t participated in any kind of crime...at least to his knowledge, but one never could be sure what Cleo did before she got to him or after she left.

“Hey!” Cleo called back happily as she was gathered up into the man’s arms.

Snuggled in the man's embrace, she missed the looks that were exchanged between them. Andreas was perplexed as to why the other man would level him with a warning glare.

"How much chaos have you left in your wake today?" the man asked Cleo as he set her back on her feet.

"Stop spreading rumors before you scare off my new best friend," she said before introducing them. "Andreas, this is my big brother, Cairo. Cairo, this is my new best friend, Andreas."

The warning that was burning in the man's eyes dissipated and was quickly replaced by amusement.

"*You're* Cleo's new best friend? My condolences. So are you coming to dinner on Sunday?" Cairo asked.

"Of course he's coming to dinner on Sunday. We might be late, though, because we've got plans."

"We do?" Andreas asked.

"Yes, we do. If you'd been paying attention, you would've remembered that. Luckily, I inserted the activities in your PDA. Really, Andreas, what would you do without me?" she asked.

"Probably be a whole lot less confused than he is now, I'll bet," Cairo said.

"Cairo, it's not too early in the day to catch an 'L,'" she threatened.

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“Not only is it too early in the day to catch an ‘L,’ it’s too early in existence for me to ever catch an ‘L’ from you.”

“Not that I can’t whip your ass; I’m just too busy picking out shoes to do it. Luckily, I have Andreas.” Turning to him, she ordered, “Andreas, teach him some respect.”

What? he wondered.

“Um, when did I become your personal administrator of revenge?”

“Justice, not revenge, and it comes along with the position of being my best friend. Best friends have to avenge each other. Everybody knows that,” she said.

“What exactly am I avenging?”

“Cairo besmirched my reputation. He implied I was chaotic.”

“Did you just use the word ‘besmirch’ in a sentence?” Cairo interrupted.

“I did. Don’t be a hater,” she said.

“Oh, I’m not hating on your vocabulary.” Cairo laughed.

“I’m not talking about my vocabulary. I mean don’t hate on me after Andreas beats you down for offending my honor and all.” Turning to him, she ordered, “Well, Andreas, get to it. Beat his ass. We’ve got more shoes to look for.”

“Do you really think it wise for me to engage in battle right here in the open?” he asked.

“Okay, fine, we can postpone Cairo’s beat down until the family dinner. Cairo, I hope you enjoy the rest of the week because on Sunday, you’re going to have an ass whipping to go along with whatever else you scarf down.”

“So you’re definitely coming?” Cairo asked.

“Yep, but I’m also bringing three other dudes with me, so don’t think you’re going to gang up on Andreas.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. I might, however, get a stunt double fighter.”

“Scared?” Cleo taunted.

“Out of my shoes.” Cairo smiled.

“Well, you should be. Next time you’ll treat me with the deference I deserve.” Cleo sniffed haughtily.

“Try not to get him deported, exiled, or worse, Cleo, as I’m looking forward to our fight on Sunday.”

“I never knew anyone so anxious to get a beat down,” Cleo returned. “See you Sunday.”

“I’m sorry, when did I become a gladiator?”

“You’re a gladiator? Do you have an outfit? Because if you do, I’m going to need to see you in that. I bet you’re hot rocking the booty skirt, armor and lace-up sandals.”

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Ändreas wasn't sure where he'd lost control of the conversation. He only knew that he hadn't been in control since he'd met Cleo...a whole three weeks ago.

"Cleo, while I appreciate the opportunity to defend your honor—" he began.

"As you should," she reassured him. "I don't let just anyone kick ass in my name."

He couldn't help but wonder about the people she allowed to kick ass in her name. Were they as hapless as him? Taking her bag, he looked at her and spoke softly. "While I will defend you anytime, Sundays are family time, and you don't have to invite us over."

Looking at him with a frown, Cleo asked, "You don't want to come? Are you pissed at me for something? You can't be, because I haven't even given you a reason...*yet!* Even if I did give you a reason, you're coming, so shut up," Cleo said. "You need to have fun, and anything that involves my family is fun. Plus, it's the perfect way to cap off our weekend," she informed him as she grabbed his elbow, thanked the sales assistant and dragged him to yet another adventure.

It wouldn't be until later that Ändreas would realize that when Cleo made plans for *them*, they

were firm plans, whether or not he agreed to or wanted to do whatever she had planned...full stop.

Chapter Four: Payback

Cleo looked at her three cousins, who were all facing off with her like it was the Old West and they were in the middle of the town square. Watching her cousins being assholes was like a parallel viewing of the movie *Groundhog Day*. Not even fazed, Cleo gave them a piece of her mind.

“You cannot be Cairo’s stunt fight double,” Cleo said as she poked Tarana in her ample chest.

“You didn’t call it,” Tarana said as she slapped her hand down.

“I also didn’t call ‘you can’t bitch slap an old lady to sleep,’ because it’s common decency not to,” Cleo said.

“It’s also common decency to fight for your woman,” Jakira said.

“I’m not Andreas’ woman. I’m his best friend.”

“Yet you’re still all hot in the pants over Andreas, aren’t you? Don’t even bother lying, because I’ve seen the way you look at him,” Jakira said.

“I don’t look at him any kind of way,” Cleo protested.

“Maybe, maybe not, but that’s not what we told Aunt Autumn,” Tarana cackled.

“You are so dead,” Cleo said as she took a deep breath in an effort to calm her nerves. If it wasn’t for the “no fucking each other up” rule the mommas diligently enforced, she’d be all over Tarana like sting on an ass whipping.

“Really?” Tarana smiled all evil-like before throwing her head back and hollering for her momma. “Aunt Autumn, Cleo’s threatening to hit me.”

Knowing that Tarana’s cry would bring all the mommas running, Cleo narrowed her eyes at Tarana. “That was below the belt.”

“That’s payback for flinging a snapping turtle at me,” Tarana said.

“And for inviting eligible guys over,” Jakira added. “Now we’re going to spend all fucking day listening to the ‘I’m getting old/need some grandbabies on my lap’ spiel from all the mommas.”

“Yeah, just because you’re ready to settle down and produce mini trilingual swankers doesn’t mean you have to drag us into it,” Nandi said.

“I hate you,” Cleo said just before her momma came over.

“Aunt Autumn, Cleo’s been making eyes at Andreas,” Tarana said while managing to sound all pitiful.

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“And unlike his partners, he doesn’t have a girlfriend.” Nandi twisted the dagger in a little deeper.

“And he loves children...wants a house full of them.” Jakira twisted the dagger in all the way to the hilt.

Collectively known as “the mommas” by most people, the mothers of Tarana, Jakira, Nandi and Cleo were women of distinction...and legends in these parts. Not only had they each snagged a Winston brother and kept him snagged, they were women who’d fought any and everything that threatened their families...and they had the scars, jail records, and notches on their brass knuckles to prove it. Once they decided on something, they went after it whole hog. Right now, they wanted grandbabies.

“I like that boy Cleo brought with her,” Patience Winston (Jakira’s mother) said offhandedly.

“His name is Andreas, and his friends are Yves Reiman, Loic von Leuzinger, and Sébastien Götsch,” Henrietta (Nandi’s mother) said.

“I don’t care what their names are. I want to know if they’re straight, if they’ve got crazy in their bloodline and when one of them is gonna sex some sense into my daughter and get me some more

grandbabies,” Autumn Winston said impatiently as they all watched the Swiss men.

Seeing her daughter Tarana flip one of the young men the finger before walking right past him, Dallas Winston cackled with laughter.

“Ah, I see your daughter’s going out of her way to be nice. Normally, she would’ve leveled him,” Henrietta said.

“Yeah, she must really like Andreas to spare his friend.”

Watching Andreas’ gaze follow her baby girl like a hungry man, Autumn smiled. *Aahhhh, excellent.*

“What do you think of our little get-together, Andreas?” Cleo asked as she linked arms with him and dragged him away.

“It’s very...*busy*,” Andreas said carefully.

Cleo laughed. “Ah, that sounds like code for ‘crazy.’ Speaking of which, Tarana is Cairo’s stunt fight double, so I’m going to have to get someone else to defend my honor, okay?”

“That someone’s not going to be you, is it?” he asked.

“Um, no. I don’t have a death wish. However, Abeni isn’t wrapped too damn tight, so I might be able to talk her into it.”

Before Andreas could respond, an elegant hand came out of nowhere and pinched Cleo's cheek.

"Momma!" Cleo whined at the stunning woman she would resemble in twenty-some years.

"Momma nothing. Why are you over here trying to arrange a smack down?" Autumn asked her daughter with a raised eyebrow.

Cleo got the familiar mischievous look on her face that indicated she was about to try and cut her way out of trouble. "It was Andreas' fault," Cleo pouted.

"Mmm-hmm," Cleo's mother said with a smile as she turned to him. "Are you to blame, young man?"

Andreas shook his head and gave her a return smile. "Honestly, ma'am, I don't know. It seems as if I don't know much around Cleo," he answered politely.

Cleo, of course, rolled her eyes at him, and he put his arms around her shoulders to show that he meant no offense. He might not know Cleo's mother, but he'd been in the world long enough to know a miffed Cleo was easier to mollify than a miffed momma. Seeing the laughter in Cleo's eyes, he knew Cleo understood his predicament. What he didn't know, however, was the picture her mother saw. If he had known how good they looked together and how

amenable to that her mother was, he might not have allowed Cleo to come to his house. Maybe. She was, after all, as beautiful as she was daring and as intelligent as she was loyal.

“Momma, Andreas and I have somewhere to be, so we’re cutting out early.”

“Well, let me make you a plate,” she said.

“Oh, that won’t be necessary,” he began, but stopped as soon as he saw the look in Cleo’s mother’s eyes.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he amended.

“Good boy,” she said as she hugged him and went off to make him what amounted to a week’s worth of food...for a family of four, including three meals a day and dessert.

Piling the bags into his SUV, he asked Cleo’s mom, “Are you sure you aren’t part Italian?”

“I’m southern, but a good momma mommas the same way regardless of where she’s from. Now go and have fun, and make sure my daughter doesn’t kill you or herself in the process.”

“Yes ma’am,” he said.

Chapter Five: Wonders Never Cease

Andreas hated to admit it, but Cleo was right. The movie was good. He still couldn't fathom a discernable plot; nevertheless, the copious fight scenes and chase scenes involving motorcycles, muscle cars, speedboats and helicopters captured his attention. Engrossed in the movie, he realized something was amiss. It took him a moment to realize exactly what it was. It was quiet. Being that Cleo was in his presence, this quiet was unnatural. Looking at the woman who'd had no qualms about using his body as her pillow, he realized why. After giving him a five-minute, hundred-mile-an-hour rundown of the movie she'd insisted they watch on *his* television, Cleo was asleep.

Gently, he turned her and resettled her so that her head lay against his chest. He'd always considered her to be cute, but being that he was always in the throes of some kind of something that she'd dragged him into, he really hadn't had time to study her. He took the time now. Her soft locks fell into her mocha face. Fingering the mass, he noted they were soft to the touch. Sweeping them back, he looked upon her face, noting that even when asleep

she smiled. She had a smile that dominated her face and a personality that dominated everything. Cleo's beauty got lost in her personality. She had the kind of beauty that settled into a man's bones and made him ache. The longer he continued to watch her, the deeper he was pulled into her.

He'd met a lot of people, but he'd never met anyone like Cleo. She was an extraordinary woman, and it had nothing to do with how she looked, where she lived or what she'd achieved academically or professionally. She was extraordinary because she didn't base her esteem or worth on the social markers of beauty, title, wealth, or race.

The extrinsic things he knew about Cleo he'd learned by happenstance. She didn't waste a moment boasting about her academic or professional accomplishments. Instead she spent time showing him who she was outside of the social indicators. What was intrinsic about Cleo were the things that were important, the things that made Cleo, Cleo. Things like her addiction to hot doughnuts, her preference for action movies, her loyalty to those she loved, and the Cleo Code she lived by.

Cleo had social activism in her blood, no tolerance for exploitation of anyone, and the vocabulary to back up her pissed off-ness. Though she took plenty of time off of work, she never took a

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vacation from the Cleo Code. When Cleo took a stand, she dug in and defended her position with what Ms. Nqobile called “fire in her bones.” Cleo in protective mode was a sight to behold. She wore her passion with ease and dispensed it with dead-on aim.

Though he wasn’t an underdog, somehow he’d become one of Cleo’s special interests. At first, it stung his pride that she saw him differently than his partners, but then she’d picked up his hands and gently traced their topography. She didn’t say a word; she simply paused at all of the calluses and scars, and when she was finished, she folded his hand into hers and kept it there. It had started with his hand, and before long, she’d kept all of him.

She’d completely taken over his life, and instead of being angry, Andreas simply wondered how it was he’d been able to get through a whole day without the barrage of e-mails, texts and voicemail messages from his new best friend. Cleo didn’t schedule appointments like other people did. She simply announced her grand plans via e-mail, voicemail, or by phone and expected one to comply. If one didn’t comply within a reasonable amount of time, she simply showed up and dragged you along with her regardless of what you were doing. He’d learned that the hard way. She’d simply kidnapped him from the parking lot and made off with him...and

of course his partners didn't even pretend they were going to stop her from kidnapping him, just like they didn't protest her claim that he was her new best friend.

There was nothing lukewarm about their friendship. They talked, laughed, and debated. Both having strong personalities, they also argued (of course Cleo always insisted that she won). Even in the midst of their arguments, Cleo took care of him. He'd met half her friends in the midst of getting told off. He'd even met her pastor (whom she visited everywhere but at church) while being threatened with an ass whipping in Mandarin Chinese.

Andreas had quickly learned that there weren't many people Cleo didn't know, and if she didn't know them, she didn't need to know them. It seemed that half of Atlanta was related to her, and the half that wasn't wanted to be. The people she knew were part of the fabric of Atlanta, from its underground to its skyscrapers. Regardless of their stations in life, Cleo treated them all the same—with a refreshing honesty. It didn't matter if she was talking to one of the wealthiest men in the city or one of the many children who called her "Aunt," Cleo gave them sweets, tellings off and hugs in equal measure and didn't give a damn who complained about it.

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It'd taken him a bit, but soon he understood that Cleo had given him entrance. He was no longer just some well-heeled foreign dude; he was Cleo Winston's friend...and that meant something. And her mother and aunts liked him, while her father and uncles tolerated him, and that meant a whole lot of somethings. Not only were doors opened; more importantly, those doors were attached to homes of people who treated him like one of their own. That is, they told him off, hugged him until his ribs hurt, fed him until he thought he was going to pass out and gave him advice he didn't ask for but was expected to follow. And of course they gave him a nickname. He was everything from Andy to A-Dog, although most people called him Dré. "Like the doctor," Cleo had said, although she never bothered explaining who this doctor was.

Because of Cleo, he was addicted to soul food at Dréa's (who gave him a discount because he shared her name and he had a nice ass), got his hair cut by Mr. Armistead Kennesaw—the proprietor of one of the oldest black-owned barbershops on Auburn Avenue—had season tickets to Emory football, Georgia Tech basketball, and had a date to check out homecoming at Morehouse College. Because of Cleo, he spent Wednesday afternoons tutoring at-risk youth and weekends doing anything but work.

Because of Cleo, his world vision had been corrected to better than 20/20. He saw beyond all he'd achieved and realized he could be more. By "more," he didn't mean in regards to titles, money, or prestige, but more of a human being.

His thoughts were interrupted by her mumbling.

"Ändreas...it's good...honest...it's just food...you're *meant* to eat it with your fingers."

He couldn't help but laugh upon hearing a repeat of the words she'd uttered during yesterday's game, when she'd shown him the proper etiquette for eating spicy fries. Not a fan of American football, he had to admit he'd had fun watching her cheer on her friend Blitz as Emory's defense shut out its opponent.

It seemed all of their activities involved eating something he was sure his physician would be shaking his head at. Ändreas was positive he had put on at least ten pounds in the past month. When he'd made the mistake of saying that out loud, Cleo had turned and slowly perused his body, making little "hmm-hmm" noises in the back of her throat. He'd felt like a prized Arabian she was considering purchasing. When her eyes had finally returned to his, he was sure he was blushing, yet he'd been anticipating her assessment. Cleo had not disappointed him.

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Damn, you're fine, Andreas, and ten pounds isn't going to change that. Hell, fifty pounds wouldn't change that. And then she went right back to eating her ice cream, and that had been the end of that.

Cleo was unlike any woman he'd ever dated (which admittedly hadn't been many), and completely unlike the woman his parents hoped he'd grow to love—Alina. Classically beautiful, smart, and witty, Alina was everything good Italian parents could hope for in a daughter-in-law, everything any heterosexual male would want in a woman, but...he didn't love her. Ever since meeting Cleo, he looked at women and considered how they fell short of the whirlwind that had swept into his life and taken it over with her smiles, laughter, and daring.

All he could think of was how he'd do anything to keep that smile in her personality. He felt something in his chest move and he knew it was Cleo, settling the rest of the way in. He didn't understand the hows or whys, but he understood that he loved this woman. He didn't need to think it over, didn't need to ponder it at length, didn't need to double-check his heart, didn't need to ask for a second opinion. He just *knew*. He loved Cleo Winston and all of her intricacies, idiosyncrasies, and the unexplainable that went with it.

A man who based his decisions on hard facts and hedged his bets based on scientific evidence, trends, and precedent, he couldn't explain his attraction to Cleo...nor was he going to. He was simply going to attend mass and thank God for this woman. And then he was going to busy himself making Cleo fall as deeply in love with him as he was with her. A woman who liked her weapons, Cleo was about to have a Tomascett male in her arsenal. While he might not have the same recoil as her favorite rifle, he would be more dangerous to anything or anyone who thought to hurt her than anything in her arsenal...and that included her cousin Tarana.

Chapter Six: Getting Southern-Fied

Ändreas managed to swallow the *interesting* fried meat...on a stick without gagging. It wasn't that the meat wasn't tasty; it was the fact that it was on a stick that bothered him. Apparently, carnival food all came on a stick. There'd been the cotton candy (on a stick), the candied apples (on a stick), the corn dog (on a stick), the corn on the cob (dipped in a vat of butter and on the obligatory stick), funnel cake (on a stick), and whatever the hell he'd just eaten (again on a stick). The only thing that hadn't come on a stick was the turkey legs. The only reason those weren't on sticks was because they apparently came from turkeys fed on a steady diet of steroids—it'd taken him two hands to hold the damn thing.

Turning to Cleo to tell her he was done eating, he realized she wasn't where he'd left her. Swallowing the last bite of his concoction, he turned every which way looking for Cleo and came up with nothing. Reaching for his PDA, he was all set to call her when the sound of some kind of battle cry rent the air, followed by the impact of almost six feet of woman landing against his back.

"Piggyback me, Ändreas," Cleo commanded.

And just like that he was a pack mule. He didn't argue, he simply held still while Cleo wrapped herself around him and waited for her next order.

"Hey, let's go over there. I think there's fried candy bars," Cleo demanded as she pointed towards another brightly colored tent.

Ändreas groaned, considering the food they'd already consumed. Still, he did as he was bid, even though his stomach roiled at what the proprietor was actually doing with the candy bars. Before he could say "no, I'm good," Cleo had not one but two candy bars in her hands. He quickly found an unoccupied picnic table. Setting Cleo down, he gave her his sternest look.

"I'm not eating *that*," he said firmly.

Busy enjoying hers, she stopped and looked at him with a frown. "Why not? It's really yummy."

"There is no way in hell I'm eating *that*," Ändreas reiterated.

Cleo merely raised a single eyebrow as she continued licking the deep-fried treat.

Cleo couldn't believe she'd actually dragged a man as cultured as Ändreas to the carnival, much less gotten him to eat carnival food. So far, he'd been a real trooper, sampling everything she'd given him and even paying for the treats. More than that, he

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was looking all kinds of fine in his relaxed-fit jeans and Emory polo shirt. Too damn fine.

She'd never questioned why she'd gravitated to Andreas, but the longer she was around the Swiss banker, the more she liked him. He was some kind of good to look at...six and a half feet of fine, and as proper as you please. She wondered if he was that proper when he had his head buried between a woman's thighs...or had a woman's mouth surrounding his cock. Scratch that...not some random woman...but her. If she was sharing a bed with Andreas, she'd make damn sure he left proper behind.

She wanted that man with the fierceness. Still munching on her deep-fried treat, she alternated between nibbling and licking as her new best friend watched. Seeing his dark eyes flare, she knew he was imagining his cock in her mouth. His breathing slowed, his eyes narrowed, and he went completely still. That turned her on. but not as much as the predatory look he gave her. Mercy.

"Oh my goodness, Andreas! How could you let that crazy woman eat that shit?" her friend Maelstrom Garaile accused as she strolled up.

"What?" Cleo asked as she licked the last bit of chocolate off the stick.

Maelstrom snatched the one Andreas held and tossed it in the nearest trash bin before spilling half the seasoning from her seasoned fries all over Loic. Then, when she went to wipe off her mess, she succeeded in making a greasy spot on his pristine t-shirt. She smiled seeing Loic's look of horror. The walking ad for men's fashion had had that look ever since meeting the business end of Maelstrom's intellect. Maelstrom might be part of Atlanta's SWAT, but she was first and foremost a Garaile, and the Garaile family didn't raise fools or cowards...and their parents saw to that. Of course, word on the street was that they didn't raise any progeny with good sense either, but no one was telling them that to their faces because the Garailes were as dangerous as they were brains. Nobody did exacting the way Dr. Caveat Draven Garaile did; nobody did deep mode revenge the way Legend Garaile did. And while it might be too close to call which Garaile sister had the highest IQ, Maelstrom was hands down the most skilled at fucking people up. Poor Loic was finding that out.

Cleo didn't even bother to hide her smile at the fact that the self-appointed master of charm, Loic, was totally getting his. Not only was he getting a regular dose of "getting told," but he looked like he was getting a daily dose of "not getting any." For as

much as the suave man loathed pretty much everything about the south, try as he might, he couldn't disguise his interest in Maelstrom. She was going to eat him alive. And from the looks of things, Loic was going to let her. *Hmm. Interesting.*

"What do you mean, 'what?' You wake up bouncing off of the walls. The last thing you need is anything with sugar!" Maelstrom exclaimed as she wrinkled her nose. The action caused her sunglasses to slip down her nose. Loic pushed aforementioned sunglasses back into their original position...and still had his hand. Even more interesting, Cleo thought.

"So, Andreas, she managed to drag you down here?" Maelstrom asked.

"Was there any doubt?" Andreas asked easily.

"Even if there was, it would've just been a waste of breath. Cleo just has to have her way," Maelstrom said with a laugh.

Their banter was interrupted by one of Maelstrom's hottie colleagues, who sidled up to her and whispered something into her ear. Maelstrom laughed and gave him a quick smile before she turned back to them. It was a quick exchange, but Cleo noticed that Loic glared a hole in the back of the man. Oh, this was fixing to be so on, Cleo thought.

"So what brought you guys down here?" Cleo asked her cousin and Sébastien.

“He was simply lurking about looking way too prissy for words, so I grabbed him and told him all about the experience of the state fair.”

“And he didn’t protest?” Cleo asked.

“Of course he did, but being I didn’t give a shit, I simply tuned him out,” Maelstrom said with a roll of her eyes.

“I only allowed her to take me because the mommas said this was something not to be missed,” Loic said in his defense.

“Hey, Cleo already has a new best friend. You don’t have to try and impress her,” Maelstrom said.

Loic leaned forward and spoke directly into her ear.

“*You* are the only one I want to impress, *la dunna* [wife].”

Maelstrom frowned at him, then turned to look at Andreas.

“What does ‘*la dunna*’ mean?” she asked.

Considering that Loic was busy giving Andreas the international signal for death-murder-kill, she didn’t expect Andreas to answer.

“It is a Romansh phrase that Loic uses, Maelstrom. I’m not fluent in Romansh,” Andreas replied.

Andreas might not want to rat his friend out, but Maelstrom watched Tarana’s back. And if anyone

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was going to get the privilege of killing her taciturn cousin ,it was going to be her. She'd earned it. While she wasn't a Romansh speaker, she knew enough to know what Loic said.

Turning to Loic, she warned him in his native tongue. *Pli plaun* [slow down],” she said by way of putting him on notice. Before she could say more, Maelstrom's phone rang.

Answering it, she mouthed a silent “see you later” and dragged Loic off with her.

“Is there anything you don't know? Andreas asked.

“There's plenty I don't know, but don't try and play me, because I know Tarana, and she'd kill you.” She smiled.

“I'd never attempt such a stupid thing,” he said.

“Good on you,” she said as she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Chapter Seven: Claim-Staking

Cleo couldn't forget the kiss she'd shared with Andreas. It'd been a brief kiss; nevertheless, it had rocked her to her core. She might have been the one who'd initiated it, but Andreas had owned it. The kiss itself was gentle, but there wasn't nothing gentle about the way he held her. He held her like his life depended on it. She could still feel his hands on her hips, still feel his hard chest molded to her own, still feel the leashed power within him. Andreas might have the mind of a scholar, but he had a body that was made for admiring. She'd admired at will (along with most of the female population of Atlanta). Though she didn't begrudge their looking (much), she was going to have to make it clear that the Swiss banker was off-limits to anyone who wasn't her. Setting her alarm, she pulled out the handle to her suitcase and rolled it to her truck. It was time to stake her claim.

Andreas was in the middle of a planning session with his partners when Cleo knocked and waltzed right in. His personal assistant no longer bothered to attempt to stop her...and he didn't blame

her, especially after Cleo reminded her who owned the building.

“Not only is my momma best friends with the woman who owns this building, that woman is my standby godmomma who loves me, spoils me and assured me that I could have anything I want. What I want is Andreas to come with me now.”

Seeing one of his partners about to interrupt, she cleared her throat and changed tactics. “Being that y’all are bankers, let me put this in financial terms. The principal party—which would be me—owns a controlling interest in Andreas, who is obviously ninety percent of the brains behind this business and ninety-nine percent of the hotness. Considering that tidbit, by extension Cleo—the principal party—has a controlling interest in your little firm.”

Cleo’s announcement left them all with their mouths agape.

Of course Yves had to do the dumb thing and open his mouth. “This feels like a shakedown.”

“That’s because you’re soft and used to having your way.”

Andreas almost spit out the mint he’d been chewing. Cleo accusing anyone of being used to having their own way was an extreme case of the pot calling the kettle black. Of course, he was too smart to

ever let that sentence sneak past his lips. He was partial to not having his “shit fucked up,” as Cleo often promised. He was also partial to his lips staying on his face...in the position where God had put them.

“Oh, silly, silly, silly man. A shakedown is when you wake up to the severed front end of that prissy little import you drive on the pillow next to you and a ninja’s fist heading to your throat, where he punches you before dragging you outside by your nutsack and burning down your house as you watch while he dictates the terms of the protection money you’re going to pay me so I will refrain from burning down your whole life. Okay?”

Andreas knew whatever came out of her mouth was going to be spectacular, and it was. Before he could tell Yves to be quiet, Loic reached over and quietly put Yves in a sleeper hold. Ah, he always did like Loic best.

“Thank you, Loic,” Cleo said, all pleased with her vassal’s efforts on her behalf.

“You are welcome, Overlord Cleo,” Loic said without missing a beat.

“Like I was saying before I was rudely and unnecessarily interrupted, I own one hundred percent of the Swankers.”

It'd been a tossup which of her decrees had surprised them more, but that last one looked like it was the winner.

Not wanting to be the victim of something, but curious, Sébastien asked a question. Sébastien was nowhere near as obnoxious as Yves was, but being the jokester of the group, he was the second most likely to say something to piss people off. "Respectfully, Cleo, when did we become yours?" he asked.

"When I decided you were mine, which was right around the time I didn't let Tarana, Nandi and Jakira fuck y'all's shit up, then call our male cousins to come and fuck y'all's shit up some more before calling our mommas to come dispose of you."

"Okay, just checking," Sébastien said, clearly not wanting to tangle with her.

Cleo paused and swept them all with a glance. "Any more questions?"

"No, Cleo," they all chorused. Yves chorused it after Sébastien elbowed him in the gut.

"Very good. Though I'm pleased you're all going along with the program, this didn't go as smoothly as it should have. As a result, I see that there's a need for me to validate my claim. Therefore, there will be a party." Turning and looking him directly in the eye, she ordered him, "I've got out-of-town business

tomorrow and Thursday, but I'll be back on Friday so, um, yeah...be here and look all hot."

Not even bothering to turn and look at his colleagues, she told them, "The rest of you, do the best you can."

None of them knew what that meant, and judging from the looks on their partners' faces, they were all scared. They spent the next hour fretting about it to the point that they called it a day and went home early to put together smashing outfits...well, even more smashing than was the norm for them. Despite being put out at Cleo's high-handedness, Yves always welcomed any flimsy-ass excuse to go shopping for new additions to his wardrobe.

Though he didn't run out and buy a new wardrobe, he did spend an inordinate amount of time deciding what to wear before settling on what he termed his Georgia Tech suit. An ambassador of her alma maters and many of the schools in the Atlanta area, Cleo had purchased him all manner of clothing items bearing the logos of Georgia Tech, Emory, Morehouse, and the like. Knowing he'd be being dragged to the universities for various events, he'd quickly purchased silk ties and vests in Georgia Tech old gold, Emory blue, and Morehouse maroon. Friday morning, he'd bedazzle in his midnight black intermingled with Georgia Tech old gold. He planned

to wear an old gold vest with midnight black trousers, an old gold-and-black patterned silk tie with matching pocket square, a midnight black sports jacket with black socks, and a black double-monk style dress shoe. Though he wasn't due for a cut for another week or so, he headed down to see Mr. Kennesaw since he was minding his P's and Q's.

Lying in bed that night, he wondered for the millionth time just how Cleo was going to "validate" her claim. He conjured up all kinds of possibilities, but he quickly threw them out as fast as he thought them up. Though they all had that Vegas Strip feel about them, they were nevertheless too tame for his Cleo. *His Cleo.* Startled by his involuntary possessiveness of the whirlwind, he cut out the lights and went to sleep so he wouldn't have to mull over the implications of such a claim.

At work on Friday morning, he and his partners discussed the many possibilities Cleo might come up with. That was when he discovered just how insane his partners were. Proving that his conceit never went on sabbatical, Yves figured she'd send in a horde of supermodels to seduce them and then take their sperm and make an army of Yves; Loic guessed she'd crash through the windows like SWAT and beat them into submission; Sébastien was sure she'd sneak attack them in the parking deck and ransom them

back to themselves. He refrained from commenting because a) his partners were testing the boundaries of stupid, and he wasn't about to be involved in that; b) he had no freaking idea what his Cleo would do; and c) once again, he was surprised by that possessive pronoun when thinking of Cleo.

It turned out to be a good thing he didn't add his two cents to the speculation, because like all other ideas that'd been tossed out, his would've been wrong...by a mile.

Cleo didn't come busting in through the window like the SWAT team; she didn't use an army of supermodels to seduce them into making progeny; she didn't kidnap them and demand ransom. Oh no, that would've been too simple.

Instead, Cleo waltzed in all carefree with the drum line from a marching band— The. Whole. Fucking. Drum line. And cheerleaders. And the flag corpsbearing a flag with her name on it. And then there was Cleo, who came waltzing in on a stallion. Not just any stallion—a stallion that, if he was correct in his guess, had won the Kentucky Derby a few years ago. There she was, sitting atop it with a woven blanket of roses, looking too fucking queenly for words.

It was easy to look queenly when one had on a crown that Liberace would've considered flashy and

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Napoleon would've considered overkill. It was so big he couldn't help but wonder how she was able to lift her head. Of course no queenly ensemble was complete without a fur cape and a scepter. And then there was what she wore beneath it. A leather dress embossed with rhinestones and four-inch leather stilettos. Yep, she was indeed a queen.

Raising her hand for silence, she cleared her throat. And when she received it, she cleared her throat again and beckoned to him to come assist her down. And when he did, she began the show. Holding out her hand, she waited while two half-naked, way-too-oiled-up bodybuilders handed her four mini-flags. Right there in the tastefully-decorated office of Vorn Investments, LLC, she took those flags and stuck them in the pockets of their two thousand dollar suits and claimed them as her personal property in the name of the metro Atlanta area and herself. And the building erupted in cheers.

And then there was what she did to *him* personally. He had to suffer the indignity of picking her up à la *Lion King* style, hoisting her in the air and proclaiming her their Empress. If that wasn't enough, she informed them that she'd negotiate homage and fealty that should be paid to her for allowing them to bask in her glory. He could understand how Yves and Sébastien became her vassals (*they were assholes*

and deserved to be ruled by her) and even Loic (*he had a thing for Cleo's friend and needed to get in good with her*), but when the hell did *he* become her vassal? And further, why did he have to suffer because Yves didn't know how to shut the hell up? He thought about asking, but his brain shut that shit down. He'd already been Cleo-fied enough for one day, and the day had hardly begun. What he didn't need with his Cleo-fication was the shit his partners were getting right now, which included a fresh round of threats and an unspecified rise in their homage. *What the hell?*

It'd been quite a day, and it'd hardly begun. Yet here he was at his sprawling home in *his* Brookhaven neighborhood, helping Cleo move *her* stuff into *her* bedroom...in his house. Did he mention that bit? *His house*. How she came to get a room in his house, he wasn't sure, but here she was moving in amidst her assurances that she'd only be present on weekends so they could maximize their "fun." *Why did that scare him...and excite him at the same time?*

Cleo couldn't believe Andreas didn't put up more of a fight about her crashing his digs. Of course, she was so glad he didn't, because she would've felt bad if she'd had to pull out her stun gun and taze him

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into submission. And then she would've simply erected a tent on his beautifully manicured front lawn and crashed there, knowing good and damn well his neighbors wouldn't appreciate that at all. She smiled, recalling the look on his face when she'd dropped that bit of information on him. For a second she wondered if she'd gone overboard, but then she quickly decided that she hadn't. Even if she had, it wasn't like he would be less than the well-mannered man he was...or any less her man. Yep, Andreas was hers. She'd decided, and like her daddy said to her momma about every bit of mischief she'd gotten into as a child: she was allowed. So there.

Andreas was as interesting as he was handsome, and damn if he wasn't what Ms. Nqobile, Dr. Nombuso, Ms. Corinna, Ms. Grace Ellen, Ms. Sudana, Ms. Silana and their homies called "some kind of good." Even her cousins had to admit he was the kind of man a woman would sop up like molasses. He was wealthy, but it was obvious from the cut of his body (ripped!) and the calluses on his hands that nobody gave him his money. He'd earned every damn dime he had.

Not one to pry into people's personal lives, she'd refrained from asking though she'd dearly wanted to know...not because she was nosy, but

because she knew from experience that some wounds were too raw to open. From the way he worked (like a man possessed), she had a feeling a whole lot of his past was like that. That was why she made it a point to drag him out of his not-a-paper-out-of-place office and his not-a-thing-out-of-place home and get him knee deep in beautiful, messy, unpredictable fun. He needed it. She'd taken him everywhere she went, and being the type of man he was, Andreas didn't flinch. He might be a cultured, well-traveled European male, but he didn't have an ounce of siddity in him. Regardless of whom he met or where they sat down to eat, he treated everyone like he was in the presence of royalty...and though no one said anything, it didn't go unnoticed.

While she might not ask about his past, the *grandes dames* of Atlanta had no such qualms. Being that they had lunch with them at least once a week, they took that time to get all up in his business. Having grown up in Atlanta, they already knew all hers. That was how she'd found out the type of jobs he'd done. And she couldn't help but be impressed...and touched. This was a man who'd do what he had to do to see to his family, whether it involved being knee deep in shit or ass whipping. She couldn't help but admire that.

After hearing his stories, she'd begun to touch him more...especially his hands. She hadn't even noticed it until Ms. Corinna had commented on it. "Am I going to have to separate you two?" she'd asked.

"No ma'am," she'd answered, though she was unsure why her pseudo godmother would ask such a thing.

"The way you touch his hands says something different. If you were touching any other part of his body like that, I'd call your momma and tell her to bring a preacher."

"I'd call for a drink and watch," Ms. Grace Ellen had thrown in. She's a Winston, and you know how those women are with their men." That woman was a straight pistol...and she was also right about how Winston women were with their men.

Later, she'd be all over Andreas, but not when they had an audience and a limited amount of time. She needed privacy and more than a couple of hours just for the foreplay. As hot in everything as she was for him, she didn't caress his hands to be fresh; she caressed them in an effort to soothe him. Not in the least put off by the roughness of his hands, she touched him because she held his hands in hers in an effort to soften whatever it was that had put those

calluses there. Andreas might not say it, but she suspected that his hands hid pain.

Though she said that she'd only rock up on weekends to maximize their fun, she found herself at his house at least three times a week. Something about him in that big house alone broke her. He might be Swiss, but under the Swiss beat the heart of an Italian man. And it might be a stereotype, but every Italian she knew did the family thing hard...just like black people and southern people. She didn't like him eating alone, and when she couldn't be there, she called him and they ate dinner together over the speaker phone and over a slew of highly inappropriate comments that had him groaning, laughing, and probably shaking his head in disbelief.

Andreas might've already had beautiful things, but she wanted him to have a beautiful life filled with more than things, with plenty of people who loved him and whom he loved. And nobody would love him like she...already did.

So here she was, in the house of the man she loved, wondering what to do now. She'd kissed Andreas and he'd kissed her right back, and she'd been all hot and bothered ever since.

Though she was comfortable with him, tonight felt different. Normally, she raised all kinds of ruckus as they readied themselves for bed, but on this night

both of them were quiet as they went through their getting-ready-for-bed routine. Lost in her thoughts, she couldn't help but wonder if she was being selfish. Maybe he didn't want her and was simply too polite to kick her out of his space. Maybe he loved someone else. Maybe she'd arrange a fucking accident for that unfortunate woman who tried to take him, but still, maybe she was going about this all wrong. What did she know—she'd never been in love before. And therein lay the problem. Cleo didn't simply love Andreas...Cleo was irrevocably, madly, passionately crazy in love with Andreas.

Filling the room with yet another chorus of sighs, Cleo plumped her pillow again and snuggled into the covers that held the faint scent of Andreas...not because he'd shared the guest bedroom with her, but because she'd commandeered his pillow in the name of the Empire. Damn, that man smelled like all man. Oh, her dreams were gonna be so freaking good tonight!

Chapter Eight: Realization

Though he was tired, Andreas couldn't sleep. Instead, he stared at the ceiling of his bedroom as if it were a projector screen scrolling through his favorite snapshots of Cleo. She had such an expressive face, and over the past ten months it seemed like he'd seen every expression she was capable of. There was her *you must've lost your damn mind* face, her *you can stick your finger up your own ass* face, her *overlord wanting homage from her lowly vassals* face, her *what kind of shit can I get into now* face, her *master of all I survey* face. Still, the face he loved best was the face she wore when she thought no one was looking. That look got to him right in the center of his everything. Andreas referred to it as her soft face...the *she'd look so good in my bed* face. If he'd really been completely honest with himself, he would've correctly interpreted it for what it was: the *she is mine* face. He'd been struggling with his possessiveness toward her over the last few months. He wanted her. He needed her. He...loved her. Of course, a drunk Loic had been the one to point that out. "Of course, you're all willing to be Cleo's bitch because you can't go two seconds without having her name in your mouth."

Loic hadn't been lying, but he'd still punched him in the face due to the tone he'd taken when speaking her name. Yeah, he loved Cleo. *Now what the hell was he going to do about it...besides spend his nights fantasizing about her?*

When his mind was through tormenting him with the G-rated images of Cleo, it switched to fantasy images of the woman who consumed his thoughts. Though she was always properly attired, it wasn't hard to imagine the body she rocked underneath all that chaos. He'd been imagining it every night. And just like always, need swamped him, his body temperature spiked, and he became rock hard. He felt like he needed to crank up the air-conditioning to sub zero to get his body back under control. He tried to close his eyes, but that just made it worse! He saw images of Cleo with her head thrown back, exposing her throat to his eyes, mouth, tongue and teeth, her gasping his name as he thrust his hard cock into her over and over and over again.

"Oh, God," Andreas muttered as he felt his cock pulse at another image of Cleo. "Stop," he rasped, pleading with his imagination to discontinue the torturous images. Knowing his mouth was lying, his brain amped up the images, making them more X-rated, more sensual, more everything. Andreas tried everything, including deep breathing meditation to

calm his body, but his imagination kicked into overdrive. He saw images of Cleo riding him with the boldness Lady Godiva demonstrated when she rode naked through the streets of Coventry. Groaning, Andreas imagined the feel of her sweat-slicked skin against his. He imagined her naked limbs tensely wrapping around him as she searched for the climax that *only* he could give her. *Only him...only him...only him.*

“Andreas?” The soft, husky voice of the woman who tormented his every waking moment floated through the room.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, amazed at how calm he sounded when he was so desperate for her.

“Um...”

Having never heard anything close to doubt in Cleo’s voice, he sat up and switched on the light. Wearing what he’d learned was her customary nightwear (t-shirt), Cleo was still the most enticing woman he’d ever seen. Right now, however, it wasn’t her beauty that called to him but her demeanor. For once, Cleo looked unsure of the reception she’d receive from him. Though she might be accustomed to being chased from the castle by torch-wielding mobs (and he’d slay them if he found out that had happened), she would only find welcome anywhere

he was. Getting out of bed, he padded over to her and gently lifted her chin with his forefinger.

“What is wrong, *Meine Dame*?” he asked softly.

“I...” she began before stopping.

And that was as far as he let her get. Closing the distance between them, he gathered her in his arms and, without another word, carried her to his bed. *Their bed*, his mind corrected. Yes, *their* bed, he agreed without hesitation.

It was the best sleep he’d ever gotten...which was ironic being that he didn’t close his eyes all night. Instead, he spent the hours drinking in the one woman who’d burst into his life without apologies or pretense. Holding her to him, he reveled in her essence. He wanted this woman, he needed this woman, he thanked God for this woman.

Not wanting to reduce what they had to the trivialness that marked his past relationships, Andreas didn’t attempt to do anything more than hold Cleo. For the last few months, his need for her had beat at him, but now that Cleo was in the circle of his embrace, his heart beat at him to cherish her, love her, honor her just like the wedding vows stated. In light of the way his body ached for her, Andreas didn’t know if he could wait until he made her his

wife to make love to her, but he vowed he'd wait until he spoke with Mr. and Mrs. Winston...all four sets of them.

Chapter Nine: Stirring the Pot

Three months later

Andreas did indeed talk to Cleo's family...and he also talked to the other members of her Empire. He was going to take his time with Cleo not because he wasn't sure, but because he was so damn sure. While he could be ready in ten minutes to haul her up in front of a priest and make her Mrs. Tomaschett, he had plans for Cleo that were going to take some time. Cleo wasn't just going to look beautiful walking toward him; Cleo was going to look like the most stunning bride that had ever walked down an aisle...and he was going to see to it. He just needed space, and some accomplices and all the prayers that all the Catholics in his large Italian family and all the Baptists in the Cleo Diaspora could pray.

In the short time he'd known Cleo, he'd met many, many people. While he'd liked them all, he'd developed a soft spot for the *grandes dames* of Atlanta. All shades of black, various levels of rich and not so rich, and off-the-chart bold, they'd accepted him despite his foreign-ness and foreign ways. While he enjoyed kicking back with his buddy Iain, he

found he equally enjoyed the time he spent with the older women. He enjoyed shopping with Ms. Nqobile, the occasional Wednesday night Bible study with Ms. Sudana, singing the Georgia Tech fight song with Ms. Grace Ellen, who'd been his favorite from way back (since she'd come and rescued him and his buddy Iain). He enjoyed haunting the libraries with Dr. Nombuso, high tea with Ms. Silana, and doing charity work with Ms. Corinna. He even enjoyed a quirky mass by the ninja nuns and doing the many errands they sent him on. And more than that, he enjoyed their hugs. Though they all referred to him as a "boy," he couldn't be offended, as it was said with such affection. He knew because they'd told him. "We're going to treat you like we treat our own," they'd all said. Cleo had leaned over and whispered that that meant he'd be getting treated like shit.

"You ever need anything, you let us know," they'd offered. He hadn't needed anything...until now. That was why he was sitting in the sumptuous living room of Ms. Corinna, asking her for space in her home.

He hadn't even gotten it out of his mouth good before she'd said "yes."

"While I appreciate your acceptance, you don't even know what I want to use the space for," he said.

“And I don’t care. I know enough. I know that you’re a good, respectful boy. I know you need it, else you wouldn’t have asked. The fact that you asked is enough for me. I don’t know what you need it for, but I know whatever you do in that space will be spectacular.”

And it was spectacular, because she’d helped him get everything he needed, given him the space to do it and kept his confidence. Well, she and the handful of *grandes dames* she allowed in the house kept his confidence. Being he was there many hours a day, he had a lot of confidence that needed keeping.

Ändreas didn’t shirk his work duties, but he spent many, many hours in that space in Ms. Corinna’s house. That earned him a lot of teasing from his partners and a raised eyebrow from Cleo. He knew she was curious, but unlike his partners, she didn’t hound him about it every waking moment—though from the way she’d started looking at the *grandes dames*, he could tell she didn’t like sharing him. Good, because he didn’t like sharing either. Still, that was just another one of the many things he admired about Cleo: her giving people space and privacy...without having to be asked.

Almost complete with his project, he emerged from the room and sat down with the older women. No sooner had he sat down than his hands were filled

with a plate overflowing with food. Famished, he smiled his thanks and dug in.

“I have to go to Italy for two weeks,” he told them. “Can you watch over Cleo? Make sure no other man pushes up on *Meine Dame*?”

“Of course,” they all said.

Knowing them, he knew it was as good as done. Cleo was not going to like it, but it had to be done. Almost done with his mission, he just needed to fly to Italy to do this one last thing, and when he returned it would be a full-on frontal assault on the woman who’d spend the last three months seducing him unmercifully.

There was mad, there was angry, there was pissed off, there was furious, there was rageful...and then there was what Cleo Winston was, which was going to require linguists worldwide to work together and come up with a whole new term. She was a lot of things by nature, but a bitch wasn’t one of them...until yesterday. Yesterday had been the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back. The straw had the name of Andreas. For the past three months, she’d shared everything with Andreas, including every weekend and all five weekdays. She wasn’t stalking him. On the contrary, she’d tried to give him space, and when she did, he came and found

her and got all up in her space. Along with the time they shared, they shared little things such as lunches with her favorite group of old ladies and big things such as sensual goodnight kisses and blazing good-morning make-out sessions. And that was the problem.

Andreas wouldn't fuck her...despite how much she'd tempted him. And believe me, a sister tried everything from wearing filmy lingerie to bed to wearing nothing at all. Though he clenched his jaw and crushed her to him as he ravaged her body with his mouth, he never went further than that. Every act of seduction on her part ended the same way on his part...with his hard body molded against hers and his ragged breathing echoing in the room, and his raspy voice telling her some version of "later."

"Not yet, *Meine Dame*," he said even as he stood there looking finer than fine. "Not yet, *Meine Dame*," he said even as his intoxicating scent filled her nostrils. "Not yet, *Meine Dame*," he said even as his presence stoked her fantasies. "Not yet, *Meine Dame*," even as he brought her to pleasure with his hands, with his mouth, with his words, with his honor. "Not yet, *Meine Dame*," even as he forewent his own pleasure...making her love him even more, making her want him even more, making her more frustrated than she'd ever been in all of her years.

You'd think he'd give in after almost three months, but he hadn't. And despite how much she tempted him, she knew he wouldn't. Andreas was not the type of man to be swayed by something as brief as sex or deterred by anything...and that included her and all her hotness. While he didn't fuck her like she wanted, he teased...all ...fucking...day long. He studied her with heated looks, he caressed her skin with blatant possession, he kissed her like he was breathing life into her. And he didn't care where they were or if they had an audience. He made it clear to all and sundry that she was his.

She couldn't help but get all hot over that, but she also couldn't help getting the tiniest bit pissed off...every day that he didn't take her. And so far it'd been a whole lot of fucking days. Ninety-one of them in fact. Ninety-one days of being turned the fuck on. Ninety-one days of being tempted with all of her fantasies. Ninety-one days of not getting them.

To make matters worse, on top of those ninety-one days of not having Andreas make love to her, she'd had two weeks of not having him in the country with her. He'd had to run off to Italy for some unknown reason, and dammit, she hadn't appreciated that shit one bit. She didn't like coming to his home and knowing he wasn't there. She didn't like visiting their favorite haunts without him. She

didn't like going to sleep anywhere but in his arms. And mostly she didn't like the other fucking swankers and three-quarters of Atlanta shadowing her movements like she was about to go crazy and jump the first legion of hot men she encountered.

She didn't like any of those things, but what she *did* like was the way he put her to bed and woke her up (despite the six hour time difference) with the first nine words of Song of Solomon 6:3: "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine." And she liked his afternoon calls that consisted of Andreas reminding her that he loved her...in Italian [*Ti amo*], in French [*Je t'aime*], in German [*ich liebe Dich*], in Romansh [*Jeu carezel tei*] and English. But what really got to her was the fact that he learned to say it in Mandarin Chinese [*wǒ ài nǐ*]. Bastard. He broke through the mad and got to every part of her, and he knew it.

He didn't have to tell her that he loved her, though, because she knew it. She felt it in the tremor of his hand as he touched her body. She felt the heat of it in his eyes whenever he looked at her. She felt it in the vibration of his voice when he spoke her name. "*Meine Dame*," had never sounded so sexy, so hot, so seductive until...it'd been directed to her. Andreas didn't simply say it with his lips; he said it with a matter-of-factness that dared anyone to challenge him on it...even her.

Just as Andreas didn't need to say that he loved her (but she reveled in the fact that he did), he didn't need to declare that she belonged to him, because the thirteenth amendment of the U.S. Constitution prohibited such a thing. Despite the law, the fact was that she did belong to Andreas, and that fine-ass man belonged to her right back! Her heart, mind and body were all in sync with that. Hell, all of Atlanta seemed to be in sync with that. When Andreas said it, everyone simply acted as his Amen Corner and mmm-hmm'd right along with him, and her heart, mind and body were busy mmm-hmming the loudest.

In light of all that, why was she ten stages past mad? Because he'd just gotten back, and instead of spending the day with her, he was busy running over to Ms. Corinna's house. Though he came home each night, it was like he lived there, being he was up there so much. He was at Ms. Corinna's house more than he was anywhere else. If it wasn't Ms. Corinna's house, it was one of the other old broads. She loved them, but she'd push an old lady down a flight of stairs with her own cane...just saying. Deep in her heart, she really wasn't worried about the old ladies taking her man (with the exception of Ms. Grace Ellen, who liked her man flesh young and sturdy, but that was another story for another day...right now she

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had to get back to her pissed off). Fine, let Andreas go over and see all of his girlfriends; she had plans today anyway. Someone somewhere had pissed off one of her cousins, and it'd been decided that they needed to and go raise some kind of hell somewhere. She was always down with that, especially when enticed with a spa day.

Sighing, Cleo savored the fresh fruit slices as she sat back and received more pampering at the hands of the sexy-hot-fineness that formed the staff at Me, Myself and Sigh. Serenegeti Uhuru might be all kinds of crazy, but she ran a first-rate spa. She was going to settle for a massage and brunch, but her cousins and friends took one look at her and declared she needed everything Serengeti had on the menu and then some. Well damn, she didn't think she looked that bad, especially since her curls were looking fierce being that she'd just come from the beautician yesterday, and she'd told them that. Well, actually what she'd told them was "shut the fuck up or die, bitches," but that was neither here nor there. What was here was a beautiful fruit spread and wonderful hotness serving it to them.

"Tell me again why we're getting all beautiful before we go whip some ass?" she asked as she took a sip of her lemonade.

“Because there’s no excuse to look tore down,” Maverick said.

“I can’t believe you of all people are asking that, being that you’re wearing stilettos with your spa robe,” Nandi scoffed.

“I’m allowed,” she said right before flipping them off. Those bitches knew she wasn’t rolling without some extra inches, being she was sub six feet. And if they didn’t like it they could kiss her ass.

While Cleo felt slightly less murderous after her day at the spa, Andreas was feeling desperate.

“Do you think I’ve ruined everything?” he asked the crowd of women gathered around him, watching him put the final touches on his project. He’d been frantic after getting that call from Tarana, even though everything was in place.

“Boy, calm down,” Ms. Grace Ellen said. “That girl been hot in the pants for you since she saw you.”

“But what if she finds another man she likes better at the spa?” he asked.

“Even if she did, after you went there and threatened to stab everyone’s eyes out if they looked at her and have my husband and his fellow barbarians cleave them in two, I don’t think you’d have anything to worry about on that score,” Silana said.

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“We’ve got your back,” Ms. Sudana said.

“It’s not my back I’m concerned about. It’s Cleo’s. Men are always looking at her.”

“This is true, but consider that most of the time men are looking at her because she’s demanding some kind of homage,” Ms. Corinna added.

Yes, there was that, he thought, recalling the looks on the faces of his partners when she’d decided their firstborn was going to be their homage...for starters.

Iain’s chuckle filled the air. “Remember how you laughed at me for being so paranoid when it came to other males being around my Victorious?”

“How could I forget—it was right up under soccer for my favorite pastime,” he said.

“Lucky I like you, otherwise I’d mock you. No worries, brother. The barbarians and I took a trip to the spa this morning and reiterated your point.”

Ändreas could’ve hugged Iain. Though he’d threatened pretty good, no one threatened like the barbarians. Andrew on his own was frightening enough, but when you threw Thamesia and Baisealach into the mix, that was a revolt just waiting to happen. Feeling calm for the first time since he’d received the call, he grabbed his keys, kissed all the ladies and headed out. He had a woman to snare.

Adjusting his extra long bath sheet, Andreas watched his Cleo as she chatted with her cousins wearing nothing but a skimpy robe. Okay, so the thick terrycloth robe was nowhere near skimpy, but it still showed some of her beautiful calves, which looked especially good as she wore stiletto heels. Ah, his Cleo wore heels with everything, including her PJs. Getting an eyeful of Cleo's succulent thigh when she re-crossed her legs, he gritted his teeth in an effort to hold back the growl that threatened to spill out of his throat. It was a gesture worthy of Sharon Stone from *Basic Instinct*, and Andreas was none too pleased that there were other males on the premises.

Getting a nod from Tarana, he forced himself to calm down. He stood back and waited as Cleo's cousins rushed her out of the room. He smiled hearing a still-arguing Cleo complain about not being able to finish her fruit.

Andreas followed quietly and watched as they made their way to the private massage rooms. He had to walk quickly to see exactly which room Cleo entered and ensure he didn't go bursting into the wrong room. He didn't have time to be arrested today or get his ass kicked by one of his woman's endless supply of cousins or vassals.

Cleo was oblivious to the plot that had been hatched over iced tea and pound cake that one of her

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cousins had brought to his office. When Cleo's cousins had come bearing "ideas," Andreas had been both impressed and afraid. He was still semi-afraid of them, but he was glad they were helping him win Cleo all the way over.

They'd come up with many possible plans, but this was the least illegal and violent plan of them all. While waiting for another "all clear" from Tarana, Andreas went through the plan in his head once more. Wait for the signal. Find Cleo's room. ~~Remove the body.~~ Wait...that wasn't it. He was to remove the masseuse who had already been warned and threatened and threatened some more, and who should be expecting him.

Once that was done he was to blindfold Cleo, for no particular reason other than Nandi thought she needed it. Then he was to throw her over his shoulders and take off with her. They'd meet him at the "secret location" in about an hour.

If for any reason Cleo looked like she'd been crying, it had been put out there that they would find him and fuck him up. No ifs, buts or maybes about it.

Hearing the signal, Andreas made his way to Cleo's room. Before he reached the door, he clearly heard Maverick cussing someone out. Wondering if something was amiss, he settled down when he heard the man's name that came before the phrase "dead

man limping.” All would be well...eventually, but until it was there’d be a whole lot of entertainment happening in the metro Atlanta area.

He couldn’t help the grin that spread across his face. Reaching the door of Cleo’s room, he heard his Cleo laughing at something. Whatever amusement he may have felt slowly faded when he heard the deep voice responding to her laughter. Quietly entering the room ready to unleash all manner of hell, his eyes went straight to the masseuse.

The masseuse was a large man, but Andreas didn’t care. Any man standing between him and Cleo was a dead man. When the man spotted him, he grinned at Andreas in a way that made him think he may not want to live any longer before moving away and gesturing for Andreas to take his. Doing just that, he nodded at the man, who left the room with a thumbs-up. Finally, Andreas had Cleo all to himself.

Cleo heard the door close and knew there was someone else in the room with her. She was about to raise all kinds of hell when she felt the big hands on her back. They were rough textured and yet so gentle. And so familiar. She’d know those hands anywhere, being they were attached to the man she loved. The man she loved—whom she was still mad at. Deciding

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to give him a little payback, she moaned out her pleasure.

“Oh yes...” she murmured.

Feeling Andreas go still for the briefest of seconds, Cleo smiled even as she enjoyed the caresses he used as he worked his way up and down her back. She knew that Andreas believed she was unaware it was him massaging her, just like she knew he’d be working himself into all kinds of pissed off. Good—he deserved it for leaving her and not spending the day in their bed caressing her, holding her, promising to never leave her again.

“Yes,” she moaned again...not simply to work him up, but because it felt so damn good.

Knowing it was Andreas who massaged her, she could fully relax, which wasn’t hard when he kept touching her like that. She’d really been wound tight, and every firm stroke, every kneading motion turned her to jelly. How could a man who’d done so much rough work with his hands wring so much pleasure from her? Before she could answer her own question, she felt his hands slide under the towel and massage the globes of her ass. Her breath caught, but before she could utter a word, his hands were gone.

Wondering where his hands were going to land next, Cleo was surprised to feel his weight press down on her. She was even more surprised when he

covered her hands with his and ground himself into her. Despite wanting to maintain control, Cleo was also turned on. She loved it when he got all possessive, all dominant, all Italian-Swiss-southern on her. Her body liked it to. Not even able to pretend another second, she moaned out his name. “Ändreas, oh Ändreas, so...so...good.”

Ändreas knew the moment that Cleo knew it was him, which was a good thing because he would’ve lost his whole damn mind if he’d thought she allowed another man to touch her so intimately. Oh, he’d still marry her, but it’d have to wait until after the massacre. He savored the way Cleo responded to him, especially as he knew she responded to him in a way she didn’t with anyone else. Cleo’s body sought out his touch, and his body sought out hers. Before he knew what he was about, he’d caged her in and was busy peppering her back with kisses. It was as if her body instinctively knew him. Already on edge, when she moaned his name he was done. Rising, he turned her over, scooped her up and crushed her mouth to his. He’d missed her, he needed her, he couldn’t wait another day to have her.

“Cleo,” he rasped.

“Ändreas,” she moaned. “Please,” she begged.

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“Soonest, *Meine Dame*,” he said even as his fingers parted her sex and he stroked her closer to orgasm. Close...but not all the way over.

“You bastard!” she screamed when she realized he’d stopped.

Licking his fingers, he smiled. Getting up, he reached for her robe and bundled her into it. Before she could do more than gasp her outrage, he tossed her over his shoulder and walked out of the room and through the main entrance of Me, Myself and Sigh, not giving a damn that Cleo was wearing nothing but a robe and stilettos and he was wearing nothing but a bath sheet and a shoulder full of hot, angry woman.

“I know you did not just kidnap me from my favorite spa!” Cleo said.

“Yes,” he said and stopped the explanation with that.

“That’s it? You go all CWB—crazy white boy—and that’s all of the explanation I’m getting?”

“I have not gone CWB,” he protested as he handed her a night mask. “Put this on—I was supposed to blindfold you, but I forgot.”

Was he fucking kidding her? Was he fucking kidding her? Seriously, seriously, was he fucking kidding her?

“You kidnapped me, and now you want me to put my own fucking blindfold on like I don’t know it’s you?”

“Yes,” he said as he secured her seatbelt before taking off.

“You are so fucking far past CWB right now, I don’t know what to say.”

“No, I’m not. Don’t be scared, okay?”

“I know you don’t think I’m scared of you.”

“I think I should be offended by that,” he said all casually.

“You should be offended by that fucking see-through bath sheet. I’m going to have something to say to Serengeti about that shit. You’re flashing my goods all over the show, and I’m really not cool with that,” she said as she snatched his cellular phone off his visor and dialed.

“Serengeti?” she barked into the phone. “Do you want to tell me why you have my man half naked, showing all my good stuff to all and sundry?” Not even waiting for the woman to respond, she continued. “I don’t want to hear it. Next week, meet me at dawn for a fucking duel. And your homage is going up. This is not the way you treat the Empire!” she said before ending the call.

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“You’re accusing me of going all CWB, and you’re over there challenging people to duels?” Andreas said.

“Hey, mind your own beeswax, pal,” she said as she entered in another number.

“Hello, Tarana, y’all are all bitches,” she said. “I cannot believe you let this crazy man kidnap me. I’m busy right now being all kidnapped, but I just want you to know I’m coming for your asses. All of you,” she said before ending that call.

Dialing another number, she was about to say “hello” when Andreas cleared his throat.

“What motherfucker, what?” she asked.

“Blindfold, please,” he said.

Knowing he was about to be all kinds of assholes over the blindfold, she snatched it over her head.

The voice in her ear reminded her that she’d been in the process of making a call. “Did you just call me a motherfucker, Cleo?”

“Oh, hi, Daddy,” she said. “Of course I wasn’t calling you any such thing. I was talking to Andreas, who by the way has kidnapped me. Being that he’s insisted on me wearing a blindfold, I don’t know where he’s taking me.”

“Do you need help, honey?” her daddy asked.

“No, I don’t need help—what I need is for you to tell the aunts that their pussy-ass daughters allowed me to get kidnapped.”

“Do kidnappers usually let you make calls that don’t involve ransom?” her daddy asked.

“I don’t know. Hold on and I’ll ask him.” Turning to Andreas, she asked, “Hey, my daddy wants to know what kind of bullshit kidnapping this is?”

“I’m allowed,” he said.

No, he didn’t use *her* line. She was so kicking his ass later. “This is obviously a different kind of kidnapping, Daddy,” she said as she regaled him with a dissertation about her bitch-ass cousins and friends and how this was completely inappropriate behavior toward the Empire.

A half hour later

“I think I might have to behead a few people to get my point across, Daddy,” she said. “The Empire cannot stand for this mutiny or next thing you know, everyone will be kidnapping me willy-nilly. I can’t have that,” she said.

So caught up in her conversation, she didn’t realize the vehicle had stopped until the door opened and CWB unbuckled her seatbelt.

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“We’re here,” he said.

A moment later, her daddy was helping her out.

“Hi, Daddy, what are you doing here?”

“Your mother told me to stand here,” he said.

“So I guess we should hang up then, being that you’re right here and all, and there’s no need to trace the call now that Andreas is right here where you can kick his ass.”

“Well, I didn’t want to disrespect the Empire,” honey,” he said.

“See, that’s why you’re the official daddy of the Empire and no one else is,” she said as she kissed him.

She was going to say more, but once again she found herself tossed over Andreas’ muscular shoulder and marched into the home of Ms. Corinna.

Though she was mid-half-ass kidnap, she remembered her manners. “Hello, Ms. Corinna, ladies,” she said to the *grandes dames* sitting in Ms. Corinna’s living room.

“Hello, Cleo,” they all said...except for Ms. Grace Ellen.

“Hell-o, Andreas,” she said, followed up by a whole lot of mmm, mmm, mmms.

“See, I told you your bath sheet was see-through. That’s why I’m beating Serengeti’s ass next week...at dawn.”

She would've said more, but she had to hold on as Andreas bounded up the stairs with her. Dragging her into a bedroom, he hurriedly untucked his bath sheet before sliding her robe off her. Before she could protest, she was dragged into the bathroom, where he carefully tucked her curls under a shower cap and pulled her into the roomy walk-in shower.

Later, she was going to have something to say about his high-handedness, but right now she was busy ogling all six foot seven inches of hot Italian-Swiss-southern male. And her hot, Italian-Swiss-southern male was busy loving her down with his mouth. He started with her mouth and worked his way down her body.

"Say my name, Cleo," he demanded as he spread her thighs and slid his fingers into her folds.

"Say my name," he asked again as his tongue joined his fingers in their sensual dance.

"Andreas!" she said, his name torn from her throat. "Andreas!" she repeated as he ravaged her sex with his skill.

Holding her thighs, he continued to lick her farther up the summit of pleasure.

"Please," she said as she thrust her hips farther into his mouth. "Please," she cajoled as she slid her fingers through his locks and held him to her. "Please," she begged as she demonstrated her

flexibility and executed a vertical split in order to get closer to that which was giving her pleasure.

“Yes!” she screamed as she detonated under his tongue.

Pleasure pinged through her, and all Cleo could do was take it. And take it some more. And take it some more, as Andreas did not relent. Kissing his way up her body, he stopped at her breasts and lapped the water from them before sucking her nipple into his mouth. When he was finished with her breasts, he bent and drank his name from her mouth.

Only when she was limp from pleasure did he relent. Wanting to please him as he'd pleased her, she reached out to stroke him. Catching her hand, he brought it to his lips and kissed it. “Soon, *Meine Dame*.”

Adjusting the showerhead, he held her against him and proceeded to give her the most tantalizing massage with shower gel. Damn, he had magic hands, she thought as he caressed every bit of her skin. Damn, he had magic everything, she thought as she lay back on the bed and enjoyed the feel of him massaging her favorite scent into her skin.

Almost drunk with pleasure, she could do nothing but lay there as he tucked the covers around her and bent and kissed the last of her good sense

away. "I must blindfold you again, *Meine Dame*," he said as he gently placed the night mask over her eyes.

Da hell? she thought.

"Please keep it on for me," he asked.

And because he'd asked, she didn't consider taking it off.

"Rest; I will return in a little while. Your mother is here so you won't be scared."

Cleo had no idea what kind of weird crazy white boy shit Andreas was up to, but it must not have been too crazy, else all those women downstairs and her daddy would've straight wailed on him. They might occasionally disrespect the Empire, but she knew in her heart that each of them would protect it.

Her thoughts were interrupted by her mother, who entered the room quietly.

"Cleo?"

"Yes, Mom?" she moaned.

"You okay, baby? It seems like you and your young man caused quite a ruckus at the spa."

"Except for the kidnapped, my-cousins-and-friends-are-punks bit, I've never been better," she said.

Her mother's robust laughter filled the room. "I like your Andreas," she said.

"I'm so glad, because as crazy and strange as he may be, I love that man, Momma."

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“And it’s obvious he loves you too.”

“He better, else I’m going to have a whole lot more to say about being kidnapped,” she said right before she dozed off.

Knowing that Mr. Kennesaw wouldn’t do this for just anyone, Andreas handed him his thanks along with two hundred dollars...and promptly got it smacked out of his hand.

“Boy, I don’t want your money. Well, not this time anyway. You’re family. I’d do this for my own boys. You just make sure you do right by Cleo, because I don’t want to be fixing your hair for a funeral.”

Smiling, he reached out and hugged him. “Thank you, Mr. Kennesaw.”

“Uncle Kennesaw,” he corrected.

Already full to the brim with emotion, Andreas squeezed his shoulder before heading off to the shower. ,

Finishing with his grooming and dressed in a fresh pair of trousers and shirt, Andreas headed back toward Cleo.

Knocking, he entered, not the least surprised that she was asleep. It took a lot of energy to run such a vast Empire. Thanking her mother, he kissed Cleo

awake...like he planned to do every morning once they were married.

He wanted to see her eyes, but that'd have to wait until after he gave her his surprise. Knowing she might need to make use of the bathroom, he escorted her to the adjoining room and left her with instructions to put the blindfold back on before coming out. "Let me know when you're ready so I can come get you," he said.

Never had ten minutes passed so slowly. Never had he been so nervous. Never had so much hinged on one woman's answer.

Cleo's voice interrupted his worry. "I'm ready, Andreas," she said.

And so was he. Walking over to her, he kissed her forehead and spun her so that her back was against his chest.

"Do you trust me, Cleo?" he leaned down and whispered in her ear.

"Yes," she responded without hesitation.

"Even though I'm a strange foreign man with a whole lot of CWB in him?" he asked as he looked at their reflection in the mirror.

"Especially because of that." She smiled.

His heart soaring, he removed the dress shirt that hid her body. He tossed it across the room as he drank in her beauty. And once again, his breath

caught and his heart hammered in his chest. Cleo devastated him.

Reaching onto the bed, he carefully selected items from where they lay nestled. First, he slid on her lace garter belt. Next, he gently rolled her shapely legs in the thigh-high hose and attached them to the garter belt.

Finished with her underthings, he focused on the jewelry. Removing the platinum and diamond necklace featuring a suspending fringe of a large center emerald and fourteen alternating briolette-cut emeralds and diamonds, he draped it around her throat. An expensive piece, but a piece worthy of the Empire...just like the matching earrings he carefully placed in her ears.

Andreas could feel her slight trembles, and he couldn't help but wonder if Cleo could feel his. He was tempted to slide on her engagement ring, but he wanted her to see him kneeling before her as he did so. Placing the ring to the side, he reached for the gown.

His heart started beating faster the moment he picked up that dress. Made of one hundred percent silk duchess satin, it was gorgeous on the dress form, but he knew it'd be everything on her. Though he'd imagined that dress on her a thousand times, this was the first time he'd see her in it...the only time he'd see

her in it. Instructing her to lean on him, he helped her step into the dress. Slowly, he pulled the dress up over her lush form, pleased with the contrast between the ivory color of the gown and the deep cocoa color of her skin. Taking his time, he slowly laced up the corset-style bodice, kissing his way up her spine as he went about the sweet and humbling task. When he was finished lacing her into the dress, he settled her on the bed before sliding her four-inch pumps on her feet. He smiled looking at the shoes. The leather-lined, crystal-encrusted ivory duchesse silk pumps sparkled just like Cleo's personality.

Standing her back up, he whispered an instruction in her ear. "Keep your eyes closed, *Meine Dame*."

Reaching around her, he removed the night mask and laid kisses on both eyelids. Knowing how particular black women were about their hair and recalling the advice of the beauticians he'd spoken to, he carefully loosed her curls from the silk tie. Gently, he raked his hands through Cleo's springy curls. Taking a moment, he hand-fluffed the curls before settling the lace chapel veil upon her head.

Stepping back, he put on his suit jacket. Taking a deep breath, he looked at his woman in the mirror and almost fell to his knees. Cleo was beautiful, so

beautiful, so his. Swallowing the lump in his throat, he bid her to open her eyes.

With every passing second, Cleo felt the fine tremors that coursed through her intensify. She wasn't sure what Andreas was about, but whatever it was, she knew it was life altering. Everything about Andreas was like that...and she loved that about him.

Feeling the clothes that graced her body, she knew Andreas had invested a great deal of time in selecting them, as her man didn't know how to half-ass anything. She had a good time guessing what colors he'd selected and even a better time wondering where they were going. Wherever they were going, it'd better lead them to their bed, because if she was hot for him before, she was on fire for him right now. The way everything fit so perfectly, she knew he'd been paying her closer attention than she'd thought.

Her musings were interrupted when she felt him drape her neck in jewelry. Necklace, check. Earring, check. That left ring. Andreas was going to propose! Her mind screamed. Though he picked up her left hand and held it for a long moment, he didn't slide a ring on her finger. No worries, because she was confident one was forthcoming. She didn't even ponder what it looked like as long as it sat on the second finger of her left hand.

She was still amped as she leaned onto Andreas and stepped into a dress of some sort. Feeling him lean her forward and begin to lace her into the dress, her mind came to a screeching halt. Shocked into silence, she said nothing, but her body said plenty. Her skin broke out in goose bumps. Her breathing slowed. Her heart beat in time to the musical lift in the first three lines of the chorus of “Oh Holy Night” and then slowed down to play the refrain of “I Surrender All.” Unwittingly, tears pooled in her eyes.

“Andreas?” she shakily called his name.

“*Ja, Meine Dame,*” he responded.

“How long do you plan on kidnapping me for?” she asked when he finished kissing her closed eyes.

Doing something to her hair, he answered. “For the rest of our lives and longer if God allows it.”

Her gasp echoed around the room. She wanted nothing more than to throw open her eyes and look at her man, but he’d asked her to keep them shut, so she did.

“Open your eyes, *Meine Dame,*” he finally said.

She didn’t waste any time. Opening them, her eyes went straight to Andreas, and he went straight to his knee. “I love you,” he said as he took her hand and slid a princess-cut diamond and emerald ring on her finger.

“I love you too,” she said as she reached down and kissed him until neither of them could breathe. She didn’t know how long their kiss lasted, but they took their time with it. Finally, after long minutes, a heavily breathing Andreas pulled back.

“You haven’t even looked at your ensemble,” he accused.

“I was too busy looking at my future,” she said even as she bumped him out of the way and looked into the floor-length mirror.

Speechless. For the first time in her life (okay, maybe the third), Cleo was speechless. Goodness, she was beautiful—so beautiful she forgot about good manners, all etiquette and any semblance of good sense. “OH MY GOODNESS I’M GORGEOUS!” she shouted as she studied her reflection. “I’m absolutely stunning,” she reiterated.

Everything she wore was not only the highest quality but a perfect fit. The gown hugged her bosom before tapering down to a slightly ruched skirt and falling to the floor in a chapel train. The beading on the bodice caught the light and, most importantly, matched the beading on her veil and her shoes! Did she mention the shoes? They sparkled like the diamonds and emeralds in her jewelry.

“Look at me, Andreas. Have you ever seen a more gorgeous vision? Of course you haven’t. Today, the Empire looks especially stunning,” she said.

“Yes, the Empire does,” he agreed as he swooped in to kiss her.

Andreas couldn’t wipe the grin off his face. Though he hadn’t been able to feel his right arm for the last thirty minutes, he wasn’t about to push his bride off him. His bride. His. All his. His. Thank you God, he breathed. Thank you.

It’d been a chaotic wedding but being that he was marrying Cleo, he’d expected no less. Once he got her to finally stop admiring herself and got her tucked into the limo, he thought all would be well until he saw that damn HOT NOW sign. Next thing he knew half the vehicles in their line were cutting across five lanes of traffic. Having secured an untold amount of glazed doughnuts, they were finally back on the highway traveling towards Winston land.

Though they had their pick of churches, he’d heard the story of how the Winstons had acquired and fought for their land, and he couldn’t see anything more fitting than pledging his life to Cleo on that land.

It was beautiful. Overflowing with towering trees, expanses of green and an abundance of lilies, hydrangeas, and roses, it was the perfect backdrop.

Watching Cleo walk down the aisle had been surreal. Of course she didn't simply walk—she strolled and thanked her subjects along the way. When she finally reached him, she stopped and had a chat with the preacher.

"I would've got to the altar sooner, but I walked extra slow so my vassals could get a good look at my dress. Isn't it awesome?" she asked.

Before the preacher could respond, she continued. "I'm just saying if I wasn't so hot for Andreas, I'd sex up whoever made these clothes real good. And that doesn't make me a harlot; it just makes me honest." Turning to those in attendance, she asked, "Can I get some homage from my vassals?"

Of course, she didn't wait for that either, because by that time she'd noticed his hair. "You cut your hair!"

"Yes, Cleo."

"Why? I mean you're still hot, but is that going to be enough hair for me to hold on to when I'm under you and..."

He wasn't about to let her finish that sentence when there were children in attendance, so he reached down and shut her up with a kiss. He had the

best of intentions...really, he did, but then, yeah, Cleo touched him and it was all over. Thrusting her bouquet at the preacher, she reached up and grabbed hold of his hair as if testing to make sure it was enough for her to work with. It must've been, because she had a good time with his mouth. And damn if he hadn't had a good time with hers. When they both pulled back, she snatched back her bouquet. "I'd say I can work with that." A moment later, she "encouraged" the preacher to be quick about the words.

"Rev. Dr. Bailey, I exempt you from paying homage to the Empire since you work for the big G, but you know, that can change, so I'm going to need you to hurry it up because I'm like a few moments away from jumping Andreas' bones. Just saying."

The preacher was on the brink of giving him leave to kiss his bride when she interrupted again. "When do we get to that part with Song of Solomon 6:3?"

"We don't," the preacher said.

"What about those Ruth verses...Ruth 1:16-17?" she asked a moment before she recited them. "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die— there will I be

buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!

“I like that bit. I can say it because Andreas is rolling with the same God I roll with. That whole your people my people thing, that means I get his people to be part of my Empire, right?” Turning to look at them, she hollered out, “Y’all are going to owe me homage, but we’ll work that our later.

“So we’re good?” she asked.

“Yes,” Rev. Dr. Bailey said.

“Okay, then ‘I do—again.’ Say it back, Andreas,” she bid him.

“I do,” he said clearly...for the second time.

“Tell him to kiss me,” she said.

“Young man, please, we all beg of you. Kiss your bride.”

And he did so...gladly.

Though they cut the cake and took pictures, they missed most of the reception...not because they were busy making love, but to stop him from handing out ass whippings. It seemed that some people in his family thought they could ask whether or not his wife (he liked the sound of that) was insane. That was just unacceptable, as was the many males looking at his wife. Looking around for Andrew and his fellow barbarians, he was all set to stab eyes out when he

found himself waylaid by Ms. Silana, Dr. Mrs. , Ms. Corinna, the other *grandes dames* and his momma. In a matter of minutes he was packed into a limo.

“Have a good honeymoon,” they all ordered.

“We will,” Cleo promised as she slammed the door shut and instructed the driver to drive like he stole something.

Thinking Cleo would be much more comfortable in something else, he asked if she wanted to change.

“No, the Empire looks good.”

He couldn’t be mad. He could only be humbled that she liked the outfit so much. After all, it did take him ten weeks of ten-hour days to make the dress, and ten days of eight-hour days under the intense scrutiny of a master shoemaker to make her shoes. He could’ve been done in two days if not for those damn crystals. But it’d been worth it. Every single moment he’d spent measuring, sewing, and beading had been worth it. Though he’d sewed out of necessity when he was younger, he was proud that he had the skills to gift his wife with a dress she loved so much. Tonight, he’d be sure to light a candle for his grandmother, who’d learned her craft from her father. Those Amorvestios knew how to ply the needle.

Ändreas was her *husband*. That was the single thought Cleo could think as she remained wrapped around her man. *Her* husband. *Her* Ändreas. She knew that photographs had been taken. She knew for sure she'd had a bouquet, because she remembered heaving it at those punk-ass chicks who'd allowed her to get kidnapped. Yeah, yeah, it'd turned out super spectacular and all that, but that wasn't the point. The point was that you did not allow the Empire to be in danger. Bitches. Who could've predicted that Tarana would be the one to "catch" the bouquet? Of course she caught it because the rest of the cousins and friends had shoved her in the direction of it, and when something was hurtling at your head you tended to put your hands up. Tarana had done just that and come down with an armful of bouquet, which she'd promptly wielded like a club at her cousins.

Ah, Tarana's pain always brought a smile to her face. Feeling Ändreas pull her closer against him made Cleo's giggles turn into moans.

"*Meine Dame*," he rasped.

"Yes, husband slash vassal slash hottie slash mine?" Cleo answered with her own endearments even as she took his lips (a.k.a. her lips) and pressed her body against his. Getting into the groove of

things, she kissed her way across his strong jaw line and slid her hands under his dress shirt.

The clearing of a throat interrupted what she was doing. “The aircraft will be ready for takeoff in two minutes, Mr. and Mrs. Tomaschett.”

Dammit, it was always something. If not the aircraft taking off, it was the preacher meandering through the service, the *grandes dames* bogarting her man...some kind of fashion crisis from his swanker pals. If not for hearing how good their names sounded together, she might’ve kicked off some kind of revenge, but today was her wedding day and she was feeling all benevolent.

“You haven’t told me where we’re going,” Cleo said as she buckled up and felt him up through his dress pants. Watching Andreas swallow hard and grit his teeth, she could do nothing but smile. Payback was a bitch. Try as he might, he was unable to stop his hips from lifting beneath her while his hands gripped her hips, keeping her where he wanted her. It was torture. It was hot. It was frustrating.

“It is a surprise,” Andreas finally answered as his eyes blazed.

“How long will it take to get there?” Cleo asked.

“A little over an hour.”

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“So you have a little over an hour to make me your wife in the biblical sense, Andreas,” Cleo advised him seriously.

Did his wife just give him an ultimatum? Oh, yes she did. While he’d go to the ends of the earth for her, he’d never give her up...ever.

“You have been my wife in the ‘biblical sense’ since our first kiss,” Andreas whispered.

Once he knew it was safe, Andreas unbuckled their seatbelts. Standing, he held out his hands to his wife and gathered her in his arms. There were certain advantages to a private jet, and he was about to take advantage of one. Walking to the back of the plane, he pushed open the door and carefully stepped over the threshold and into the opulent bedroom.

Andreas laid his Cleo on the wide mattress, then paused for a moment. He needed to just enjoy the sight of his beautiful, bossy wife before him. Disregarding his need and wants for a few more moments, he slowly began to undress her, with his hands and lips getting involved.

Kneeling at the foot of the bed, his palms caressing his wife’s ankles, he looked upwards from his position and found Cleo sitting up, watching him with such love in her eyes it caused him to pause.

“Did I tell you how much I love you, Andreas?” she asked softly as she gently took his face in her hands.

Andreas couldn’t help but sigh at the feel of Cleo’s soft hands caressing him.

“You tell me every day, *Meine Dame*, but hearing your verbal declaration...words fail me,” Andreas hoarsely admitted. These weren’t just words; this was the truth.

“Then let me show you, my love,” Cleo said with the smile that had won his heart.

Pulling him in closer, Cleo pressed her lips to his, but before Andreas could deepen the kiss she pulled back.

“You’re playing with fire, Cleo,” he announced.

“Good thing I like it hot,” she said as she scrambled to a standing position on the bed. Not willing to take the chance she’d injure herself if they experienced turbulence, he automatically put his hands around her waist to steady her. From the shit-starting grin she wore, Andreas knew Cleo had no thought for anything except getting her way. Ah, he couldn’t help but love that about his wife...especially when her way was always so entertaining. Not willing or able to stop himself, he lifted her off the bed as he took her mouth in a gentle kiss.

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“Cleo,” he whispered against her succulent mouth.

“Ändreas,” she breathed back.

A moment later he felt her hands at his tie, pulling the knot apart before slipping it from around his collar and throwing it over her shoulder. Turning her attentions to his jacket, she pushed it off his shoulders before letting it fall to the carpet. Pulling his crisp dress shirt from his trousers, she made quick work of it and his t-shirt. Once he was bare chested, she mapped the contours of his chest with her hands...and then again with her tongue. It was all he could do to stand still under her sensual onslaught.

Locking gazes with him, Cleo moved her hand to his belt. With her fingers moving tortuously, she unbuckled the black leather. His wife was killing him slowly, and he was enjoying every delicious moment of it. So intent upon her seduction, Cleo didn't notice that his hands weren't where she'd left them until he gripped her hips and dragged her closer to him.

“Hey! This is my seduction,” she admonished in the midst of unzipping his dress trousers.

“You are enjoying my frustration a little too much, *Meine Dame*,” he said as he bent his head and buried his face in her throat. Hearing her gasp and feeling her tremble against him, Ändreas knew he'd

successfully gained her attention...and the upper hand in the seduction. His Cleo was so responsive to his touch...and he was responsive to her everything.

“Now you know how I felt since the day I met you,” Cleo moaned.

“I only began my seduction three months ago,” he pointed out.

“You may not have intentionally seduced me, but you’ve been turning me on since you stepped onto the red clay of the Georgia backwoods. You seduce without trying. Your voice, the way you look at me, the way you look so good wearing every damn thing that’s ever graced your body—which now belongs exclusively to the Empire, which would be me,” she said as she stroked him through his underwear.

Andreas groaned out his pleasure. Capturing her hand, he brought it to his mouth. “I only meant to make you want me a fraction as much as I wanted you.”

“If I’d wanted you any more than I did, I’d be delivering our first child now instead of in the process of making her or him,” Cleo said.

“Or them,” he amended. “We Tomaschetts are a potent lot,” he said as he turned her in his arms.

“Hey, you’re depriving me of ogling your hotness,” Cleo protested.

“You will get all of the hotness you can handle...after I get you out of this dress,” he said as his deft fingers untied the bow and began to pull the laces of her corset from the fastenings.

“The last three months were torture,” Cleo admitted.

“I did not mean to torture you, my love,” Andreas said between nibbles.

“Well, you did,” she said.

Andreas didn’t have to see her face to know that his beautiful wife was pouting. She did not like not getting her way. But being of a similar temperament, he could understand that.

“I tortured myself as well,” Andreas said softly as he pulled the laces from the last two fastenings.

He coaxed her to lean her head against his shoulder. Gently turning her face toward his, he ravished her mouth as he reached inside the bodice of the dress and cupped one of her full breasts. Andreas couldn’t hold back his groan of pleasure...nor did he try.

“Wait!” Cleo cried suddenly before twisting in his arms.

Hearing her distress, Andreas instinctively went into protective mode.

“What is it, *Meine Dame*?” he asked with concern.

“I don’t want anything to happen to my dress,” she admitted softly. “I don’t want anything to happen to any bit of it.”

The tears in her eyes slew him. Holding her close to him, he pressed her face into his chest so she couldn’t see what her admission did to him.

“The *grandes dames* put the dress bag on board,” he said. “I will see that your ensemble is properly stored.”

“Thank you, Andreas,” she said.

Cleo knew it might sound silly for her to worry over her dress, but she didn’t care. This wasn’t just *any* wedding dress; this was the wedding dress that her husband had made for her...by hand. Tears had streamed down her face when she’d learned the extent of Andreas’ love. Pride had laced the voices of the *grandes dames* and shoemaker Sig. Calogerus Amorvestio as they recounted a determined Andreas hard at work making his bride her fairytale outfit. Reaching up, she pulled him down and filled his mouth with “thank you”s.

Seeing Cleo look at him like he was everything almost unmanned Andreas, but her touch renewed his strength. Standing before him in her jewelry, her lace garter belt, thigh-high stockings and four-inch

pumps made him recount every one of his blessings and offer up thrice as many “thank you”s for them. Helping Cleo step out of the dress, he went to the closet to fetch a padded hanger and the garment bag. Andreas had to step back, as Cleo was suddenly all action. Gently nudging her to the side and placing her on the queen-sized bed, he carefully encased the dress before storing it. While he was over at the closet, he removed the rest of his own clothes. Turning back to the bed, Andreas smiled, seeing that Cleo was once again back in the role of seductress. He was pleased, aroused, amused and all bragging bastard. Before meeting Cleo, he’d never known the male brain could handle so many emotions all at once.

“Come here, wife,” Andreas ordered.

He expected a protest, but instead all he received was an eyeful of his sexy wife as she strolled her way over to him wearing boldness like she was born with it. The sway of her hips mesmerized him. With every step, his body became more primed. Finally, she was standing before him, prompting his body to shout out cheers. *Yes!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

“Now that I’m here, what are you going to do with me, Andreas?” his Cleo sassed him even as her nipples grazed his chest.

Ändreas didn't respond. Instead, he gave her a smile that said it all. He knew it said it all because not only did Cleo's eyes light up with a heady mixture of challenge and passion, but she sunk her teeth into her full bottom lip in an effort to hold back her moans. Oh, he couldn't have her holding back the sounds of her pleasure. He couldn't have that at all.

Reaching out to her, he tightened his grip on her hips and pulled her flush to him. Grinding his erection into her, he leaned down and whispered in her ear. "Everything I dreamed about, *Meine Dame*. And the first thing I'm going to do is show you that I'm all man. While I might pay homage to the Empire, it is I who rule your passions."

"Well, rule them with the quickness, Ändreas," she said as she sunk her nails into his shoulders and rubbed herself against the length of him like a cat.

Ah, his woman wanted to battle him for dominance? He could do nothing less than accept her challenge and then claim his victory. Picking her up, he walked them both to the bed. Taking a moment to throw back the luxurious covers, he laid her down. He didn't follow her down onto the bed; instead he took a step back. Grabbing his cock in his hand, he slowly stroked it, getting a kick out of the way Cleo's eyes followed the movements of his hand. Suddenly, he wanted to see Cleo masturbate along with him.

“Lick your fingers and then insert them in my pussy,” he commanded.

Not backing down from his challenge or questioning his command, Cleo did as she was told...with her own twist. Licking both her pointer fingers, she gathered her breasts in her hand and squeezed them before circling her nipples. Pinching the dark chocolate peaks, she slowly trailed a finger down to her sex. Spreading her thick thighs wider, she didn't hesitate. She simply plunged her fingers into her honey and went to work pleasuring herself. Seeing her throw back her head and arch her back, it was clear she wasn't new to this. Hearing his name spill from her lips, it was also clear that she routinely self-pleasured to images of him.

Needing to be inside her, he walked over and caught her hand in his. Leaning down, he brought her sticky sweet fingers to his mouth and licked them clean of her honey. That seen to, he nudged her thighs wider before following the path she'd made with his tongue. Cleo tasted like all of his tomorrows, and all he wanted to do was eat her up. From the grip she had on his hair, she was going to let him.

Having sated his thirst (for now), he rose from his position and kissed his way to her mouth. “Taste yourself,” he instructed a moment before his lips crashed down on hers.

She must've liked the way she tasted, because Cleo wrapped those long legs around him and pulled him in closer to her. Though they were already skin-to-skin, he pressed deeper into her, meshing their bodies together. A medley of deep brown and apricot, a meshing of European and southern, they came together in an explosive display of passion. He grunted out demands; she moaned her responses. He nipped; she arched into his bite...and then bit back. He pinched her nipples; she smacked his ass before sinking her nails in and demanding more. He held her down and suckled her breasts; she rolled him onto his back and deep throat his cock and sucked him until his eyes crossed. He might be the victor, but Cleo's message was clear: she was going to make him work for it. It was a good thing there wasn't any kind of work he was afraid of.

Tangling his hands in her thick curls, he arched up into her mouth. "Yes. Yes. Cleo," he encouraged.

And that was all it took. Backing all the way off his cock, she met his eyes and held them. Swirling her tongue around the head, she raised a single brow and then took his entire length without hesitation—again. Damn. Needing to regain control, he pulled her off his cock. Pulling her up his body, he took a moment to smooth his hands over her ass. He'd spent many a day and night fantasizing about her ass. Roughly

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palming the globes, he delivered a sound smack to both cheeks. Just as he'd thought she would, she arched her back and mewled in pleasure.

Repeating the action, he leaned up and caught her nipple in his mouth. Gently biting the nipple, he sucked it into his mouth. Pleasuring her breasts, he spread her legs wider, gripped her hips and rubbed her sex over his cock.

“Ändreas,” she moaned.

He didn't answer. Instead he rubbed more insistently against her pussy.

“Ändreas,” she rasped out.

Rolling her onto her back, he reached between them and plunged his fingers into her.

“Ändreas!” she screamed.

He showed no mercy. Instead he stroked her harder, faster, more insistently. Feeling her orgasm approaching, he backed off and waited for the explosion.

“You motherfuc—” she began.

Cleo got no further. Before she could finish the word “fucker,” he reared back and filled her with six foot seven inches and over two hundred thirty pounds of him.

The abrupt silence was interrupted by her gurgling her pleasure. Despite her impressive vocabulary, despite the many languages Cleo knew,

she couldn't get out a single coherent word. Smirking, he looked in her eyes as he gave her everything.

Cleo might not be able to say a single word, but her eyes entreated him to bring it, and her hands commanded him to bring it harder. His ears were filled with the sounds of her guttural responses to his stroking. His back, ass and sides were tattooed with the evidence of her pleasure. Still, he went deeper, longer, harder. In return, Cleo spread her thighs wider, wrapped her legs around him tighter, and arched higher into him.

"More," her body demanded...and he gave it to her...he gave it all to her.

Feeling her body tighten, he thundered into her and watched as his wife's orgasm consumed her. Emitting a gasp, she went silent for a moment before screaming out his name. "Ändreas!"

Hearing Cleo call out his name with such unrestrained passion made him feel like he was the only man in the entire universe. Watching such a beautiful moment triggered his own orgasm. Stroking into her one last time, he threw back his head and roared out his triumph as he poured himself into her.

Cleo woke but did not bother moving. Ändreas had brought it. The things that man did to her. He spread her like offensive coordinators spread the field

against its opponents. He stroked into her sex like a prisoner tunneling his way to freedom. Through it all, he peered into her eyes like a bondsman peered at the night sky, looking for the drinking gourd. Andreas made love to her like he did everything else: like his life depended on it. And all she could do was love him more with every touch, every caress, every stroke.

"I love you, Andreas," she said even as she snuggled closer to him.

"I know, *Meine Dame*," the arrogant man said.

"Your arrogance is totally uncalled for," she said without heat.

"Shall we ask the pilots my name and what you sound like screaming it?" he asked.

"Shut up, and speaking of the pilots, where are we going and how long is it going to take for us to get there?" she asked.

Andreas had refused to tell her where he was taking her.

"We're already there," he said. "And we've been here for quite a while."

"Then why are we still on the plane?" she asked.

"That is the exact same question air traffic control asked forty-five minutes ago when we landed."

"What did you tell them?"

“I didn’t tell them anything, but the pilot told them that the new Mrs. Tomaschett was busy calling for God and her husband, and he wasn’t about to disturb that.”

Oh. My. Damn. This was no way to treat the Empire. She was going to inform the crew of that...later...when her voice was back and she wasn’t feeling so jelly-like.

Epilogue

One year later

As always, Andreas shook his head and smiled each time he walked into the living room of their new home. It wasn't the big-screen plasma, the panoramic view or the eclectic artwork that caused people to stare. It was the dress form in the glass case with the motion sensors, camera and warning label. No, it wasn't what he would've chosen for the décor, but how could he be offended that his wife had liked her wedding ensemble so much she designed a house around it?

Their new house had everything: a spacious kitchen that Cleo didn't use; a pimped-out office that was the hub of the Empire; a sewing room for him; a pimped-out master bedroom suite with an adjoining nursery that was currently full of the sounds of his bambini crying. Carelessly tossing his briefcase onto the hallway table, he ran over and picked up his gorgeous babies.

"Daddy's home," he said as he hugged them to him and kissed the tops of their heads.

“Wow, you made it twenty whole minutes today,” Cleo said as she walked in with two bottles.

“Well, that’s five whole minutes longer than yesterday,” he said.

“I don’t know why you keep acting like you’re going to that office when you have a perfectly good office here,” she said as she took a baby and sat next to him.

“Because I’m going to take care of my responsibilities,” he said.

“Because you are stubborn,” she finished as she laid her head on his shoulder. “And I love you for it, but as your wife, and the leader of the Empire, I sometimes have to make unpopular moves. Today, I’ve decided you’re officially on leave.”

“But I just came back from paternity leave,” he began.

“Which is what your partners said,” she continued. “To which I said if they didn’t want their homage to be raised, they’d shut the hell up, or—” she began.

“Being that they already owe you their first and second-born children, I’m guessing they selected the choice that came before the ‘or’ in that sentence.”

“Indeed they did. After getting them told, I suggested that they put on their big boy panties and deal with the fact that you’ll only be coming into the

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office two days a week, and then only for a few hours...and only during mild weather when I'm not horny, lonely, or tired."

"Being that you're on me like style on Italians, I'm guessing I'll never set foot in the office again."

"You know getting jooged in the throat isn't a good way to start your day," she said.

"I bet you pointed that out to my partners."

"As a matter of fact I did. It's a good PSA. Anyway, back to me and my needs. You never shirk your responsibilities, and your punk-ass partners know that. You're also perfectly capable of working from home. Further, you're needed at home."

"You just want me to change diapers," he said, not in the least offended.

"This is true, but I also want you to get me Krispy Kremes, fluff my pillows, and make me peach milkshakes."

"Don't you have staff for that sort of thing?"

"I do, but being that your staff is what got me into this condition, it's your job."

Condition? "You're pregnant?" he asked.

"Yep, and it's all your fault," Cleo said a moment before she handed him the other baby and fell asleep.

He knew he was grinning like an idiot, but he couldn't even be bothered to care. All he could do was

offer up a prayer. God had already blessed him with twin boys, an awesome extended family and a beautiful wife—a beautiful, awesome, kickass, super-intelligent, funny, benevolent wife who ran her Empire with precision, he amended.

****Jeanie and Jayha****

*Georgia's alligator hunting season is actually Sept. 6-Oct. 5, 2008 but we adjusted the date for our story. Information and regulations about alligator hunting can be found at the Georgia Wildlife website.

Thank you for trusting us to deliver your prose. While we do write to supplement our incomes, we appreciate the investment of your time. We hope that you enjoyed the adventures of Cleo and Andreas.

To read more about the characters connected to this book, check out the following stories:

Come Spell or High Water by Jeanie Johnson and Jayha Leigh (Ms. Corinna P. Drystan, Grace Ellen K. Jones)

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Killer Crossover: Hot up in the Capture by Jeanie Johnson and Jayha Leigh (Grace Ellen K. Jones)

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The Wild, Wild Be My Guest: Silana by Jayha Leigh
(Silana Toussaint Treunmhor, Thamesia Ceanncath,
Baisealach Galgachus, Andrew Treunmhor)...coming
Fall 2010

The Wild, Wild Nothing Less: Victorious by Jayha
Leigh (Iain Banks, Dr. Mrs., Silana Toussaint
Treunmhor, Grace Ellen K. Jones)

For more information on the Jeanie and Jayha
universe, please visit our website:
www.jeanieandjayha.com

About the Authors

A kickass tag-team bound together by the pen, Jeanie (the shagalicious wordslinger) and Jayha (the ninja master of h*ll no's) are forces of nature that will either leave you begging for mercy or begging for more.

We are women who have brains we aren't afraid to use; feelings we aren't afraid to express; and, middle fingers that we aren't afraid to extend. We pen stories that push all kinds of boundaries and we don't apologize for it. Our heroines are feisty; our heroes are hot, and our stories are one-of-a-kind adventures. Come visit us at www.jeanieandjayha.com.

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