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SMOKIN':

Carolina in the Storming

Jeanie Johnson & Jayha Leigh

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Leigh



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To my Momma for everything you do for me (The Baby) every minute, of every hour of every day—I love you Momma. For my sisters, Rolanda and Dréa, for your passion and support, but especially your love. To Vonglorious, mere words can never fully express the joy that your enthusiasm and support gives us.

Thank you. To RRM for your original and constant love and ensuring that I (The Baby) was spoiled beyond measure. And last—but never ever least—to my man who embodies my dreams, fantasies and love...I love you baby forever and always.

-Jeanie Johnson

To Jeanie (my ridiculously spoiled bambina)...Let's start this off right—restriction...smile...Thank you for allowing me to be your momma. I enjoy the privilege more than words can convey. To Rolanda, Dréa, and *the* Von-glorious... yeah what Jeanie said.

To RRM, thank you and you know why, and even though I have to share (and you know what) I couldn't think of a cooler person to share with. To CM—grab a bottle of the J-syrup and say grace before you eat. To all of the chicks in the MF Please Posse (formerly the PAW Posse) what's up!!!!!!!!!! Thanks for hanging with us. To Mr. Me—damn, you are one lucky, lucky man to

have me as a wife...thanks for buying me those eff-me boots...now get on your back and prepare to scream my name. And as always, to the inventor of cut, copy and paste. Oh, yeah, I almost forgot...US. To me and Jeanie...we freaking rock!

Here's to many, many more smoking hot reads.

-Jayha Leigh

Additional information on the kick-ass Tantra Chair™ mentioned in this book is available at:

<http://www.tantrachair.com/>. Check them out, get the chair and get your groove on!

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.

CAVEAT TOO

Just another reminder this book contains adult language and sexually explicit scenes, which are smoking hot. So keep this out of the hands of people with small minds and poor imaginations. Also, keep it out of the hands of honeys who might get jealous because they can't bring it like our alphas.

PART WON
A STORM BREWING

Prelude 1

Whoever She Is, She'd Look Even Better under Me

Mackenzie Roberts smiled politely at the bevy of Southern women who were patrolling the dining area like generals. He knew they were Southern from their accents and also from the way that they piled food onto plates. They had a gleam in their eyes that said no one was leaving here without being close to cardiac arrest or a sharp increase in their cholesterol level at the very least. Though he'd been to many receptions and been fed pretty good he knew he'd have to loosen his belt before sitting down to eat. His stint in Atlanta had taught him that nobody took eating as seriously as Southerners. Looking around, he saw that the tables were piled high with delicacies. There were some he couldn't wait to sample—such as that barbeque—and some he was sure that he didn't want anywhere near his stomach—such as that salad. He was pretty sure it was salad as there was lettuce and other vegetables in the dish, but he wouldn't bet on it because it was struggling under a bed of fried chicken pieces, bacon (real bacon in strips, not the bits), turkey and ham. Yep, some people were going to be rushed to the ER tonight,

but they'd enjoy the events that led up to it. Southerners didn't have blood pumping through their veins; they had gravy or grease. It was a wonder that they hadn't died out but then they did tend to drink a lot of grain alcohol (the homemade kind) and that cleaned out their arteries. Of course, that shit could clean rust off of the Titanic, but hey who was he to criticize considering the fact that he damned sure enjoyed Southern cuisine. In fact, that was the one thing that he missed about Atlanta: the food. And if he'd have really felt like being honest with himself he would've remedied that statement and admitted that he also missed the women. Southern women had a way about them. Once they got in your blood; they stayed there.

But before he could get to the food, he had to haul his ass to the front with the other groomsmen and see his close friend, Samson Madeira, marry the woman of his dreams...for the second time. Though this was the second ceremony, Samson was still antsy waiting for his bride to walk down the aisle. Having just flown in from Utah that morning, where he was overseeing a project, he hadn't had the pleasure of really getting to know her (of course she'd been kept prisoner in Samson's opulent master suite). He knew that she had to be a stellar woman though and not simply because damn near everyone sang her praises but because she'd managed to do

what no other human had ever attempted let alone had a hope in hell of achieving. She'd conquered Samson. Though he wasn't much on marriage, Mackenzie couldn't help but be happy for him knowing how much Samson valued family. Mariana was a beautiful woman with a smile that could bring a man to his knees and an inner strength and integrity that was equal to Samson's. It was clear that they were destined to be together and as far as Mackenzie was concerned, it couldn't have happened to two more deserving individuals.

Mackenzie took a moment to appreciate the surroundings. Samson's spread was a little over two hundred acres in some of the most beautiful land in all of Creation. In his opinion, Teddy Roosevelt—the twenty-sixth president of the United States—had been dead on right when he'd remarked that there weren't enough words in the English language to adequately describe Colorado. Samson's property was spectacular. Not a particularly religious man, whenever he was in Colorado, especially in this region, he felt close to God. God was evident everywhere: in the ruggedness of mountain areas such as Indian Peaks Wilderness, Routt National Forest, Zirkel Wilderness, and Mount Evans; in the waters of Gilpen Lake, Green River, Hans Peak Lake and the Colorado River; in the endless greens of Buffalo Pass, Yampa Valley, and Ouzel Creek.

The city of de Vires was a picturesque city that was beauty personified. Tucked between mountain ridges, Samson's spread straddled the border of the Northwest Territory and The Front Range...and it backed up against his. A little higher up in elevation, his spread was actually located in the even smaller city (and calling it a city was stretching the truth a bit) of Ville de Mann Ridge. Just under fifty acres, his spread wasn't as big as Samson's spread, but it boasted more diverse topography. Other than his home—which was way bigger than a single man needed—he'd allowed nature to have its way with the rest of his property. He loved this part of Colorado. The area was so beautiful that he often felt like he was sitting between Jesus and God. You just didn't get any more perfect than that.

Mackenzie hadn't been able to attend the first ceremony, but everyone had remarked on the beauty of New Zealand. He didn't doubt that the South Pacific was beautiful, but it wasn't Colorado. Inhaling, he slowly let out a deep breath and looked at the place that Samson had selected to exchange vows with his bride. There were no flowers, but there didn't need to be. Not in that spot, where it seemed that God was showing off His skill. The only concession was the tasteful lighting, which was needed since the ceremony was taking place in the evening to honor the Navajo wedding custom.

Even though there was three officiates—a Navajo elder, a Baptist preacher, and a Catholic priest (which sounded like the beginnings of a bad joke)—the ceremony lasted only a few minutes. When Mariana waltzed down that aisle, he swore that he'd never seen a more beautiful bride. And from Samson's reaction, neither had he, even though he'd had the pleasure of seeing her as a bride just a few weeks prior. Wearing a deep red gown that highlighted her womanly curves, Mariana was the epitome of woman. Walking between her father and brother, she didn't merely walk down the aisle, she waltzed. And when the men of her family placed her into Samson's care, Mackenzie witnessed Samson tremble. In that moment he knew, that the long wait Samson had endured had been worth it. Now that the ceremony was complete, and the pictures were taken, Mackenzie simply waited for a chance to congratulate the couple so that he could get to the grub.

Consumed by thoughts of a proper Southern banquet, Mackenzie let his mind wander. It wasn't until he felt eyes on him that he focused and looked around. He immediately became aware of the woman glaring a hole into him as if she were metaphorically lining him up so she could take him out. He so didn't like the look that she was giving him that he surreptitiously looked for evidence of a sniper rifle on her person.

Mackenzie was pretty sure that she didn't have a sniper rifle, but his gut told him that she did have a weapon on her person...and more importantly, knew how to use it. Since she wasn't making any sudden moves toward him, he took a moment to *really* look at the woman who looked like she was about to set the dogs **and** security on him. She wasn't your average woman. The truth was that nothing about the woman said average. That woman had eyes that alternately flashed caveats and wisdom and an aura surrounding her that said: 'try me.' And though he may well be taking his life into his own hands, Mackenzie knew that regardless of the consequences he definitely wanted to try her—over and over and over. A full-figured woman, she was blessed with a rather impressive bust line and an ass that not even that expertly tailored blazer could conceal. Her mocha-colored skin was flawless. Her full lips were devoid of any artificial color, but the gloss she wore was simply an invitation to kiss it off...to see if it had a flavor. She had a head full of well-maintained locs that were pulled back before flaring out into a riot of curls. Like Mariana, she carried herself with a regal awareness that many women of color possessed.

Mackenzie should've been concerned with the caveats that burned in her eyes, and he would be...later, after he'd looked his fill. He began another slow perusal of her lush figure starting at her feet,

which were encased in some deadly looking shoes that he'd like to see while she was flat on her back and her legs were resting on his shoulders. And those hips—damn. There was a song about hips like those—something about baby-making hips. When he finally made it to her eyes, he noted the unwavering gaze and knew that it wouldn't be long before she marched over to him—most likely to give him a piece of her mind. And if his hunch was correct, even after she'd given him a piece of it, she'd still be smarter than most of the people he knew. She was about to make her way towards him when she was side-tracked by Mariana. And when she looked upon Mariana he saw what the woman kept so well hidden: love and softness.

The look that she directed at the bride—who had thrown her arms around her and hugged her tightly—robbed him of breath. Mackenzie watched as the woman lifted a hand and brushed an errant curl from the bride's cheek before kissing her forehead. It was a gesture full of care, full of gentleness and underlined with love. If they didn't seem so close in age, he would've pegged her as the bride's mother, but he'd met the bride's mother who'd wept through the entire ceremony. Knowing that she didn't have a ring on her finger, Mackenzie felt no remorse about lusting after this woman, instinctively knowing that if this woman was some man's wife, she'd have on a

ring. Settling back against the huge evergreen, he took a drink of liquid sugar flavored with tea, and continued to watch the woman interact with Mariana. He was intrigued with the way she smiled at the bride with the patience borne of loving someone so much that you wanted to hear *everything* that they had to say.

His reverie was broken by Samson who clapped a hand down on his shoulder. Turning his head, he greeted him. "Congratulations, Samson. You're a lucky bastard."

"That I am, and so are you having me as a friend and all," Samson joked.

"Ah, there's that modesty you keep so well-concealed," Mackenzie joked.

"Thank you for coming, Mackenzie," Samson said sincerely before grabbing him in a bear hug that damn near busted his ribs.

"There's no way that I would miss this. After all, you have a Southern spread," he laughed as he returned the hug.

"The benefits of marrying into a Southern family," he joked as he stood next to Mackenzie and looked out at the boisterous crowd.

Anyone looking at the two men standing side-by-side would be taken aback by the picture that they made. Both standing close to seven feet in height and carrying the bulk to match, they looked like light and

shadow. Samson, with dark, good looks and an easy-going demeanor, and Mackenzie, with his slightly darker-than-white-skin and his *do-not-fuck-with-me* disposition were two peas in the proverbial pod. Regardless of how laidback they appeared at the moment, everyone present knew that to fuck with them or theirs would not end well...at all...but it would definitely end.

Prelude II

Put Your Damn Eyeballs Back in Your Fucking Head

Carolina was so glad that her baby had Samson. Samson was quite a man. Sure he was intelligent, wealthy, and smoking hot, but even better than that, he was loving, gentle, and attentive to Mariana. He treated Mariana as if she were the center of his whole world. She couldn't have created a better man for Mariana even if she had a state-of-the-art secret lab.

They'd had a beautiful wedding in Auckland. And even though it was in April, because the seasons were reversed, it was still warm enough to have a beach wedding. And though it was damn near June here in the city of de Vires, Colorado, it was colder than a motherfucker to a Southerner such as herself. While all of the native Coloradans had on short-sleeves or shorts, damn near all of the Southerners had on blazers or sports coats. There was an upside to having to wear a blazer—it allowed her to conceal her weapons. Yeah, yeah, she knew that there were laws and all that, but she wasn't taking any chances out here in the fucking woods with a bunch of strangers surrounding her baby. If something broke off and her baby was hurt in any way whatsoever,

there'd be a misunderstanding of colossal proportions—one that people would still be talking about millennia from now when archaeologists excavated the place and came across a shit load of bodies.

Carolina had watched the ceremony with interest being that she'd never before attended a ceremony that had so many officiates. There was a Navajo Elder, a Baptist Preacher, and a Catholic Priest. Somewhere, she was sure that there was a good joke in that that would be the catalyst in her downward spiritual spiral, but still it was funny. Though she'd paid attention to the goings on at the altar, she'd kept one eye on the crowd. She had momma eyes that allowed her to see everything going on and put an end to any nonsense with a quickness without even having to turn her head in the direction of aforementioned nonsense.

She'd been minding her own damn business minding everyone else's when she'd spotted the white boy. Well, he wasn't a boy, but he was definitely white. He would've been that kind of fine that made women lose their damn minds, with that honey-colored hair and fuck-me body, but he had that crazy, about-to-make-the-evening-news look about him. And he kept looking in the direction of her baby...and that was unacceptable. She was on her way over to give him a piece of her mind and a swift kick in that delicious-looking ass when she was

waylaid by her beautiful baby. Dammit. She'd have to put the fear of God in that man another time. Right now, her baby was hugging her, and she had to concentrate on maneuvering her baby around so that her body shielded Mariana. Oh, damn, she loved that little girl something fierce, with those big eyes and that cute little pout she got when she was in danger of not getting her way. Luckily, she was hardcore and had ice water running through her veins (well either that or barbeque sauce) so Mariana couldn't use those eyes and that pout against her at all. Okay, well maybe once or twice...a day. Dammit, she was a grown damn woman and Mariana was her baby so she didn't have to say no to her if she didn't want to so everyone could just shut the hell up. She was in the mind to kick someone's ass. Where did Mr. Fine disappear to?

Chapter 1

The Jump Off

Mackenzie Roberts was pulled from his morning meditation as the unmistakable sound of a big vehicle tearing ass up the long, dusty driveway that led to the two-hundred acre spread belonging to Samson and Mariana Madeira intruded upon what, until that moment, had been a peaceful morning. With a frown, he put down his coffee and glanced at his watch. The sun had just broken the crest of the horizon. None of his men were due for a good hour. Growling, he waited—impatiently—and watched the black GMC Yukon approach the sprawling log home that was common in this area of Colorado. The only reason the gates to his ranch stood open was because Mackenzie himself had opened them anticipating the arrival of the work crew. He went on high alert knowing that whoever was driving was definitely not from around these parts. Though ranchers often began their day early, it just wasn't good manners or safe for company to a) come unannounced; b) come this damn early; and, c) interrupt him from his coffee. Unfolding six and a half feet and damn near three hundred pounds of mean motherfucker off of his comfortable perch, he walked to his truck, where

his rifle was safely ensconced in the back. Removing the rifle from the gun rack, he disengaged the safety and placed it within easy reach. Leaning against the side of his Dodge Ram quad cab, he simply waited for the intruder to finish their reckless drive up to the house.

The intruder was guilty of more than simply violating accepted mores; they were also taking their lives in their own hands. One did not approach the domain of Samson Madeira without first receiving an invitation, and even then not without a fair amount of respect. Samson was a diligent man, leaving little to chance and after bringing home his bride, the diligence that he was renowned for only increased. Nothing would approach Samson's woman with ill intents or disrespect and walk away intact. Samson would see to that and as his friend he'd help him see to that since he had a vested interest in seeing his friend happy. After meeting the woman that put that sense of peace in Samson, he could do no other than like her.

Mackenzie and Samson had been friends since their days at Georgia Tech, where they'd attended graduate school. Though in different graduate schools, they'd both signed up for the same elective in the college of arts and sciences. That had been a mistake. Though the class was academically rewarding, it was full of silly kids who'd made it difficult not

to go on a mass beat-down. He and Samson had been older, meaner, and far more impatient than their classmates, which had earned them the misnomer of 'the crotchety, old bastards.' Neither had minded the insult because it meant that no one screwed with them.

Mackenzie wasn't at college to party or pick up women, though he'd had his fair share. Coming from a single-parent family that saw more times of lean than times of plenty (hell, he would've settled for times of just enough), he was at college to get an education so he could provide for his mother and kid brother. Never again did he want to see his mother (or any woman for that matter) work herself into exhaustion for just enough money to keep them from being hungry and homeless. He'd vowed that Cairistiona Roberts would never want for anything as long as he had breath in his body. That was why he'd taken college very seriously. After earning his B.S. in Construction Management and a B.A. in Architectural Studies from the University of Washington, he'd earned a Masters in Architecture and an M. S. in Building Construction and Integrated Facility Management (concentrating in residential construction development) from Georgia Tech.

Carolina Gilchrist-Williams sighed as she finally arrived at Samson and Mariana's home. After traveling for the past twenty-two hours straight, she was glad to hear the default voice on her GPS announce that she had arrived at her destination. The trip should've taken twenty-six hours with gas stops, but she'd put foot to accelerator and set the cruise control on 'like a bat out of hell.' Sure, she could've flown, but she really couldn't be bothered. Flying had become a complete pain in the ass. If she was shallow, she'd find friends who were well-heeled enough to have their own jets. She could've broken the trip up into two or three days stopping and resting at a hotel each night, but she was eager to see her baby. On her routine make-sure-her-baby-was-being-pampered call, she'd overheard Samson remark that Mariana needed to be resting considering her condition. *Her baby was about to have a baby!* The fact that Mariana (known primarily as *Somente Mina Nizhoni* since Samson had first laid eyes on her) was in reality her niece, not her daughter, didn't even enter the picture.

Mariana was *her* baby. Since that first day that her sister Virginia had carefully placed that cuddly bundle of baby in her arms, Mariana had been hers. She'd literally called *DIBS!* and even though she was only five years old she'd meant that. The family often joked about how fierce she was over Mariana. Nu-

merous occasions saw Virginia asking her if it was okay if she held Mariana. With a sigh, she'd poke out her bottom lip and hand Mariana over, even as she hovered nearby to insure that her baby was being cared for properly.

Her sister had always shared her baby with her, never punishing her by taking her away. In fact, it was Mariana that had cemented her love for her oldest sister. A serene woman, the only time that she'd witnessed her sister go straight shell was when meddling family members suggested that perhaps she should reconsider naming her as Mariana's godmother considering her age as it would only encourage her possessiveness over Mariana. Virginia had hurled fire and brimstone and any and all manner of insults that she could wrap her vocal cords around. And after that day, no one had questioned Carolina's right to Mariana. Time only strengthened the bond between Carolina and Mariana. In Carolina's heart she felt that Mariana would be her only child as she didn't foresee herself marrying anyone—actually, she didn't see anyone marrying her. It wasn't that she wasn't desirable; it was that she had too many of the qualities that men wanted in their best friends and too few of the ones that they wanted in their girlfriends and wives. In spite of always being in the role of 'go-to chick', she had stellar rela-

tionships with men...they just weren't intimate relationships.

Though a staunch, bra-burning womanist, she was traditional when it came to family. In her mind, marriage was forever and children should have both parents whenever possible. There were benefits of children having both strong masculine and feminine influences. Sighing, she realized that she'd set the bar high...perhaps too high, which would explain both her husband-less and childless state. Sighing, she drove on, knowing that she could never drive far enough or fill her life with enough adventures to quash the faint feelings of longing that settled in her heart.

So when Carolina discovered that Mariana was in the family way, she could do no other than jump in her SUV and hightail it to Colorado. Even though it was accepted that Mariana was her baby, of course, she'd had to call her older sister with a detailed report. Mariana might be hers but Virginia was damn protective over her daughter, as was her father and brother. Virginia was also *en route* but being that she was overseas, it would take her a little longer to arrive.

Shaking her head to clear it, Carolina took time to appreciate the early morning freshness and beauty that was Colorado. Normally one to take the scenic route everywhere, she'd foregone scenic in lieu of

expediency. Because she'd been so concerned with getting to Mariana, she hadn't taken time to appreciate the scenery that she'd encountered on the way. In reality, she hadn't recalled much of anything once she crossed the border out of North Carolina. She remembered West Virginia as she'd had to stop to refuel. She vaguely remembered Kentucky, Indiana and Illinois. She didn't recall Kansas at all only placing herself geographically when she'd noticed the sign welcoming travelers to Colorado.

Knowing that her niece wouldn't be awake at this indecent hour, as they both shared that 'not being a morning person' gene, she slowed her speed from 'bat out of hell' to just under warp speed. Finally getting a glimpse of the beautiful log cabin that blended into the scenery, Carolina caught her breath and slammed on brakes thus bringing her truck to a Starsky and Hutch— or Ace Ventura—type stop.

"My God!" she said aloud, awed by the sheer beauty of the place. Even though she'd been here before, it was bustling with people so she'd been in secret service mode, and therefore didn't get a chance to really look at the place. Now that the place was devoid of the bunch of revelers she saw the place in all of its glory. Sighing, she took a moment to drink in the beauty. It was moments like this, when surrounded by beauty of this magnitude, that Carolina wondered how individuals could doubt the exis-

tence of God. Only God could be responsible for such beauty and humanity needed this beauty considering the ugliness that it itself was responsible for perpetuating.

Cutting off the engine, she slid out of the driver's seat. Taking a few steps away from her truck, she smiled and breathed in deeply, inhaling the sweetness of the cool mountain air. Looking around, she finally noticed something other than the scenery and the main house. Smiling, she noticed the beginnings of a building site. Mariana had admitted that Samson had insisted on building a guest house outfitted with all of the extras on his property. Guest accommodations were necessary because Samson anticipated an exponential increase in not only the size of his immediate family, but also in the sheer number of family members that would be gracing their doorstep once word of Mariana's pregnancy got around the entirety of their mixed family. She laughed recalling Samson's grumbles about the fan club that Mariana had amassed. It wasn't that he didn't want her to have friends; he was simply put out that damn near all of them were males.

«»*

Meanwhile, as Carolina took in the scenery, intense green eyes took her in. Reengaging the safety

and returning his rifle to its proper place in his truck, Mackenzie watched with intense interest as Carolina closed her eyes and took deep breaths. A smile—well as close as he could come to one—softened the intensity of his gaze. Someone with supersonic hearing would've heard the appreciative sounds he made in his throat as he perused the abundant curves, dips and valleys that made up the full-figured, black woman who in that unguarded moment literally robbed him of his ability to think. Her robbing him of his ability to think about anything else, save bringing her to pleasure, seemed to be a habit. He hadn't discovered who she was since he'd had to head out the next day to wrap up the construction project he was overseeing. But he didn't forget that woman; in fact he saw her every night in his dreams, which explained why he woke every morning with a raging hard-on. It wasn't until he arrived back at Samson's house that he discovered that Carolina was part of Mariana's family. He'd hoped they had a reunion sometime soon because he wouldn't mind seeing that woman again—provided he was properly covered in Kevlar.

«»*

When Carolina came back to herself she was more than ready to see her niece. After hugging her

until her arms grew tired and seeing for herself that she was indeed blossoming, she'd give in to her baser needs. That was, she'd demand some sweet iced-tea knowing that her niece—a proper Southern woman—would have an abundance of the Southern staple in her refrigerator. She was damn near parched after her cross-country trek. For some unknown reason, people outside of the south didn't think they needed to have a ready supply of iced-tea on hand...and those that had it thought that it was permissible to serve unsweetened tea. Sweetened iced-tea was the default drink in the south. When you said tea, it was understood that one meant sweetened and iced. The only question was if you wanted it served with lemon or without. Those who wanted unsweetened iced-tea had to ask for it and if they didn't want to be viewed with suspicion, they better have some kind of medical reason for that nonsense. After she downed some decent tea, she was going to pass out on the nearest flat surface. It was way too fucking early for anything more than dealing with the basics.

Turning, she was startled to discover a man standing just a few feet away from her. And not just any man, but *that* man. The one she'd thought she was going to have the pleasure of kneecapping. She'd never discovered who he was, having to catch a flight back to cover finals at the college she taught at part-time. Well, if he was here on Samson's property, he

must not be a threat because Samson was damn particular about whom he allowed in the vicinity of Mariana, especially when said people had a dick somewhere on their person. And she'd bet that the fine motherfucker in front of her had an impressive one.

He rivaled Samson in height, but he was about sixty pounds lighter. With hair the color of wheat and devastating eyes that reminded her of spring in all its glory, he was one smoking ass hot man...but he was *white*—and not half white like Samson, but *all* white. Too bad she thought with an almost imperceptible sigh and a metaphorical shake of her head, because that man had a presence that screamed alpha and a body that screamed/advertised guaranteed fuck fest. The man was undeniably hot, but unfortunately not for her she thought as she checked him out. She was seeing him without *really* seeing him. With a dismissive sniff that was primarily due to a mixture of physical hunger, sugar withdrawal, and sexual frustration, she addressed him.

“Make sure you get all of my bags from the back seat, please.”

Without waiting for Mr. Fine to respond, she turned towards the house completely missing his raised eyebrows and the WTF in those intense, green eyes that couldn't keep themselves off of the one and *only* Carolina Gilchrist-Williams.

«»*

Hearing the distinctive cry of her niece, who for some unknown reason was up, she promptly forgot about Mr. Fine and addressed her baby.

“Baby, why in goodness’ name are you up at this ridiculous hour?” Carolina asked as she enfolded Mariana in her arms.

Carolina held her tightly before releasing her a little so she could look into her face. After looking with momma eyes, she smiled. The look on her baby’s face was a mixture of utter bliss, that glow that everyone talks about when describing pregnant women, and joy.

“You make a beautiful momma-to-be, darlin,” Carolina said sincerely as she leaned forward and brushed her lips against Mariana’s forehead.

She felt her baby sigh and relax against her. Over Mariana’s shoulder she spotted the man who’d managed to keep his promise of keeping her baby happy, which was no small feat. Then again Samson was not a small man in either stature or heart. Sending up a prayer, Carolina smiled at the man that she’d quickly come to think of as her son.

“Auntie Carolina, you’re as biased as Samson,” Mariana said with a shake of her head. The delicate blush that spread over her face only served to high-

light her cuteness and Carolina couldn't resist swooping her up in another crushing hug. Loosening her bear hug, she allowed her baby to breathe (although she didn't let her go) and beckoned Samson over.

She watched Samson approach. The man was huge yet he approached carefully not taking any chance that he'd hurt or startle her. First, stopping to enfold his wife in his massive arms, he used his free arm to gently embrace her. Though his touch was warm, he kept the contact brief knowing of her aversion to being touched. Appreciating Samson's thoughtfulness, Carolina surprised him by hugging him back. Before breaking the hug completely, she grabbed a lock of his hair and tugged him down to a workable height and kissed both of cheeks.

"Ow," Samson complained.

"Ow, nothing. I should kick your ass for having hair that beautiful. You're lucky that I didn't snatch you bald."

"But then Mariana wouldn't like me if I had no hair," he complained.

"Bullshit. That woman cannot keep her hands off of you. I was damn glad she managed to drag you to the altar before you ended up slapping her with a sexual harassment charge," Carolina joked.

"Oh, my goodness, I'm not even here listening to you guys talk about me," Mariana gasped.

Ignoring her baby's mock outrage, she turned to Samson. "Has she been behaving, Samson?"

"Auntie!" Mariana gasped.

Carolina didn't say anything; she merely watched the byplay between the couple. Mariana practically cooed as Samson wrapped her in his massive arms before dropping a kiss on her lips. She smiled as Mariana ceased protesting and simply snuggled closer. Witnessing the honest display of love and affection that existed between the couple, Carolina closed her eyes and sent gratitude to The Big Guy for gifting her baby with a love so pure. Samson didn't even attempt to hide the love that he felt for his wife. Watching them, she felt happiness for her baby. She refused to acknowledge that twinge that accompanied it.

"*Somente Mina* has been very...pliable as of late," Samson answered.

"So in other words she needs both of us to keep her out of trouble, hmm?" Carolina asked whilst raising a single brow.

«»*

Removing his head from where he'd had his nose buried in *Nizhoni's* neck, Samson nodded. Samson loved *Somente Mina*, which meant that he had to love everyone that she loved. Carolina was the

exception. He didn't love Carolina simply because she was his *Somente Mina's* favorite aunt; he loved Carolina because she was a hella good woman. Carolina was one of the people he most respected and not simply because she'd gotten the drop on him and made a very real threat to his life should he fuck with her baby. Oh no, he respected Carolina because she was doing the damn thing.

Somente Mina had told him that Carolina was known for, well, starting shit. A dissenter of the highest order, Carolina gave you the gift of her honesty—without the gift wrapping—whether you wanted it or not. Though she wasn't even alive when Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their black-gloved fists on the medal stand in the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, Carolina lived with a metaphorical gloved fist raised in defiance of anything that she considered unjust. She was all about justice and the construction of societies that allowed an individual to exercise their freedom. How serious was the woman about the sovereignty of the human being? The woman had copies of The Declaration of Independence, the US Constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and religious canon from numerous denominations...and had written lengthy papers on all of them criticizing them for what she deemed shortcomings. That woman should

have a bumper sticker on her truck that read: *'Tell me your opinion so I can tell you why it's not shit.'*

Carolina might seem like your garden variety shit-starter but she had the academics to back it up. She had a voracious appetite when it came to learning, and as such was a scholar in rebel's clothing. She'd earned a B.A. in Afro-American Studies and a B.A. in Women's Studies from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill before enrolling at North Carolina A & T State University where she earned her B. S. in Architectural Engineering. She was working in an architectural firm in Raleigh when she realized that her real interest laid in people majors, not technology majors. With careful planning and by choosing a major that offered evening courses and catered to the needs of working students, she returned to college where she earned an A.M. in Liberal Studies and a Certificate in African and African-American Studies from Duke University. Not even pausing to catch her breath, she moved to Atlanta where she'd earned a Ph.D. in Liberal Studies and a graduate certificate in Women's Studies from Emory University whilst working graveyard shift at the post office. Yeah, that woman was on the one. Good looks, brains, and courage...all wrapped up in just enough crazy to make people think twice before challenging her.

Nodding his head out of respect for Carolina, he answered. "We're *both* glad that you are here."

"Thank you for allowing me to come," Carolina answered.

Samson stilled. "I know that you didn't just imply that there will ever be a time when you are not welcome in our home. I know that you wouldn't insult me like that. Wherever *Somente Mina* and I have a home, you have a room in it."

"Calm down, Samson. I'm just," she began but he interrupted her.

"You're not a guest here. You are family. And just as I demand that everyone treat my *Somente Mina* with reverence; I demand no less for her second mother."

"Thank you, Samson," Carolina said as she broke into a huge smile.

That smile scared Samson. "Carolina, that isn't an endorsement for you to start a revolution or attempt to overthrow the political system of my state."

"Samson, just because I believe in ruling with an iron fist and crave unbridled power doesn't mean that I would start trouble," she smiled.

Again, Samson was scared. Carolina could start a riot in a convent. Oh well, between him and Mackenzie he was sure he could keep the western U.S. safe from any nefarious plots Carolina planned.

“I don’t even want to think about what that smile means. I’m going to leave you two to catch up so when the men in black come knocking at my door to question me about your rogue activities I can honestly say that I know nothing,” he joked.

“Oh, ye of little faith, by the time any government found out about my rogue activities I would’ve already completed my takeover of the world.”

“So not even hearing you,” Samson said.

“Spoilsport,” she threw back.

“Yes, because unlike you who’ve pissed off the governments of damn near every industrialized country, the hierarchy of the ecumenical church, a certain hockey league, and the school board—in states that you don’t even reside in—I’m a peaceful man.”

“And I’m a peaceful woman. I didn’t piss off the aforementioned institutions. I just pointed out the flaws in their way of going about things.”

“Still throw the ‘Nothing but Meat’ barbeque in honor of your favorite animal rights group?” he asked.

“Every single year.”

“See.”

“Oh, ‘see’, nothing. Samson, you know good and damn well I like animals, but it’s a damn shame when people can march for the ethical treatment of a dog, but not for the ethical treatment of people.”

"That's why I love you, Carolina. You have such a way with words."

"Like you don't."

"I'm a simple man who likes to spend quiet evenings in my recliner in front of a fire with my lap blanket as I contemplate how to be a good and obedient citizen."

"And you are so full of shit. The only thing you like to contemplate in the evenings is how many times you can make Mariana scream out your name before she passes out from pleasure."

"Auntie!"

"Yes, baby?"

"I'm..." she started. "You are embarrassing me."

"How?"

"Auntie," Mariana whined.

"Okay, baby. For your peace of mind, I will pretend that you and Samson only do missionary position, every other Saturday, with the lights out. I'll pretend that the way you got pregnant is via some scientific experiment. I'll pretend that every woman that sees Samson isn't wondering how you are able to walk after riding him."

Samson chuckled, loving the way Carolina riled up his *Somente Mina*.

"Are you going to say something?" *Somente Mina* asked him.

"Yes."

“Well, now would be a good time to speak up,” *Somente Mina* huffed.

“I don’t care how senile I get, as long as I have the strength to get into the same building as you, I will fall asleep to the sound of you screaming out your pleasure.”

“Yay, Samson!” Carolina cheered.

“I am not your friend. Either one of you,” Mariana said with a pout.

* «*» *

Piercing his woman with a look that promised a good time, he winked at her before turning to Carolina.

“Are your bags still in your truck?” He asked.

Shaking her head, Carolina answered. “I had one of your workers bring them in.”

Frowning, Samson wondered who the hell she was talking about. No way could some unknown man be on his property without him knowing it. Before he could work out the puzzle, Mackenzie Roberts walked in carrying Carolina’s bags.

Smiling inwardly Samson knew that this was going to be fun. Obviously, Carolina had dismissed Mackenzie. And just as obvious, his friend was helpless to do a damn thing about it. Mackenzie was

definitely unaccustomed to having a female dismiss him.

“Carolina, this is Mackenzie Roberts. He and I attended grad school together. He designed this house and drew up the designs for the addition. On top of that, he graciously agreed to remain on site and oversee the construction. Mackenzie, this is Carolina Gilchrist-Williams, *Somente Mina*’s favorite aunt. Do not let the gentle Southern accent fool you; she’s no helpless damsel in distress although she shall be treated like one.”

After completing the introductions, Samson surreptitiously watched Mackenzie and Carolina feel each other out. He needed to know if there would be bloodshed before he left those two together. He wasn’t scared for Carolina, but for Mackenzie. Still, he couldn’t have Carolina getting worked up when she had so many other people on her ‘people-she-hated-loathed-and-despised’ list with which to concern herself.

Samson smiled as he watched his normally suave and observant friend watch Carolina. It was obvious that though Mackenzie had heard him, he wasn’t paying much attention to anything except Carolina. Just when Samson thought he’d have to do something to alleviate the tension, Mackenzie spoke.

“If you’re Mariana’s aunt then you must be really old.”

Samson couldn't believe that those were the first words out of Mackenzie's mouth. Out of all of the words Mackenzie could've said, his genius mind could only come up with that shit? How could a man with four fucking degrees be so utterly stupid? Closing his eyes, Samson waited for the explosion and wondered if Carolina would kill Mackenzie now or wait until she'd designed an especially unpleasant demise for his friend.

"And you must be Samson's affirmative action friend because usually he rolls with men who are well-endowed—physically and intellectually."

"You must be really intelligent," Mackenzie remarked.

"Thanks."

"That wasn't meant to be a compliment."

"I know, but I'm still taking it as one. So like the large percentage of white male voters in this country, you need to get over yourself and stop thinking that your whiteness and your maleness give you some kind of special rights."

"Ah, you're one of those people who just have to be the 'expert' on everything?"

"I don't *have* to be the expert on everything, but if I know something then I'm not going to play the metaphorical dumb blond to appease someone's little ego, especially yours."

"Ain't nothing little on me, Sweetness."

Smirking, Carolina commented. "Obviously, we have different definitions of the term 'little.'"

"Contrary to what you think, you don't know everything."

"That may be true, but I'm pretty sure that I know more than you," Carolina returned.

"That's precisely that attitude that makes men prefer beauty over brains."

"Well, I can understand why your boyfriend would crush on you then. You're pretty and shiny and look good as his sub," she said while shooting him a look of challenge.

Oh shit. Samson decided to intervene before he had to hire a Haz-Mat team to come in and clean up Mackenzie's remains.

"Carolina and Mackenzie," he began, only to realize that further intervention wouldn't be necessary. Instead of growling at Carolina, Mackenzie simply stared at Carolina. And instead of moving to disembowel Mackenzie, Carolina simply stared back. Samson couldn't believe that two of the most intelligent individuals he knew—both with razor sharp wits and the balls to match—hadn't taken their verbal barbs to the next level. Though neither Carolina nor Mackenzie made a move, his *Somente Mina* bumped his heavily muscled thigh with one of her womanly hips. Turning to his woman, he read her lips.

“He likes her,” she mouthed. Leaning up to whisper in his ear, she continued. “And Auntie doesn’t wish death on him, which means they’re practically best friends forever.”

Turning to look at Carolina and Mackenzie again, he noticed that neither had moved. They simply continued to stare at each other. Samson recalled his reaction upon first glimpsing the beauty in his arms. When he’d laid eyes upon *Somente Mina*, he’d been rendered mute, instinctively knowing that he’d found his heart. It appeared that Mackenzie was having a similar experience upon meeting Carolina.

«»*

Mackenzie couldn’t believe that this woman was here...and from the mountain of bags that she had loaded in the back of her truck, she was going to be here for a while. Here, in the same state, in the same city, under the same roof with him. And he couldn’t believe that she’d just implied that he was pretty and stupid, and even more egregious, that he was anybody’s fucking sub. He was going to show her that he was an alpha, through and through. Fantasies of having the fiery woman under him screaming out her pleasure as she took everything he gave her had him inwardly groaning. Carolina had a sharp mind...and a slamming body with succulent lips to

go with it. Oh, yeah, this was going to be fun he thought as he took a moment to leisurely peruse her abundant curves up close.

«»*

Carolina couldn't believe that this fucking man was here...in this state, in this same city, under the same roof as her. Didn't he have unjust social structures to create? Images of him shirtless with a fine sheen of sweat highlighting the ripped body that she suspected lay under his clothes assailed her. Damn it, why did Mr. Annoying have to be so damn fine?

«»*

As Mariana watched her Auntie and Mackenzie stare at each other she could only imagine what was going on in their heads. And as spectacular as her imagination was, she was sure that whatever it came up with would only be the tip of the iceberg. She loved them both, but the truth was that in a runoff covering crazy, her Auntie and Mackenzie would be neck and neck. It wasn't technically their fault; brilliant people were frequently like that. Yeah, she might be clueless about their innermost thoughts, but she knew three things. First, both her Auntie and Mackenzie were going to be difficult about the whole

liking each other thing; second, both were going to fall—hard; and, third, she didn't want to be anywhere around when that shit went down. She loved Mackenzie as a friend but she was really going to love having him as an uncle. If he was going to be her Auntie's husband, he'd have to spoil her as much as her Auntie. Al-right! She was going to be the spoiled, spoiled baby when they got married. But before she could get them married, she had to get them out of their trance.

"Auntie, let me show you the house. Samson will take your bags to your room," Mariana said with a grin. Noticing that neither her Auntie nor Mackenzie had moved, she grabbed Samson and brought his head down to hers so that she could whisper into his ear. "Put Auntie's bags in the room next to Mackenzie's."

"*Somente Mina*," he warned, but then his woman did the one thing he could never resist. She turned her head and looked at him with eyes full of love and wide with faux innocence.

"I will know that my Auntie is safe being next to Mackenzie. Don't you want her to feel safe, Samson?" she asked while batting those eyelashes at him.

Samson was powerless to do anything but what she asked.

"But will Mackenzie be safe from Carolina's searing whip of a tongue?" he asked.

Grinning, *Somente Mina* replied. "Oh, he's going to find out that though he might be man enough for most women, he's going to have to bring his A-plus game if he thinks to have a hope in hell of having a chance with her."

"And if he's doesn't?"

"Then no harm; no foul."

Samson shook his head. His *Somente Mina* was in matchmaking mode and there was nothing he could do to resist her logic. "I don't want to have to hurt my friend, *Somente Mina*, but I will if he has less than honorable designs on your aunt."

Mariana caressed her husband's cheek with hers. "I know and I love you all the more for how you love her but I don't believe that Mackenzie is one to hurt a woman."

Samson answered seriously. "It doesn't take just a fist to hurt a woman, *Somente Mina*." His *Somente Mina*'s eyes clouded for just a second, which was a split second too long for Samson. Tightening his arms around his woman, he continued. "I have to admit that you're right. Although Mackenzie is as crazy as they come, he's a good man else I wouldn't allow him anywhere near you. He's always been a protective SOB when it comes to women, which is one of the many reasons that I like him. Knowing him, he wants Carolina and if that is true,

few forces in the universe will stop him from pursuing her.”

* «*» *

Hearing a particularly hair-raising string of cussing from Carolina, Samson and Mariana turned their attention back to the couple. After pausing to listen to the heated exchange, they both smiled before turning back to each other. It appeared that Carolina and Mackenzie were embroiled in a *discussion* about who was better at conquering, pillaging, and general mayhem—Genghis Khan or Attila the Hun. Perhaps the term ‘discussion’ was the wrong word because Mackenzie appeared to be enjoying the argument a little too much.

“*Somente Mina*, Carolina might’ve truly met her match in Mackenzie.”

“I know! Isn’t this exciting?” his *Somente Mina* cried happily, as she practically burst with joy at the prospect of her Auntie having finally found someone worthy of her.

* «*» *

After her lengthy nap, Carolina showered and headed off to find her baby. Finding her curled up in the media room, she took a moment to drink in the

sight of her baby who was enjoying an afternoon nap—as she should be. If Mariana followed the pattern of the rest of the women in her family, she'd stay asleep for a while. The women in her family didn't nap—they hibernated when with child...that was, when they weren't laying waste to entire sugar plantations. Of course, the women in her family tended to have multiple births. Virginia was an anomaly being a single birth. Hell, she and Georgia were almost anomalies—not for being twins, but for being spaced so far apart from their sibling. Gilchrist women tended to multiply in multiples...and frequently.

She didn't know how long she stood there watching her baby, but she enjoyed these moments. Mariana was so beautiful. It wasn't merely the pregnancy; it was the love that Samson heaped upon her. Carolina closed her eyes and took a moment to thank God once more. She'd spent countless hours pleading for something good for her baby, and oh how God had delivered. Samson loved her baby so well. Though she'd spent endless hours in prayer, every moment had been worth it. Mariana deserved a love like this...and so did Samson. That boy needed Mariana as much, if not more than Mariana needed him—and he wasn't ashamed of letting everybody and their momma know that. Oh yes, God is good...all the time.

Dropping a soft kiss on her forehead before covering her with a light blanket, Carolina quietly exited the room and went in search of the kitchen. She had delicacies to make for her baby. True, Mariana could cook, but that baby rarely did, and now that she was here, she wouldn't even have to consider lifting a finger much less do something as physical as cooking. And make no mistake about it, cooking for a Southern woman was a physical thing. Carolina didn't cook; she burned; she put her foot in it; she straight threw the fuck down. She wasn't bragging, she was just telling a fact much like one would say with conviction that the south was the most beautiful place on earth.

Pulling her hair up, she tied it back with the elastic band she wore on her wrist and took a peek inside the massive refrigerator. There was enough food in there to feed...everybody. She liked Samson...she liked that man a lot. Pulling out this and that, before she knew it she had a good Sunday dinner going and it didn't matter that it was mid-week. As usual, when into an activity, she started singing. Carolina had a voice that could melt butter in the Arctic but she didn't do public singing, not wanting to be the stereotype of a big, black woman who was known for singing and cooking. She wanted to be known for her intellect and her ability to put a motherfucker in his place. True, she was known for

those things, but she was also known for her singing and cooking because she was money with both activities.

«»*

Walking into the house after hours of talking with the suppliers and his crew, Mackenzie only wanted a cool drink before heading off to enjoy the massaging jets of the lavish shower in the guest suite that he was occupying. But that was before he neared the kitchen and heard Carolina singing. Carolina's singing stopped him in his tracks and suddenly every other desire he had dissipated. He no longer needed to quench his thirst—he needed to sate the hunger that Carolina's voice triggered. Carolina's voice was seduction—raw seduction. Her voice gleaned through his whole body awakening the beast that he kept well-hidden and locked down. There was a strange mourning quality to the lilting musicality of Carolina's voice. It called to him. It wrapped itself around him causing his skin to prickle and his dick to go instantly hard. Closing his eyes, he breathed in the scent of her and let her voice seep into his tired body and refresh him.

Carolina had no idea that she was putting on a show for an audience of one. She had no idea that she held him in a spell. She had no way of knowing

that Mackenzie was contemplating how to remove the mourning from her tone and replace it with heartfelt love that was to be directed towards only one man: *him*.

Mackenzie was stunned at the immediate heat and possessiveness that overwhelmed his entire being. He tried to imagine Carolina with some other man...some other *dead* man he amended in his internal conversation. He didn't realize the vision that he made in the setting rays of the sun. His entire body was bathed in golden light, yet his green eyes were ablaze with an emotion he could not hide.

With his body in battle-ready mode, he walked into the kitchen and got an eyeful of the woman who that voice belonged to. Even dressed in a simple t-shirt and jeans, he found her to be nothing short of beautiful. Mackenzie wanted to embrace her and draw her womanly curves flush against his hardness.

Mackenzie was about to move when Carolina began singing another song. Wrinkling his forehead he wondered at the last verse she sung. He knew the melody but obviously she'd changed the words.

'Use me as the mule of the world but I don't understand. When did I become invisible to every man?'

Who the fuck could overlook Carolina? That woman was the complete package. She was all of the phases of a revolution—the righteous indignation

that called for justice, the brain that meticulously plotted the overthrow of the corrupt regime, the guerrilla army that secured justice, and the system of checks and balances that kept it honest. She was all of that and the package that contained that had him panting. Carolina was a man's woman...hell, if he was honest, he'd admit that she could be a woman's woman too. That woman had breasts and ass for days...and an intellect and integrity that surpassed them both. He was familiar with her intellect from their brief, but intense verbal battles, which though he kept losing, at least she was talking to him. He knew that she had integrity from the reverent way that both Samson and Mariana spoke about her. Though Mariana was a loving woman, he knew from experience that Samson was a stingy man when it came to heaping praises upon anyone other than his woman. Yes, Carolina was quite a woman...and he intended to have her.

Of course Carolina had no clue that he was standing just inside of the kitchen basking in her voice, fantasizing about...everything with this woman. He thought about making love to her; he thought about making love with her. He thought about her...full stop.

He watched as Carolina continued to move around the kitchen, graceful as she sprinkled the food with attention and care and garnished it with

her voice—that soul-stirring voice that had moved on to some back in the day R&B. She didn't sing complete songs but bits of many songs that together told a story. He wondered if she even realized that she did that, and he wondered if the listener would appreciate how amazing her mind was to take a medley of songs and compose a single masterpiece. He was doing fine...listening to her concert with appreciation and silence...keeping his hands to himself and his thoughts just under X-rated. Yeah, he was doing fine until she pulled the okey-doke and started singing Gladys Knight...and not just any song from the repertoire of the talented and lovely Ms. Knight, but THE song.

When Carolina started singing '*The Best Thing that Ever Happened to Me*,' Mackenzie damn near lost his fucking mind along with the tight hold he had on his dick. That was his song dammit, and not only was Carolina singing it, she was straight ripping it up. He wanted to close his eyes but he didn't want to take his eyes off of her. He simply wanted to look at the woman that he was going to make his wife. When he'd first glimpsed her he would've described Carolina as a black woman with Jill Scott presence, a Queen Latifah body, and Angie Stone flair. After hearing Carolina sing *this* song, he could only describe her as...his. She was his and he liked the

sound of that even better than the sound of those Ella Fitzgerald vocals that she possessed.

He allowed her voice to heal him. Those lyrics smoothed all of the jagged parts within him. Her voice soothed parts of him that he didn't know were agitated. Her voice painted fantasies that he wanted to fulfill; it spoke about tomorrows that he intended to share with her; it suggested a forever that he intended to usurp.

Here he was, silently laying claim to a woman that he barely knew. She didn't know that he was alive. Well, she knew that he was alive, and she wanted to remedy that, but still, this woman was his master...and she had no clue. Just a look from her had him hard; just a whiff of her sweet perfume had his mouth watering; that amazing singing voice brought him to his knees. That woman caused his body to shut down altogether.

It took everything within him to remain where he was. It was a battle of immense proportions because his body was metaphorically chomping at the bit to rush her. His mind filled with images of throwing her onto the kitchen island and filling her with nine inches of hard dick. Yeah, that's what he wanted to do, but he planned on courting her good and proper...because she deserved no less and he was cognizant of the fact that he was a white male and she was a black female. He didn't care that they were

different races; he cared that Carolina knew that he respected her. This is why he just stood there letting Carolina's voice caress him as he imagined his fingers skimming over her abundant curves.

Carolina was now humming the song she had been singing moments ago, still totally unaware of her audience. Silently groaning, he curled his fingers into the wood surrounding the doorway. Damn, he needed to think about something other than her curves. He wanted Carolina with a passion. Breathing in, he could imagine that silky skin beneath his body. He could imagine the heat between her solid thighs. Oh, damn, those thighs. How tightly would they grip his ears as he buried his face in her sweet honey? Lost in his fantasies, he almost missed Mariana's approach.

«»*

"Hey, Mackenzie," Mariana said as she walked beneath his arm and into the kitchen. She went straight to Carolina who had spun on her heel when she'd heard Mariana speak his name. Mariana hugged Carolina and waited expectantly for her Carolina to kiss her and hug her back. Emitting a satisfied sigh, she held on for a few moments longer before pottering off to investigate the goodies that Carolina was making. Lifting pot lids and 'ooing'

and ‘ahhing’ over the contents, she missed the mean look that Carolina gave to Mackenzie who was still standing in the doorway. If she’d bothered to look, she would’ve noticed that Mackenzie was staring at Carolina like she was a five course meal and he was a starving man. If she’d paid attention, she would have witnessed Carolina decipher that look and gulp. And she would’ve smiled. But Mariana was hungry so she didn’t notice anything except the mountains of food that her Auntie was making.

«»*

“Is there a reason why you’re standing here?” Samson asked Mackenzie as he came to a halt a few feet from the kitchen. Samson’s question broke the spell between Carolina and Mackenzie. Carolina turned away from Mackenzie after shooting him the ‘motherfucker, please’ look. Samson smiled as he watched the byplay between Carolina and his *Somente Mina*. When Carolina shooed his *Somente Mina* away insisting that she get that spoon out of that pot unless she wanted a good switching, *Somente Mina* reluctantly surrendered the spoon but not without pouting. No way in hell would Carolina lay a hand on her baby...and her baby knew it, which was one of the reasons that she was so spoiled.

Carolina spoiled and loved his *Somente Mina* in equal measures and he loved Carolina for that.

“Isn’t she amazing?” Mackenzie asked Samson as he quit the kitchen and moved towards the living room.

Noting that Mackenzie had yet to take his eyes off Carolina, Samson paused before answering.

“Yes, she is.” Samson answered as he watched his wife and her second mother tease each other. *Somente Mina* must have felt his gaze upon her for she turned her head and smiled at him. Seeing his woman so happy filled him with joy. *Somente Mina*’s laughter washed over him causing his heart to swell. When she turned that sexy look on him and loved him freely with her eyes, another part of his anatomy swelled. If he didn’t know that she was hungry, he would’ve carried her upstairs and feasted on her until she screamed out his name at least four times. Knowing good and well that he was going to allow her to eat before ravishing her, his woman winked at him and went back to teasing Carolina.

Samson turned his attention back to his friend whilst keeping his eyes on his wife.

“You must be careful, my friend.” Samson spoke quietly to Mackenzie.

“I know—” Mackenzie started.

“Mackenzie,” Samson said his friend’s name quietly but seriously.

Mackenzie dragged his eyes off of Carolina and looked Samson in the eye. Samson had just employed the bring-the-wrath tone. "Like all women in her family, Carolina is adverse to any unwanted touching of her person."

"Not that a woman has to have a reason, but is there any particular reason for that?"

"Yeah, they're called men."

"What did he do?" Mackenzie stiffened.

"Be calm, Mackenzie. I don't think that anyone touched her like that. Carolina's actually a big toucher. She likes touching as much as she enjoys being touched. The key is that any touches must be invited."

"Okay."

"Macken—" Samson began.

"Samson," Mackenzie interrupted. "Don't you think that I know when a woman *doesn't* want a man to touch her? Give me more credit than that."

Samson nodded before replying.

"I know that you're smarter than most men, but you're also treading on dangerous ground. *Somente Mina* loves Carolina like a child loves their mother and though you're my closest friend I won't hesitate to make what would be your short life a living hell if you mess with Carolina's heart, body or soul in a less-than-honorable fashion whether it's invited or not. Understood?"

Mackenzie grinned at Samson as if their conversation was nothing more than easygoing.

“Samson, I don’t doubt you for a minute, but don’t doubt me when I tell you that I plan on touching Carolina—a whole lot. But I also plan on making her Mrs. Mackenzie Roberts even if that means that I have to drag her fine ass down the aisle kicking and screaming all the way.”

Samson inwardly smiled anticipating his *Somente Mina*’s choruses of ‘I told you so,’ and knowing that he would enjoy hearing every single one if it meant that Carolina would be happy. “And what are you going to do if Carolina decides that you should be Mr. Carolina Gilchrist-Williams?”

“That’ll be fine as long as she keeps me pregnant and barefoot.”

“Uh, barefoot I can understand but pregnant?”

“Yeah, I’m hoping for triplets every time I get pregnant,” Mackenzie said looking at Carolina and imagining her ripe with their progeny.

“Mackenzie,” Samson said as a warning.

“Samson,” Mackenzie answered. “Carolina’s mine. That’s just how it’s going to be. Is my pursuing her going to cause a problem between us?”

“Your pursuit of Carolina won’t cause a problem; however, you hurting Carolina will.”

“Noted, but as I don’t plan on hurting her, I don’t see it as a problem,” Mackenzie answered.

Samson and Mackenzie shared a look before the two men went back to watching the women with whom they were enchanted.

Later That Night...

“Where are *you* going?” Carolina asked Mackenzie with a raised eyebrow and a hand on her curvy hip. It was bad enough that she had to share meals with him being that he was Samson’s friend. She took a moment to silently cuss out Mack Mitchell Ford. Granted, after their initial meeting, she was sure that she was the last person that Mr. Ford wanted to see. Gosh, threaten to kill a man and his best friend and they get all pissy about it. Mr. Ford should be here, and he would be if he hadn’t glimpsed Mariana’s cousin and fallen for her with the quickness. She laughed knowing that girl was more elusive than a cool breeze in hell. Dammit, now she was going to have to deal with Mr. Fine and Annoying with no one there to stop her from maiming him. Oh, damn, was that motherfucker still there, and still that mouth-watering fine. Bastard—fine bastard, but bastard nevertheless. When she glared up at him, Mackenzie had the gall to smile at her instead of cowering like most men would have. But of course, this fine motherfucker wasn’t most men.

“Why ma’am, I’m heading to my sleeping quarters,” Mackenzie answered, smiling as he watched the ire that lit Carolina’s eyes. Damn, she was beautiful when enraged. He usually liked his women pliable, but Carolina in all of her rage was turning him on something fierce. His dick had never been harder.

“Well I didn’t see a barn on the property, but I’m sure there’s some kind of lean-to that will suffice.”

Mackenzie didn’t retaliate with the snappy comeback that she expected. Instead, he simply shook his head causing that thick, silky, wheat-colored sheaf of hair to shake around his head as he crowded her. He didn’t back off. Instead, the big, grinning motherfucker leaned one of those huge mitts on the wall beside her and casually leaned in like he was going to...KISS HER! Oh. Damn. She didn’t know what he was wearing but that motherfucker smelled good. And not simply, pleasing aroma good, but the scent of Thanksgiving dinner good. If she didn’t have that iron-clad control, she’d dry hump his fine, working-her-last-good-nerve ass into the wall. She should’ve moved back but...she didn’t want to. And besides, even if she wanted to move back, there was a damned wall impeding her! She felt Mackenzie use his free hand to stay her hip and she almost came from that touch alone. He moved in

closer, taking his time as if time wasn't a factor, and then he...inhaled before smiling.

"Sweetness," he drawled, having the nerve to sound almost Southern. "Mariana and Samson always put me up when I'm here. In fact, I do believe we're right next door to each other...you know...so I can keep you safe and all."

Carolina knew that her eyes were wide as he stepped in closer but refrained from *actually* kissing her. He was so damned close that she was going cross-eyed. Bastard!

"Bullshit! My baby would never put me next to," she began, but her tirade was cut short when Mackenzie gently placed his soft lips against hers. Carolina tried to struggle, but Mackenzie shook his head. "Sweetness, you will never have to struggle against me. This isn't foreplay. I'm merely trying to get you to cuss me out softly. Your baby is sleeping. Do you really want to interrupt her rest when she's pregnant and all just to change rooms?"

"You are such an asshole."

Instead of being put off by her remark, Mackenzie turned on the charm. "I promise to show you mine if you show me yours."

Carolina glared at him once more before turning and walking into the bedroom her baby had put her in and without looking back at the big, smirking bastard, she slammed the door as hard as she could

knowing that neither Samson or Mariana would hear it on the west side of the house. Knowing how needy Samson was over her baby, she'd bet that they were both in a love-induced coma. Though they would know nothing of the bickering that had gone on between her and Mackenzie, she just didn't want to argue with him anymore. That man simply didn't know when to shut the fuck up...but he smelled so good. The throbbing between her thighs attested to the fact that she was attracted to him. Whenever he was in close proximity her pussy had something to say, which created a paradox within her body. Her brain said, brain him with a cast iron skillet while her pussy said okay, hit him then throw your pussy in his face. She cussed all the way through her shower and bedtime ritual.

«»*

Mackenzie grinned to himself as the lovely Carolina Gilchrist-Williams slammed the door in his face accompanied by a litany of cuss words that would make sailors blush. He should've been insulted, but it was all music to his ears. At least she was talking to him.

He sighed as he took the four steps that would get him to his own bedroom. Samson had insisted that he crash at the Madeira spread to save him the

inconvenience of having to make the short drive to his home every day. It wasn't that it was a far drive, it was just that it was particularly convenient for all to have him remain at Mariana and Samson's home. His staying on the property also allowed him the convenience of dealing with any issues that arose with construction without delay. It was a good deal—made all the sweeter by the fact that he would now be sharing the same house with Carolina. *His Carolina.*

Mackenzie thanked fate and God for placing him in a context that brought Carolina into his life. And then he thanked Him again for giving him another chance to actually meet the woman who'd been haunting his sleeping hours for the past six weeks. Now it seemed as if the separation had been but a build up for this moment—the moment he would finally meet the woman who'd not only taken up residence in his fantasies, but had beat the shit out of all of the others and banished them from his psyche. He considered himself lucky to be close to her...even if she still looked at him like he was a vegetarian spread. She might look at him like that now, but he'd be changing that real soon.

Samson carried his *Somente Mina* into their bedroom, enjoying the feel of his lush woman. Her arms were around his neck and her head rested on his shoulder, which allowed her to hear his whispered description of the naughty things that he wanted to both do **to** her and experience **with** her. By the time he kicked the door shut and crossed the floor to their opulent bed, he already had possession of her mouth. It seemed as if he couldn't get enough of his woman. So many times he'd wanted to snatch her up and make love to her, but he refrained allowing her time to show Carolina the grounds.

Placing her on the bed, he laughed when he noticed her superior look. *Somente Mina* was forever pouting about being so much shorter than he, and when standing on their bed she stood taller than he. Call him a caveman but he enjoyed being physically bigger than his woman. Samson grabbed a handful of hair and pulled her lips back down to his before her brilliant mind could come up with something to deter him from having her. His *Somente Mina* liked pushing him to the edge of his want, confident (and right) that she owned him. He was well on his way to his goal when he felt her hesitation. It wasn't a physical withdrawal but a mental one.

Pulling back, he asked. "*Somente Mina*?"

"Yes?" she answered as she gently stroked him.

Samson growled into her neck as he feathered little kisses along her jaw to the curve of her throat. “What is it, *Nizhoni*?”

“Huh?” Mariana answered as she lazily rubbed her breasts against her husband’s chest.

Taking a moment to revel in the feel of her delightful and bountiful ass, Samson used a fraction of his strength and lifted her in his arms wanting, needing, the contact.

* «*» *

Mariana gasped when she felt Samson lift her so easily. His strength never ceased to amaze her. She wasn’t surprised that such a large man had such strength; she was surprised that such a strong man touched her so gently. Samson never used his strength or size against her. He only used it for her, to bring her pleasure, to keep her safe. Lost in the sensation of her husband’s kiss, she had a momentary flashback of her life a mere twelve months ago. She was amazed that so much had changed in such a short time. Her whole life had changed...*for the better*...she amended during her inner conversation.

“*Nizhoni*, what are you thinking of?” Samson’s baritone rumbled in her ear.

Mariana sometimes forgot that her husband was more ‘in tune’ than not only most men, but most

people. Samson was aware of her physically, but he was also in tune with what she was feeling. Having someone so aware of you might be frightening for other women, but for her it was only one of the reasons that Samson was her everything.

“I’m thinking of my life before you...and how every day I wished for a man like you and how every night I dreamed of a man like you. And then poof! God blessed me with you.”

Samson smiled before nipping at the shoulder that he’d exposed as he dragged her shirt aside.

“I understand your feelings, *Nizhoni*. I too prayed fervently for someone like you. I know that I don’t deserve you, but I also know that I’ll never let you go,” he confessed as his mouth moved gently over her shoulder.

Mariana sighed at the sensation. His fingers were busy ridding her of her clothes. She knew from his growls that he was impatient to get her undressed. Moaning from pleasure, she smiled knowing that her clothes were in danger for they were impeding Samson’s journey of her body. Samson probably knew her body better than she knew it being that he worshipped at it day and night.

“Carolina behaved tonight even though she looked tempted to impale Mackenzie with her steak knife,” Mariana said with a smile as her husband

finally pulled her shirt from her body revealing the blood red bra that was his favorite.

Samson growled and buried his face between her breasts whilst reaching around and un-hooking the garment with one hand. Her breasts were free in mere nanoseconds. Cupping her heavy breasts in his huge hands, he thumbed her tender nipples until she gasped. Her head fell back on her neck, which exposed her neck to him. Nipping a trail up her neck, Samson began to slip her tan cargo pants over her rounded hips, leaving her in nothing but her red silk panties.

"I think they're getting along pretty well, don't you?" Mariana asked as she twisted around to help Samson remove the rest of her clothes.

"*Somente Mina*, I think that you need to let your Auntie deal with Mackenzie in her own way. Now hush so that I can deal with you in my own way."

«»*

Mariana clearly heard Samson's need in his last sentence. Though she was giddy at the prospect of her Auntie being claimed by Mackenzie, she knew that she wasn't being fair to Samson. This bedroom was their sanctuary and nothing else belonged there but their love. Tangling her hands in his silken hair,

she closed her eyes and breathed in his scent, his desire, his love. She could feel her husband's need beating at him and she smiled apologetically before she ripped his shirt off of his big body. Damn, she loved his body, not simply because it was a beautiful work of art, but because he used this body to demonstrate his love for her. Even as he dominated her, he worshipped her. Never did he touch her irreverently. Every touch bespoke love. Though she enjoyed teasing him, she really shouldn't be thinking about others as he made love to her.

"Sorry, baby. I love you, Samson," Mariana whispered as she wrapped her legs around his waist and bent her head so that she could kiss the curve of his neck where it met his shoulder. She felt her husband shudder as she bit him.

Growling, he turned and sat on their bed still wearing his jeans even though they were unbuttoned exposing his huge cock. They were a tangle of hair—her unbound curls and Samson's straight, raven locks. Taking her husband's mouth in a hot kiss, she rocked her hips into his hard body and sighed.

"I love you, *Somente Mina*," Samson declared when they came up for air.

"And I never doubt that, baby," Mariana proclaimed before winking at him and allowing her hands to make a slow journey down his amazing body.

She watched as a look of pure joy washed over his face. Closing his eyes, he pulled her tighter before dragging off his jeans and throwing them to the floor without a care.

“*Somente Mina, Somente Mina, Somente Mina*, you are everything. Always know that,” he chanted.

“There is no way that I could ever forget that,” she sighed.

“Then I am doing my job. And yes, I do believe that Carolina and Mackenzie are getting along just fine. In fact, I believe that Mackenzie is quite taken with Carolina,” Samson said softly.

Though the thought brought a smile to her face, she was too far gone to focus on anyone else. “Let me say *‘I told you so’* later. Right now, there’s something else that I want even more than that.”

“You only have to name it, *Somente Mina*,” Samson purred.

“For you to get on your back...on *the* chair,” she said into his mouth.

“If I wasn’t a confident man I might have to call that chair out and whip its ass, *Somente Mina*,” he smiled as he lifted her and walked over to the chair.

Mariana couldn’t help the moan that escaped her lips anymore than she could prevent the cream from flowing from her body. She had this reaction whenever she looked at *the* chair. Waiting for Sam-

son to settle his big body on the highest arc, she smiled knowing that she was getting ready to have a smooth and pleasurable ride.

Oh, yeah, she liked this chair. Just as some people were so famous that they were known simply by their first names, the Tantra ChairTM was so fucking unbelievable that it was simply known as ‘the chair.’ Designed by A. Vitaro, the Tantra Chair was a beautiful and unique piece of furniture on its own. How could it not be when it was inspired by the softness and contours of a woman’s body? When the chair was used as a platform for lovemaking it served to enhance both her and Samson’s pleasure. The arcs allowed her to control the depth of Samson’s penetration in some positions and when Samson was seated on the highest arc, it made pleasuring him orally much more comfortable.

Settling herself onto Samson, she threw back her head and sighed as he penetrated her. To say that she enjoyed that chair was an understatement. Who knew that something so simple in its beauty could provide such pleasure? They may call it the Tantra Chair for obvious reasons, but they could just have easily called it the ‘fuck-me-into-a-stupor chair.’ Panting in time to Samson’s thrusts, she gave herself over to pleasure, savoring the way her husband made love to her with everything. And though she enjoyed the feel of his mouth, fingers, and

cock...it was the love that poured from his heart that she enjoyed the most.

Chapter 2

The Law According to Carolina

Mackenzie said farewell to the last of his crew before heading to the main house to wash up before dinner as was the normal ritual. He, Samson, and Mariana always sat down for their evening meal together—the added bonus was Carolina. Ah, his *Sweetness*. Mackenzie felt like skipping but watching a grown man skip, especially a man as big as himself, was *not* on **anyone's** agenda. Instead, he skipped metaphorically. Stopping inside the foyer, he removed his boots so that he wouldn't sully the pristine hardwood floors that he knew Mariana still insisted on mopping despite being able to hire a hundred maids to do it for her. Well, she used to do it before Samson learned that she was pregnant. That was just one of the *many* traits that Mackenzie truly admired about Samson's woman.

He made his way up the stairs wearing only his thick socks and stripping along the way wanting to hurry his cleaning ritual. He didn't bother closing the bedroom door as he finished stripping *en route* to the shower. Letting the massaging jets soothe him, he hurried through his shower knowing that he still needed to shave. Walking to the sink, he grabbed a

thick, green towel and placed it on the side of the sink. Looking into the mirror he contemplated the picture he made. Without vanity, Mackenzie contemplated his reflection. He noted that his wheat-colored hair contrasted nicely with his eyes that were the color of emeralds, until darkened with passion and then they were the color of Colorado forests in the summer. His jaw was square with a hint of a five o'clock shadow, which is why he had to shave. Smoothing a big hand over his jaw, he reconsidered whether or not he should shave, and after thinking about it vetoed the idea. If he got a chance—or rather when he found the opportunity—to get close to Carolina, he would make sure to rub his cheek against her. Razor burn was right up there with marking his woman right? And he intended to mark her...and make her his woman.

Mackenzie grinned at the thought of Carolina's reaction to him actually marking her. Oh, it would be a joyful occasion to watch her brown eyes brighten with temper before he turned that expression into one of orgasmic bliss. He felt his dick harden imagining his pursuit of the contrary woman. He knew that he would have a hella battle convincing his Carolina that he was worthy of physically and emotionally loving her just the way that she needed and the way he was bordering on desperate to do. Cupping his hands under the cold water, he splashed his face

several times to hopefully cool his—*yeah right*—his heart and dick sang happily as he let his imagination run wild.

His mind was full of Carolina. He could almost taste her sweet lips as he recalled their brief, but dick-hardening, exchange earlier in the day. He bet she tasted sweeter than any confection he'd ever sampled and that was saying something being that Mackenzie considered himself a sweet connoisseur. From their exchange in the hallway, he knew that Carolina's lips were soft. In spite of her stature and her prickly demeanor, he saw softness in his woman. It was a softness that Mackenzie knew that Carolina kept so well hidden that anyone who didn't take the time to truly see and hear his Carolina would miss. Her in-your-face approach might cause most people to label her prickly, but she was his and he didn't want her to change one bit.

«»*

Strolling down the hall, Carolina heard the water running and noticed Mackenzie's room door wide open. Good, he was in so she could tell him the rules of sitting down to eat with her. It didn't matter that it wasn't her house. She'd made the dinner, so she got to make the rules. She wanted to make sure that he cleaned his fine self before presenting himself for

dinner. Mariana had been all too joyful about informing her that Mackenzie *always* had dinner with Samson and herself, so Carolina found herself in the precarious situation of having to share the evening meal with the hot ass and annoying man.

Passing his door she was about to announce herself when her eyes were treated to a feast. Mackenzie's heavily muscled back faced her. The planes of muscle made her clench her thighs together and his wide shoulders beckoned her to test them with her teeth. She cursed the towel that was wrapped around his waist wanting, begging for it to fall to the floor so that she could ogle the beauty that she knew it concealed. The **whole** picture of a half-naked Mackenzie Roberts made Carolina's mouth water. He was busy rubbing a towel over his head and face so he had no idea her eyes were devouring him from behind...*oh and what a fucking beautiful behind it was!*

As he toweled his face and head dry, Carolina moaned silently as every muscle in his back bunched then lengthened. She tried her hardest to move her damned feet so that he wouldn't catch her ogling him but her body had stopped listening to her as soon as her eyes locked on to that fine specimen before her. If she was honest, she couldn't really blame them. He may be an annoying bastard but dammit all to hell if he wasn't fine as all get out...*for a white man.*

«»*

“Hello, Sweetness. Checking that I get clean for your table?” Mackenzie asked the reflection of his woman in the mirror. She blinked a few times before focusing her gaze on him.

“Damn straight,” she said as she watched Mackenzie throw the towel into the laundry hamper.

Turning slowly to face Carolina, he leaned back against the sink and folded his arms across his wide chest and looked at his woman properly.

“You want to scrub my back, Sweetness?” Mackenzie asked the woman who’d invaded his daydreams. He watched as she glared at him and tossed her beautiful head.

“Keep dreaming,” she snapped.

Mackenzie laughed, totally amused by her answer, “And you know that I will, Sweetness.”

Carolina rolled her eyes before answering. “Oh, please.”

«»*

One second Mackenzie was leaning casually against the sink, but the next thing Carolina knew she was staring up into the bastard’s dark green eyes. His gaze was hot with hunger. He wasn’t touching

her but he was so close that she could feel the heat of his big body. She watched a drop of water slowly roll down his wide chest, over his eight pack abdominal muscles and disappear into the top of that lucky, lucky towel. She swallowed hard.

“You say that in my dreams too, Sweetness. In fact, you groan it into my mouth as I drive my fingers into your—” he began.

Carolina reached up and covered Mackenzie’s mouth with her palm noting that his eyes glittered with humor and heat.

“Shut. Up,” she whispered.

Mackenzie licked her palm and Carolina felt the cream drench her panties. Swallowing in an attempt to lubricate her dry throat, she took her hand off his mouth and stepped back from him.

“Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes,” she said unsteadily as she turned and walked away from Mackenzie’s tempting body before she did something that they **both** wanted.

«»*

Having spent a restful night in the opulent guest suite, and having replenished her sweet tea reserves, Carolina woke refreshed. After checking on her baby, she decided to whip up some desserts knowing that the women in their family developed a

relentless sweet tooth when carrying. Luckily, Carolina was a master at desserts. And she was also a master at ignoring her own desires so even if her heart wondered if she'd ever carry a baby within her, she paid it no mind. Besides, she had Mariana to spoil.

Carolina put the finishing touches on the cakes that she'd spent all morning baking. Singing along with Ella Fitzgerald, she'd lost track of time. Glancing at the clock she saw that it was almost lunch time. Grabbing a knife from the butcher's block, she made quick work of slicing ham. Smiling, she turned and surveyed the mountain of food that she'd cooked and released a satisfied sigh oblivious to the fact that Mackenzie was standing at the entrance of the spacious kitchen.

"For me? Ah, Sweetness, you shouldn't have, but I'm glad that you did," Mackenzie's voice reached out and wrapped itself around her.

Spinning around, with knife in hand, she pinned Mackenzie with a glare that would have had *normal* men running for the hills. Of course he wasn't normal...or sane, but he was a man. Oh, damn, he was some kind of man. After coming close to being impaled with the kitchen knife, the smirking bastard merely stayed her wrist with one hand and backed her into the counter. Divesting her of the

knife, he placed it aside while using his lower body strength to hold her in place.

“I most certainly did *not* cook for you, Mr. Roberts,” she snapped. Instead of being put off, Mackenzie simply smiled at her like one would a wayward child and kissed her collar bone before letting her go and ambling his fine ass deeper into the kitchen.

Cussing under her breath, she turned her back to him and arranged the delicacies she'd prepared. True, she needed to lay out the spread, but she really needed to gather herself. The man simply would not leave her alone and his proximity was not helping matters. Carolina got a whiff of him and damn near creamed herself. She'd tried holding her breath but it didn't work because every time she'd exhaled her frustration, she'd inhale a breath full of Mackenzie...and her whole body reacted to him. She could deal with the increased heartbeat and the sweaty palms, but the incessant throbbing in her lower body was riding her hard. It took every bit of the good sense that she was blessed with not to take the frosting spatula and spread what was left of the cream cheese icing on him and making him her dessert. Dammit, she was in a kitchen full of baked goods and this motherfucker had the nerve to be the best sight around. Asshole.

“Oh, Sweetness, we don’t need to stand on ceremony when we’re practically sleeping together,” Mackenzie answered as he made his way to the island that was laden with the smorgasbord of goodies that Carolina had prepared.

“We are not sleeping together!” Carolina gasped out. “We are in separate rooms!”

“With only a single wall between us we’re practically in bed with each other, Sweetness,” Mackenzie grinned.

“You are such an ass,” she spat.

“Do you like my ass, Sweetness?” he asked as he turned, giving her an unobstructed view of his muscular back and delicious ass. Mackenzie might be a privileged, white male but his body didn’t know that.

“I’m a heterosexual woman so of course I like your ass, but then again so do many bi-sexual men, so what’s your point?” she asked.

“I guess that I’m going to have to get up earlier in the morning if I want to out-talk you,” he said.

“Oh, that’s mighty ambitious of you, Mr. Roberts. You’d have to get up a few lifetimes earlier in order to have a chance merely to argue me to a draw,” she said.

His grin merely widened as he listened to Carolina spew venom at him. She was so beautiful when she was attempting to put him in his place. Little did

she know that his place was between those glorious thighs of hers. "I'll keep that in mind, Sweetness."

"Unless you're comparing me to number thirty-four for Chicago, don't call me 'sweetness.'"

"Unless we're playing a bondage game, don't call me 'Mr. Roberts.'"

Making a noise of disgust, she rolled her eyes.

Smiling, he made to nab a pecan pie bar but Carolina slapped his hand away...and his dick got hard.

"Leave that alone," she scolded him.

"Why should I?"

Exasperated, she placed her hand on her hip and told him off.

"Because, you don't want to piss me off."

Stalking her, he leaned against her and whispered in her ear. "Then give me something else sweet to tide me over."

"Like what?"

"Like this," he said as he tasted her lips knowing they'd be sweet.

"Mackenzie," she drawled, forgetting to use the formality that she'd adopted as a pseudo-shield against his allure.

"Ah, Sweetness, I do like the way you say my name. I'll bet you'll sound even better when you're screaming my name," he said as he ground his hard dick into her softness.

“Mackenzie, you have to wait for the others.”

Frowning, Mackenzie backed off and asked,
“What others?”

“The guys.”

«»*

Mackenzie had walked into the kitchen simply to grab a drink of water and to needle Carolina but then the contrary woman had had the unmitigated gall to be singing Ella Fitzgerald’s, “*At Last*.” Carolina’s sultry voice, coupled with her great ass and the smells of the kitchen, had been his undoing. Without thinking of anything except getting close to that woman, he’d started teasing her and damn near gotten the bad end of a knife for his efforts. Only his quick reflexes had saved him from being disembowelled. He was sure that Carolina was tearing him a new one with her impressive vocabulary, but when he’d backed her into the kitchen island all he could do was concentrate on how good her womanly curves had felt against him. Not being able to resist, he’d nipped her collarbone, which did nothing to ease his hard-on. He’d had to force himself to walk away from Carolina before he did something that he’d wanted to do for the past two months: fuck her raw.

When she’d told him that she hadn’t cooked for him, he’d damned near laughed. She might not have

cooked for him *per se*, but now that he'd eyed that spread, there was no way that he was leaving without sampling some of that. Carolina had fixed a Southern spread complete with multiple desserts. There was ham, turkey, stuffing, macaroni and cheese, sweet potato pie, carrot cake, pineapple upside-down cake, and an old-fashioned chocolate cake. No box cake mix for an upstanding Southern woman such as Carolina. He'd bet that the refrigerator held potato salad and iced tea. The iced tea he could do without being that that shit had the viscosity of 40w (forty weight) oil.

He'd started in with the teasing again because he couldn't resist. She was something when riled. There was no way in hell he could win an argument with her so he had to resort to complete illogic. And then, he'd had to use his body. Not a vain man, still he was aware that he looked good. Women had been telling him so since he was sixteen, but he didn't expect Carolina to tell him. Well, she didn't really tell him. She'd actually snarled it whereas other women usually purred it, but the compliment went straight to his dick, which was still rock hard.

Like the idiot that he was, he kept getting closer and closer to the fire. Bending over her, he'd inhaled her scent and whispered in her ear. Though he'd wanted to whisper every erotic act he wanted to share with her, he'd settled for telling her to give him

something else sweet before gently taking her lips. He didn't use tongue for two reasons. First, he didn't want to frighten Carolina. And second, because he didn't trust himself to stop if he went down that path. Though he wanted Carolina with the fierceness, he wouldn't go further until she indicated that she'd be comfortable with that. Being that she was still at the calling-him-a-sorry-mother-fucker-with-every-other-breath stage, he didn't think that they'd progressed to the point where their tongues should be introduced.

He'd settled on gentle kisses. Savoring the taste of her succulent lips, he'd been a good boy and kept his hands on her hips. He was content to simply be in the same proximity with her without having to fear for his life. And when she'd moaned out his first name instead of spitting out his sir name, he almost came. Growling, he'd again resorted to teasing. All was well until she'd mentioned some guys.

Growling, he'd immediately stopped kissing her. *Was some asshole trying to hit on **his** Carolina?* He'd put a stop to that. Before he could interrogate her, the door opened and Derek, one of the men on his crew, walked in.

Not even considering his actions, Mackenzie pushed Carolina behind him and directed the full force of his displeasure at the upstart that dared be in the vicinity of his woman.

“Hey, Miss Williams. I’m here like you told me,” Derek Carter announced as he walked in blissfully unaware that he was about to die...slowly...at his hands. Well, he was blissfully unaware until he looked into his eyes. And then, he looked scared...and if he wanted to remain alive, he should remain that way because no way was Mackenzie going to allow some snot-nosed little shit to come between him and his Carolina.

«»*

“Child, you’d better call me Carolina if you want to eat any of this—” Carolina began, trying to get out from behind Mackenzie who was suddenly tense. She was about to tell him off when she realized that the temperature in the room had dropped about thirty degrees. Sliding out from behind Mackenzie’s heavily muscled back, she saw Derek and more importantly, she saw the stark fear in his eyes. An easy-going, young man, Derek was surprisingly modest considering his good looks. Standing about 6’4” and weighing in at about 230 pounds, his olive complexion pointed to what she guessed was a Mediterranean heritage. A humble kid, he was working construction to earn money for graduate school. She could respect that. Though they’d just met, she’d taken a liking to him from the moment that he’d

quietly laughed at the dig that she'd hurled at Mackenzie. Of course Mackenzie had ignored the dig and it had gone straight over damn near everyone else's head, but she expected no less. It was hard to find an audience who could appreciate a good joke about Caligula. Since that moment, she'd taken to teasing the kid, even going so far as to ask him if high school was still in being that he was obviously a lot younger than the rest of Mackenzie's crew. That's when she'd learned that he was about to graduate from the nearby university in Boulder. That was an accomplishment that she couldn't let go by without acknowledging so she'd demanded that he present himself for lunch, knowing that if she made declining an option, he'd do so out of some misguided sense of propriety.

Right now, Derek's handsome face was full of fear. Wondering what put that look on his face, she looked around for the source. And then she looked at Mackenzie who held her wrist in a gentle, but unbreakable hold. Mackenzie looked like he was on the verge of killing the boy who was literally quaking in his shoes.

«»*

“What's going on, Derek?” Mackenzie asked the young man who had just celebrated his twenty-

second birthday a month ago. He'd hate to have to hurt a boy that young, but he wouldn't hesitate to kick his ass all over Colorado if that boy was thinking of having any romantic ideas about *his* woman.

"Miss Williams came down to the site and told us all that she wanted us to get a plate."

It was obvious from Derek's wide eyes that he expected a negative reaction so Mackenzie felt it was his obligation to supply him with one and he would've done so had Carolina not intervened.

"Derek, give me ten minutes. I need to talk with Mackenzie but in ten minutes—not nine, not eleven, but ten—your behind better be back here ready to throw down on my cooking. Understood?"

"Um," Derek began to answer.

"Good," Carolina interrupted before turning to Mackenzie who simply glared at the young man until he closed the door behind him.

«»*

Now that the usurper was gone, Mackenzie allowed Carolina to leave his side. He remained where he was, watching Carolina storm around until she was standing directly in front of him. Folding his arms over his wide chest he watched as his Carolina began to blast him with words, most of which he didn't hear, although he was sure that she used the

term ‘motherfucker’ a lot. All he knew was that her luscious lips were moving and she was touching him. Sure, she was poking him in the chest so hard he was sure that there’d be bruises, but that still counted as touching. He started paying attention when he heard that little brat’s name on her lips.

“So don’t you ever think you can fucking come in here and tell me a damn thing. Derek is a nice boy and he doesn’t deserve for you to treat him like he’s Edward of Longshanks and you’re Scotland.”

Ah, the historian in her reared her pissed off, but quite beautiful, head. He promised to be amused later, but right now he needed to know if Carolina had a thing for that boy so he’d know whether or not he needed to replace him. Gently pulling Carolina to him, he looked directly into her angry eyes and asked.

“Do you want that boy?”

“Do I want him to what?”

“Do you want him, you know in a man-woman way?”

He watched as it took Carolina a moment to grasp what he was saying, and then he watched outrage blossom on her face.

“I. Am. Not. A. Fucking. Pedophile. Derek is a baby. He is young enough to be my own fucking child. What the fuck is wrong with you? Just because males harbor the innocent school girl fantasy doesn’t

mean that females sit around thinking of ways to debauch young boys. And though some females do that, they are not women. Women don't lust after boys; real women desire real men. You might not have noticed, Mackenzie, but I am a woman—a real woman, not a fucking pervert.”

“Oh, Sweetness, I might not notice the time, or the fact that it's about to pour down rain. I might not notice it when you call me all kinds of motherfuckers, but I notice the fact that you're a woman.”

“Get. Out.”

Knowing that she didn't harbor any romantic intentions involving the young man eased his mind, but he'd have to speak to Derek to make sure that he understood that developing romantic feelings for his Carolina would be detrimental to his health. Being that Carolina's diatribe had only taken two minutes, he decided to use the last eight minutes to rile her up.

“But what if Derek wants you?”

“He doesn't. I had to order him to show up for lunch, Mackenzie. Derek's a good kid and he deserves to have people celebrate the fact that he isn't a miscreant but a solid human being. Not only is he going to school, but he doesn't mind hard work, and he has manners. Do you notice how he addresses me as Ms. Williams?”

“He needs to address you as Mrs. Roberts,” he grumbled under his breath.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You owe him an apology, Mackenzie.”

“For what?”

“For being an asshole. Apologize to him.”

“I don’t have to, nor do I want to.”

“No, you don’t have to, but you should, Mackenzie. If you don’t I’ll know that I should simply lump you in with the pile of privileged, white males who don’t care about shit except for money and power. And then I won’t feel bad when I have to hide your body.”

“Carolina?”

“What?” She spat.

“Kiss me,” he instructed.

“What?”

“Kiss me,” he repeated.

“Why in the hell would I kiss you?”

“Because I’m a jealous ass and I need reassuring,” he admitted.

“Did I miss the part where we started dating?” Carolina asked.

“Must have. Now kiss me,” Mackenzie whispered.

Carolina was good and worked up and dammit she had every right to be. Mackenzie had lost his ever-loving mind. And then he'd made his ludicrous demand. Kiss him. *As fucking if*. And then he'd admitted being jealous...and her pussy got wet and started fist-knocking other body parts. Closing her eyes she'd attempted to calm herself when he restated his demand.

Tossing back her head, she looked at that fine motherfucker and replied.

"No. If you want a kiss then you kiss me."

And that was the last thought she had for the next five minutes because that motherfucker moved like he was the anchor leg on the men's 4x100m relay team. Backing her against the wall, he grabbed her hips and leaned down to her. With his lips almost touching hers, he made a demand.

"Open."

Opening her mouth, she watched Mackenzie's eyes darken and then she felt bliss. When he finally pulled back, she was breathing so hard that she had to grasp the kitchen counter for support. From the dazed look in Mackenzie's eyes, she'd bet that he wasn't faring much better. Her musings were interrupted by Mariana.

"Auntie?"

Carolina watched as Mariana appeared. After glimpsing the food-laden table, she smiled and made a beeline to the pineapple upside down cake. Tsk-tsking Mariana, Carolina shook her head at her niece and ordered her to sit down. Carolina watched her niece smile as she looked from Mackenzie, who was leaning back against the bench, to herself and knew that she had overheard her telling that fine mother-fucker off.

“Baby, what are you doing up? Did this idiot wake you up?” Carolina asked as she gently touched warm fingers to her forehead.

Mariana waited to receive her customary kiss before answering.

“No, I couldn’t sleep—” Mariana began.

“Why? What’s wrong? Are you hurting? Do you need me to—” Carolina interrupted.

“I’m not tired. All I seem to do is nap,” Mariana complained.

“And what is wrong with that, young lady?”

“Samson is busy and I don’t want to bother him and I could smell the cakes you were baking,” Mariana said.

“Baby, if you’re hungry you should’ve just called me. I would’ve brought some food for you,” Carolina admonished her baby softly, forgetting about Mackenzie Roberts as her attention was solely on Mariana.

“Auntie, you’re acting worse than Samson, I’m eight weeks pregnant, I’m not even showing yet and neither of you will let me do *anything*. Don’t you think that’s unfair, Mackenzie?” Mariana asked as she looked to him for support.

Mackenzie simply shook his head, noting the look that Carolina aimed at him promising dire retribution should he answer in the affirmative.

“Dearest Mariana, I am not going to get involved in this. I’m pretty sure your Auntie has some weapons stored in this kitchen and I’m equally sure that she’s just chomping at the bit to use them on me if I put a foot wrong. But I will say this: you’re a beautiful momma-to-be and I can understand both Samson *and* Carolina wanting to keep you safe and sound. I would be **exactly** the same way.” *Actually, I’d be even more psychotic if it was Carolina who was carrying **my** baby*, he said to himself.

Sighing dramatically, Mariana pouted slightly and looked at Carolina through her long lashes before speaking.

“Fine. I’ll just go back to my room and continue being all lonely with no one to talk to and just the TV for company...if that’s what y’all want.”

Carolina shook her head and waggled a finger at her baby before speaking. “You know what? When your momma gets here, I’m going to tell her off for

spoiling you so bad. I cannot believe you are using the eyes and the pout on me, young lady.”

“But Auntie, you spoiled me too,” Mariana protested.

“I did no such thing. I am the disciplinarian.”

“Okay,” Mariana sing-songed.

“Oh no you don’t, young lady,” Carolina said when Mariana turned those eyes on her that were wide pools of feigned heartstrings-pulling, gonna-get-my-own-way-ness.

“But Auntie...I’m so lonely all by myself. I’m so far away from everyone. Don’t you want me to be happy?”

Carolina steeled herself against the look that Mariana gave her, although she could feel her heart squeezing and the need to wrap her baby up in her arms and never let her go was almost overwhelming. She was trying to resist, good Lord was she trying!

“Baby...” there was a warning in Carolina’s voice, Mariana ignored it and moving to her Auntie she laid her head on her shoulder and continued to look at her Aunt with *The look* (feigned innocence) whilst using *The eyes* (peeking under thick eyelashes) and employing *The lip* (quivering bottom lip).

Carolina felt what little resolve she’d built crumble like the proverbial sandcastle in the middle of a storm.

"I love you, Auntie," Mariana whispered.

That did it. Carolina wrapped her arms around her baby and held her tightly whilst kissing her forehead.

"You can stay here with me, but you aren't to do a damned thing but sit and talk, you hear me?" Carolina stipulated.

«»*

Mariana grinned and flounced to the refrigerator and pulled out the sweet ice tea—of which she was only allowed to have a half glass per day. Dammit. She loved iced tea and it was killing her to limit herself, but she'd happily comply if it meant delivering a healthy baby.

"Would you like some iced tea, Mackenzie?" Mariana asked the big man who hadn't taken his eyes off her Aunt for longer than it had taken for him to speak directly to her. *Excellent!*

"You don't serve this motherfuc—" Carolina began heatedly.

"Auntie!" Mariana cried trying to hide a grin. Her Auntie's passionate response to Mackenzie's mere presence was enough to make her absolutely sure that getting the two of them together was sooooo meant to be!

«»*

“What?” Carolina asked her baby who was looking at her with innocent, wide eyes. Dammit, she should get an acting award for pulling off the innocent look when Mackenzie was crowding her from behind. The front of his body was so close to her back that Carolina didn’t dare turn her head for fear she would do something like throw that sorry bastard down and kiss him until she came.

“I can see where your baby learned the technique of *persuasion*, Sweetness,” he whispered hotly into her ear.

Carolina ignored his hard body that was so damned close that her nostrils were filled with his intoxicating smell. Making a sound of disgust, she moved away from him, missing Mariana’s satisfied grin.

Chapter 3

Don't Stop...Get It, Get It

Carolina was so fucking sick of Mackenzie Roberts. Every time she turned around that fine mother-fucker was looking at her. If he was simply Samson's friend she would've stamped him with a 'come up missing' stamp and thought no more of it. But *noooo*, Mariana liked that fine ass man for some reason. Dammit. Well, at least he was off doing who fucking knew—he was out of her hair and that was the important thing.

Having already seen to her baby, she'd decided to bake her famous deep dish, sweet potato pie. But first, that meant finding some sweet potatoes. Dammit. There were just some things that she'd taken for granted living in the south, like having an abundance of sweet potatoes available at all times. After calling around to various stores, she located one that had enough. She had no idea where the hell it was, but luckily she had her handy GPS system. Scribbling a note to Mariana, she grabbed her wallet, set the alarm and set off to the market.

Mackenzie had just finished instructing his foreman of the changes that needed to be made. Number one: Carolina was his regardless of what she said. Number two: the men were to treat his Carolina with the utmost respect and they may keep their lives. Number three: Carolina was to be treated like spun glass regardless of what she said. Number four: whatever Carolina wanted she was to receive—except an opportunity to expose herself to danger, and regardless of what his Carolina said, heavy construction was hard and dangerous work, especially in this part of Colorado where she wasn't aware of their particular terrain and special issues. If and when she insisted on doing some work, his men were to notify him immediately.

Before Mackenzie could continue with his thoughts the woman came barrelling up the dirt drive in her big SUV. He watched as she screeched to a halt a few feet from him. Smiling, he took a moment to admire her Ace Ventura parking style. Obviously, that woman was hell on brakes.

He grinned to himself as he heard Mr. T's voice announcing her arrival at her pre-programmed destination. He then heard what sounded suspiciously like a battle cry, right before he witnessed a small square plastic box come flying out the driver's side window. Tom, his foreman, happened to be passing by that window and because he was busy reading the

latest set of blueprints, he didn't realize that he was in the direct path of her anger, which was why he wasn't prepared for the flying GPS system that knocked the prints from his hands, almost taking his hand with it.

* «*» *

“Oh, shit! Hey, Tom! Are you okay?” Carolina scrambled out of her truck and had the misfortune to come face-to-chest with Mackenzie—the reason she was so damned pissed in the first place. She was going to kill him regardless of the fact that her baby liked him. Mackenzie was going down and that was that. The fine motherfucker had taken her GPS and downloaded the voice of Mr. T from the manufacturer's website *and* deleted her default voices. She'd had to drive all over the fucking city (and she used that term lightly being that the nearest thing resembling a city didn't even have a stoplight) listening to the voice of Mr. T giving her directions. She was so going to unleash the wrath on Mackenzie. Samson would simply have to find another, whatever the fuck it was that Mackenzie was. After quickly ascertaining that Tom was indeed okay, she quickly forgot about the nice man, which was easy considering how much man was currently in front of her, all fucking six and half feet of needs-a-foot-in-his-ass man.

Getting a fresh rush of pissed off, she pushed Mackenzie, as she let loose a string of cuss words that would make the south proud. Because he wasn't expecting that, he stumbled back a little, but Carolina wasn't finished with him by a long shot. Oh no, she had just gotten started. She followed her push with a fresh round of cussing right before launching her entire body at Mackenzie—all 5'11, 190 lbs of herself.

«»*

Mackenzie easily caught her in his strong arms, but could do nothing to prevent their subsequent fall to the ground. He grunted as Carolina began to pummel him with her strong fists. The woman may be soft and voluptuous, but damn, she was strong.

Because he was laughing so hard, it took him a moment to remember why he had the woman of his dreams straddling him. A particular stinging punch to his gullet reminded him. Gently rolling her beneath him and fitting his big, hard body between her soft thighs, he bit back a moan. Finally, Carolina's words began to penetrate his foggy brain. It took a minute because his brain was busy trying hard to convince him that Carolina wouldn't mind if he ripped open that ridiculous plaid shirt and jammed his face into her ample, ample cleavage.

“You’re not even listening, Mackenzie! Argh! I had to drive around all fucking morning listening to Mr. T! All morning Mackenzie! And now I’ve probably hurt poor Tom and it’s all *your* fault!” Carolina yelled at him as he hovered over her bracing his big body on his heavily muscled forearms.

Not appreciating hearing another man’s name on her lips when it was his dick that was jammed against her pussy, he growled a response loud enough for Tom and any other male within the vicinity to hear and heed if they wanted to remain unmaimed. “There is no other man but me, Carolina!”

“What? See, again. You. Are. Not. Listening!”

“I am listening, Carolina,” Mackenzie answered with a small smile lingering over his sensual mouth. “I simply don’t care to hear what you’re saying at the moment,” he said knowing full well that he was adding fuel to the fire...and totally not giving a damn.

Carolina punched him again in the arm but this only made him smile wider. He liked her hands on his person. And he really liked her underneath him—where she should always be, except the few times when she was straddling him. He knew that she didn’t yet know how to ride a horse, and had no intentions of remedying that, but he wondered if he could convince her to learn to ride him. With a gentle nudge of his hips, he made Carolina aware of the position she was now in.

«»*

Feeling Mackenzie's big body between her thighs, Carolina gasped. Mackenzie's lower body was pushing down on her pelvis, making it hard for her to remember why she was actually in *that* position. It had something to do with Mr. T. Who the hell was...oh goodness! Carolina felt the hard pulsing of Mackenzie's dick against her pussy. She felt him ever-so-gently grind against her and involuntarily her head dropped back exposing her throat, and directing attention to her heaving double E's beneath her shirt. Closing her eyes, her lips parted and she emitted a sultry moan that made Mackenzie's dick push harder against her.

«»*

Mackenzie heard that sultry moan and almost came on the spot. Calling upon every ounce of his will, he backed off. If he remained in this position, he'd do more than nuzzle her bountiful breasts, he'd have them both undressed and his dick balls deep into this lush woman who was still cussing him out. In that moment, he wondered two things: First, what was the fastest way to get this armful of lush, angry woman, who was still cussing him out for all she was

worth, into his bed; and second, he wondered if he could take her now, knowing that at no time in his thirty-seven years had his dick ever been this hard.

«»*

After having a long soak to help her recover from a morning spent listening to Mr. T. and going an entire round with Mackenzie, Carolina put on a mix CD and padded to the kitchen to put on a roast for dinner before getting to her sweet potatoes. She liked to make the mixture and refrigerate it overnight to give the flavors a chance to mingle. Her way took a bit longer but she'd never had anything but compliments about her pie. Concentrating on her task, she didn't hear Mackenzie walk in.

«»*

Walking into the kitchen, more to annoy his woman than a real need for anything, Mackenzie listened as Carolina sang the chorus of Tamia's '*Stranger in My House*.' Though he'd intended to rouse her, he found himself focusing on the lyrics more so than Carolina's sultry voice. Engrossed in her task and caught up in the song, Carolina didn't notice him until she walked into him.

“Dammit, Mackenzie. Is it asking too much for you to fucking be someplace where I am not?”

Catching her to prevent her from falling, Mackenzie took a moment to steady her before answering. “Yes, it is.”

“Of course it would be because you’re an ass,” she sneered.

«»*

Noticing that Mackenzie hadn’t replied or let her go, Carolina stopped talking and looked up at Mackenzie. Mackenzie was watching her with an intensity that was usually reserved for...someone who loved you. His gaze literally burned into her. Instead of backing away from the look, or the burning touch of his hands on her, she remained still. She was about to speak when he cut her off.

“How did he touch you?”

Not expecting *that* kind of question she went silent.

“Tell me, Carolina. *How* did he touch you?” Mackenzie repeated his question.

Shaking her head slightly, she attempted to shrug off Mackenzie and avoid the question but being the ass that he was, he refused to surrender his hold on her. Instead he pulled her closer so that her body was flush against his. Moving his hands down

her arms until he reached her hands, he linked their fingers together and pulled her hands back so that her hands rested at the small of her back still linked with his.

He repeated his question. “Carolina...*how* did he touch you?”

Looking into his eyes and seeing nothing but determination there, she finally answered instinctively knowing that he wasn’t about to abandon his question.

“With indifference,” she said and attempted once more to pull away from Mackenzie, needing to walk off. She didn’t need to walk off from Mackenzie but from the memory—the memory of having a past littered with men who didn’t touch her like a woman, but treated her like a man. Being treated the same as a man satisfied the feminist in her, but it left the woman in her wanting.

When Mackenzie didn’t let go, Carolina turned and glared at him. Of course that fine bastard only smiled in returned. That smile caused her to still for it was a smile of intent and adult content. Dammit, that motherfucker didn’t scare her...but he made her want him. Staring back defiantly, she raised her chin before backing away.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Mackenzie asked Carolina as he lowered his lips to brush gently across her forehead.

Seeing him bend forward, Carolina moved as much as she could, which wasn't much considering that Mackenzie's fingers still gripped hers at the small of her back.

"Wherever I want to, being that I'm grown and all. Move, Mackenzie."

"After I finish," he said, before lowering his head once more and kissing her forehead, her ear, her neck, and her throat before backtracking.

Oh, damn. She sighed loving the feel of this man even as she wanted to smack him for being so...fine, arrogant, white. If only he was anything but a white male, she would...oh, my goodness, she moaned lost in the pleasure he was giving her. Not once did he touch her lips but every kiss he'd given her had been erotic. Every damn thing about this man was erotic. Everything about this moment was erotic. The way he touched her, the way he smelled, the way he breathed in her scent. She reveled in the feel of his hard body pressed into her soft one. Though she wouldn't admit it aloud, she enjoyed the feel of his calloused hands holding hers hostage within them. It allowed her the freedom to, for once, only feel...and in this case enjoy.

"Mackenzie," she drawled asking for everything with that one word.

"Carolina," he breathed telling her that she was everything in his response.

“Let go,” she moaned.

“I can’t, Sweetness. If I let go, you won’t be able to leave my bed for at least a week.”

“Oh, damn,” she answered. “I mean let go of my hands.”

“If I do are you going to hurt me?” he asked as he continued leisurely raining kisses upon her.

“Do you want me to?”

“I want you—” he began, before letting go of her hands.

“I want you too, Mackenzie,” Carolina admitted as she stood on tiptoe and kneaded her hands in his silken sheaf of hair. Pressing her body tighter into his, she pressed her lips to his and waited for him to let her in. When he opened his mouth, she moaned and slipped in and tasted and smelled...the south. Mackenzie tasted like Sunday dinner and smelled like a summer thunderstorm. She yanked him closer needing this man more than she needed to breathe.

«»*

The blood screamed through Mackenzie’s veins. Hell, his blood was burning hot and it was only getting worse as Carolina’s lips plundered his. He could do no more than crush Carolina’s soft body against his. Clothes were in the way. Fucking hell! He needed. He needed to feel her skin against his.

He needed to stroke his big, calloused fingers along her sensitive, soft, mocha skin. He needed the taste of her nipples on his tongue to test if they were as sweet as her mouth. Carolina moaned into his mouth and Mackenzie felt his dick throb more insistently. Right now he was hanging on to the precipice of his sanity by his fingernails. Thought was no longer an option; all he could do was *feel*. And he reveled in the feel of his woman, his future, his reason for drawing breath for the last thirty-seven years. Grinding his hard dick as far as their clothes would allow caused Carolina to elicit another husky, orgasm-inducing moan that reverberated throughout his big body.

“*Ohhhhhhhh*,” was all that Carolina said, moaned. One word. One breathy, husky word and he was forced to use every single reserve of good sense and wisdom that he possessed to refrain from doing what his body begged him to do. Damn, he wanted to yank her panties down and sink his aching manhood into her hot, wet pussy. The scent of her arousal was beating at him. He could almost taste her *sweetness*; it was tempting him, and slowly, but methodically eradicating every sensible cell in his brain. He was commending himself for his ability to hold on to that last brain cell when Carolina did it. She took their kiss over the line.

“*Mackenzie*,” she whimpered into his mouth as she feasted on him.

That was all it took. His woman moaning out his name as if it was the only word she knew...the only word that she needed to know. She moaned his name as if it was her lifeline, as if it was a prayer. Mackenzie growled low in his throat as he lifted Carolina against him and pressed his dick against her pussy. *Fucking clothes!* He thought right before taking over their x-rated kiss.

It wasn't a skillful kiss. It wasn't a romantic kiss. Truth be known, it wasn't a kiss that small children and cute, furry animals should see because then they would know what *Hunger* truly looked like.

Their teeth ground against each other. Tongues battled each other. Mouths received and gave off fiery heat. The world around them faded to black and white before exploding into a kaleidoscope of colors so brilliant that it temporarily blinded them. Mackenzie was grateful that no one walked into the house and shattered the sacredness of this moment. Collapsing from exhaustion, the last coherent thing Mackenzie did was to insure that he protected Carolina's softness as they sank to the floor.

Their breathing sounded like a platoon of asthmatics. Their heartbeats sounded like a herd of thundering horses rounding the last bend at Chur-

chill Downs. Their bodies hummed at a resonance that could likely shatter diamonds. They lay there on the kitchen floor unable to focus, unable to speak, unable to do anything except think of the kiss that had shattered them both...and know that they'd never recover...and not sure that they wanted to.

Chapter 4

*MF Please...Please, Please, Oh,
Goodness Yes, Please, Please, Please*

Carolina couldn't believe that now that she had her pie out of the oven and sufficiently cooled that neither her baby nor Samson were here to taste it. Not even that fine, but annoying, Mackenzie was anywhere around to play guinea pig. She was sure that her sweet potato pies were all that, but she needed to see at least one person virtually orgasm from a taste before she felt good about serving it. She had fifteen piecrusts filled with her 'oh, damn, that's good sweet potato pie filling' just waiting to be baked. Dammit, her ego demanded that someone taste this pie besides her because she was biased. She knew that she was the shit in the kitchen...and in the bedroom...and in the classroom...pretty much everywhere.

Smiling, she cut a piece of pie, grabbed a handful of forks and ambled her fine self out to the work-site knowing that there would be at least a couple of men out there with taste buds that needed to experience this kind of good. Spotting Tom, she called his name and hurried over.

“Tom, come here and bring some of those guys with you,” she demanded.

“What can I do for you, Ms. Carolina?” he asked as he ambled up.

“Taste this,” she said as she stuck a forkful of pie into his mouth.

“Oh, *damnnnnnnnnnn*,” he moaned. “Oh, damn.”

“Is it good?”

“Is the sky blue? Hell yeah, that’s good. It’s better than good.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Okay, come here,” she instructed the other guys.

Handing them plastic forkfuls of pie, she awaited their reactions, smiling when they had similar reactions.

“Ms. Carolina, I’ve never had pumpkin pie this good before,” Derek said.

“Derek, I should wash your mouth out with soap. That’s bordering on blasphemy, mistaking sweet potato pie for pumpkin. I should take you behind the proverbial woodshed for that nonsense.”

“Ma’am, I didn’t know. I’ve never had sweet potato pie before,” he admitted.

“That’s a damn shame. Well, I’ll be sure to make more pie and when I do you will eat it all and

make appreciative noises while you eat it. Understand?”

“Yes, ma’am,” they all said.

Having one mouthful of pie left she turned to Tom, who she’d taken a liking to, and fed the last bit to him. “Open,” she demanded and shoved the bite in his mouth loving the appreciative sounds he made. She was on her way back to the kitchen when she heard Mackenzie roar. *What the fuck?* she wondered, just as Mackenzie came stomping into the area.

«»*

Mackenzie was minding his own business. Having a few minutes before he needed to speak to the crew, all he intended to do was to find Carolina so that he could needle her. Yeah, that was his intention but then he heard his men...groaning. What the hell? Hurrying around the corner he came to a sudden stop as his eyes tried to make sense of the scene before him. His Carolina was feeding his foreman. Shoving the last bite in Tom’s mouth she stamped her foot demanding their opinion because apparently the crew’s orgasmic moans weren’t enough clues that they fucking loved whatever she’d just fed them. His crew had the fucking nerve to be looking at *his* woman like they were considering making off

with her. Oh fuck that. Apparently, he was going to have to kill them all. He could find a new crew.

“Don’t you have work to do?” Mackenzie snarled in Tom’s direction though he didn’t take his eyes off of Carolina who was pursing her full, luscious lips. He couldn’t believe that his woman had the nerve to smirk at him, considering that he was going to have to kill on her behalf.

“You said to let her do anything that she wanted so long as it wasn’t dangerous. I didn’t think eating pie was dangerous,” Tom explained quickly.

“Being fed by my woman—” Mackenzie’s sentence was cut off by Tom *and* an affronted Carolina,

“Mack—” Tom began.

“Oh, no you didn’t!” Carolina snarled in outrage.

Mackenzie continued as if neither had spoken. Their explanations didn’t matter. What mattered was that these men understand that Carolina was *his* woman and that there would be no liberties with her if they wanted to continue to live. He thought he’d made that clear but obviously his crew needed a refresher course.

Mackenzie continued his warning. “—is dangerous Tom—real dangerous. In fact, it’s tantamount to death.”

Turning, he addressed the rest of his crew. *How dare they come near his woman?* And even

more egregious, how dare they not only be fed by his woman, but they enjoy it so damn much? He knew that they enjoyed that pie immensely from their choruses of groans and the looks on their faces. They wore looks of post-Thanksgiving dinner bliss. All they needed was more of whatever Carolina fed them, a cigarette and then a nap to make it complete. He liked these men. He really did. It was too bad that they were going to have to die so violently, so unexpectedly, so soon.

“Do I make myself clear?” he asked as he glared at his crewmen.

Derek and Tom immediately answered in the affirmative and the remaining crewmen all nodded before turning and walking away—fast, as if their very lives depended on their hasty escape...and ironically, their about-to-be-worthless lives *did* depend on such a thing.

«»*

Carolina could not believe the fucking unmitigated gall of this fine motherfucker. Noting his about-to-go-on-a-killing-spree expression, she ignored it because she had a repertoire of her own.

“Carolina,” Mackenzie spoke her name. Actually, he purred her name but she knew it for what it was—a warning. She turned to face the fine ass man

who did nothing but crowd her constantly and to her utmost annoyance, make her want his attention and his big hands on her person. How rude!

“What can I do for you, Mackenzie?” she asked.

Carolina regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth. Forgetting how stellar Mackenzie’s mind was and how fast it worked, she knew she was in trouble as soon as she saw that sexy grin of his make an appearance. *Oh, shit!*

“Well, *Sweetness*,” he literally purred as he stepped closer, which was unnecessary being that he was already too damn close. Obviously, he had no respect for personal space. “I would like a taste of that pie that you’re so willing to share with my crew.”

The way he spoke that sentence was almost like he was implying that something sexual had occurred when she’d fed the men a taste of her sweet potato pie. She took great offence to that as she was always careful about things of that nature considering the many negative portrayals of black women with which both history and the media inundated the populace.

“Oh, hell no—” Carolina stepped forward ready to blast Mackenzie with her words as well as hit him with the dish that she held in her hand. He must have sensed her intentions because he easily caught her arm. It wasn’t bad enough that he’d prevented her from braining him, but then he had to go and

kiss a trail from her wrist to the inside of her elbow before gently lowering her arm back to her side.

Carolina was so enraged (and wet) that she didn't notice the fact that Mackenzie was guiding her away from his crewman until he backed her against his truck. They were still in full view of the construction crew who could see what transpired between them even though they couldn't hear their conversation.

"You have some kind of fucking nerve, Mackenzie Roberts! Insinuating that I was somehow *enticing* your damned crew with my pie..." Carolina faltered as she noticed Mackenzie leaning closer.

"Stop it. I am not your fucking whore! You can't simply paw me whenever you get the notion."

"No one here thinks that you're my whore, Sweetness. They all know that you're my woman."

"You know what, contrary to what these women around here have led you to believe, the world does not revolve around your whims and wishes. Deal with it."

"I don't care about other women. I care about *you* because *my* world revolves around you."

Oh, damn. Carolina was sure that her panties were now pretty much useless. "What is wrong with you, Mackenzie?"

"What is wrong with me is that I come around the corner to see other men in the throes of orgasm

because they've not only sampled *my* woman's cooking, but had it fed to them by *my* woman."

"Mackenzie, if you want pie I have plenty more in the kitchen and..." she stopped when he grabbed her up in his massive arms and headed to said kitchen.

Carolina found herself deposited in the kitchen and pushed up against the kitchen island with the quickness. *What the hell? Shit, where did the plate go?* she wondered, and then she forgot how to think for a few seconds because Mackenzie placed his big hands on her hips and stepped between her legs. Her eyes flew up and locked onto the green orbs that were radiating with heat as they stared into her eyes. Damn, she wanted to throw him down and have her way with him. *Where the fuck did that come from? she wondered. She had to force herself to think of reasons why fucking Mackenzie into a coma was a bad idea but truth be known, she was having a hard time coming up with anything. He was everything she wanted in a man. But he's white!—her dashiki-clad self reminded her, although weakly. It seemed that even the dashiki-clad, afro pick with the fist at the top-sporting, 'We Shall Overcome'-singing part of her wanted Mackenzie Roberts too.* Her inner conversation was interrupted by Mackenzie's rumbling voice.

"Feed me, Woman" he whispered hoarsely.

Carolina refused to be a victim to the lust that swirled between herself and Mackenzie. She was a grown woman for goodness sake! She wasn't some innocent girl who had no idea what to do when a man paid attention to her—not that one could categorize what Mackenzie did as merely *paying attention* to her. It was more like tempting her with delicious intent. He made promises with his big, hard body that her rational mind said she'd be ten times the fool to ever take him up on, while her pussy said ride that fine motherfucker like the freedom train. That was, with a sense of wonder and awe and like your life depended on it. Damn it. Her panties were so wet, she bet they were molded to her like a wetsuit. She and her pussy were so going to have to have a talk.

“No,” Carolina said with a superior smirk that was meant to put him off.

“Just one taste, Sweetness,” he enticed her.

Carolina was unsure as to how her body was going to react to hearing Mackenzie express his *appreciation* for her pie but nevertheless the Southern blood in her veins prompted her to feed the big man at least one bite. *One bite wouldn't hurt, right?* With a put-upon sigh, she went to the sink and washed her hands, wondering where the fuck she'd lost the plate as she cut a quarter of the pie and presented it to Mackenzie who shook his head.

“Look, motherfucker,” she began, but he interrupted.

“Feed it to me, just like you did the men.”

“What are you like five years old?” she asked as she scooped up a forkful to feed it to him.

She watched as he again shook his head.

“From your fingers,” he said huskily.

“I didn’t feed it to the crew like that,” she protested.

“And that’s the only reason that they’re still alive. Now feed it to me from your fingers, Sweetness. Make love to my mouth with those beautiful fingers of yours and that sweet potato pie.”

Oh, damn. Her panties were going to have to be chiselled off of her body. Rolling her eyes, Carolina scooped some pie onto her fingers and held it up to Mackenzie’s pussy-eating lips. As soon as the tips of her fingers felt the moist heat from his sensual mouth she was lost. Caught up in a haze of lust, she didn’t realize that Mackenzie had her shirt unbuttoned until she felt him decorating the top of her cleavage with the warm pie. Before she could protest, he had her bent over the kitchen island so that he could eat the pie from the tops of her breasts.

Mackenzie didn't know what had possessed him to eat that pie off of Carolina's cleavage. Oh, yes he did. It was that fucking pie's fault. He had a voracious sweet tooth. Damn near any dish that had copious amounts of sugar as an ingredient was his favorite...or it had been until the moment that he tasted that pie and the flavor of brown sugar, cinnamon, and vanilla exploded on his tongue.

Enjoying the thrill of his tongue being anywhere on Carolina's person, he gently bit down on her finger and slowly licked the pie from it before releasing the digit. Already hard from being so close to Carolina, eating from her finger only served to make his dick harder. He was about to adjust himself when his mind finally registered the taste of the pie. The pie was so good that the rest of his body got jealous of his taste buds. Every moment it sat in his mouth was pleasure atop of pleasure until his mouth exploded in an orgasm.

Not one to cuss, he couldn't stop the invective that fell from his mouth—his very satisfied mouth. “Fuck,” he'd drawled as his dick went hard and his mind begged for, no demanded, more of that pie. If that pie caused him to damn near orgasm from a taste from her finger, he concluded that it would taste even better from her cleavage. One moment, he was unbuttoning her shirt and the next he was on sensory overload. His skin revelled in the silken feel

of hers; his nostrils were assailed with the erotic scent of her want and sweet potato pie; his taste buds were rocking out and being treated to the combined taste of Carolina and pie; and his dick was rammed up against her mound as he'd picked her up to fit them together. He. Had. To. Stop. Now.

When he finished licking the dessert off of her breasts, he was breathing hard and on the verge of coming in his jeans. He backed off, knowing that if he didn't leave now, that he'd have Carolina right there on the kitchen island. Though he had heated fantasies involving Carolina and that kitchen island, he wouldn't disrespect Samson and Mariana's home like that. Neither would he dishonor Carolina and the way he was feeling he knew that he was too damn needy to be gentle with her.

He backed off and damn near ran from the kitchen. He had the front door open but before he walked out, he shouted a warning at Carolina. "No one gets any of that pie and lives."

Chapter 5

You Better Recognize

Carolina wanted Mackenzie. She didn't just want him, she *wanted* him. And that disturbed her on so many levels. Never before had she been unable to control her desire. She wasn't the stereotype that history tried to make black women out to be. She wasn't possessed with uncontrollable lust...and even if she was, that lust would be directed to a brother. It should not be directed at that fine ass Mackenzie Roberts...but it was. Shit. She had to create some distance between them.

She had to sit down as the admission had sapped the strength from her. It was a humbling moment to realize the full extent of the ramifications of the realities that followed 'despite,' and there was a laundry list of despites. Despite her best intentions; despite her participation in the struggle for the full inclusion of black people; despite having a wall decorated with degrees verifying her intelligence, her will, and her stick-to-it-tiveness; despite being a metaphorical bra-burning, feminist, (metaphorical because no way were her double E's going to be loosed on the world); despite knowing the astronomical failure rates for interracial relationships (hell, any

relationship for that matter); despite knowing that she should know better; despite it all...she still wanted Mackenzie Roberts. Despite everything she thought about the reality of her upper-class privilege, educational access, academic achievement, and financial soundness, she was still a slave to her own humanity. She wasn't exempt from desire...even when that desire came in a package that wasn't the one she dreamed of, even when that desire wasn't the best thing for her. Damn. She was going to have to distance herself from Mackenzie Roberts before she willingly became his whore and a traitor not only to herself but to every cause she believed in and had fought for.

Gathering herself, she headed for the kitchen.

Carolina was minding her own business. Really, she was. She'd baked all of her sweet potato pies and had them cooling on the kitchen island. Already having checked on her baby, she'd decided to go to the gourmet grocery store in Boulder to pick up mass quantities of chocolate—the good shit, minimum seventy percent pure, not that watered-down abomination that manufacturers attempted to pass off as chocolate—to make her baby her specialty, chocolate cake with homemade chocolate ice cream. That's all she'd been trying to do. She'd almost made it to the front door when her baby accosted her and asked her where she was going. After

telling her what did her baby do? She turned on those eyes and sighed.

"I'd feel better if you took Mackenzie with you, Auntie."

Dammit. And she'd feel better if she brained that fine motherfucker with the cast iron skillet that was sitting on the stove.

"I'm sure Mackenzie's busy," she said.

"No, he's not. And even if he is, Tom can handle things for a while. Please, Auntie. Plus, I want pizza and Mackenzie knows what kind I like, but it's okay if you're too busy. It's just that my baby wants pizza and," she started.

Carolina interrupted. "You so cannot use the baby against me. Stop using those eyes on me. I'm so talking to your mother about her spoiling you. Fine, okay, I'll ask Mackenzie if he wants to go. And by the way, you're on restriction," she huffed on her way to find the fine bastard.

«»*

Mackenzie was hugging Mariana as soon as he got back. She'd rung his cellular phone and informed him that the beautiful Carolina was on her way. Of course, he'd act like he didn't know that she was coming, and of course he was going to go with her. How could he not after all of the trouble Mariana

had gone through to throw them together? He chuckled recalling Mariana's put out tone at being put on restriction just because she'd used *the eyes* on her second mother. Mariana was due a present and he'd be sure to pick her up a little something in Boulder.

His thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of his feisty woman coming around the corner. It took all of his control not to smile upon seeing her disgruntled expression, which didn't detract from her beauty in the least. He knew that Carolina had no idea how he saw her for if she had an inkling she wouldn't even consider being in the same state as him, much less sitting in an enclosed cab with him. Mackenzie looked up when he heard her call his name.

"Good morning, Sweetness. Looking for a real man?" he teased, anticipating her answer.

"Yes, and I think I see two. Hi, Tom and Derek," she called out enthusiastically.

Growling, he stalked his woman. Gently grabbing her hips, he leaned down and whispered in her ear. "Ah, Sweetness. You're playing a dangerous game. I've already had to have a chat with those boys," he began.

"I don't see any boys in this crew," Carolina interrupted. "All I see is some fine men who would look good..."

“Laid up in the emergency room, is what I’m thinking,” Mackenzie growled.

“You are so nuts,” Carolina said.

“Yes, I am when it comes to you. As I was saying, I’ve already had a talk with my work crew about proper conduct around my woman.”

“Really, and what did your woman say about that?” she asked with a quirk of her beautifully arched brow.

Chuckling, he leaned in and breathed in her scent before answering. “Oh, she’s feisty. She cussed me out something awful, but it didn’t matter. All I saw was her beautiful mouth moving and I imagined making love to that mouth...right before making love to her.”

“Mackenzie,” she moaned.

Grunting with satisfaction, he licked a trail from her shoulder to her ear before dropping a light kiss on her tempting mouth.

“Yes, Sweetness?” he asked.

“Ah, Mackenzie,” she moaned.

Without thinking, he caught his name in his mouth and threw hers back. “Sweetness,” he answered before leaning in to give her a proper kiss.

“Mack-enz-ie,” she drawled once more.

Drawing her close to him, he reluctantly released her luscious mouth and stepped away from temptation. He needed to back off though backing

off was the last thing that he wanted to do. “What do you need, Sweetness, besides me as your man?”

“You are such a,” she began before he interrupted her.

“Prime example of man? Billboard for women’s fantasies? Lucky bastard to have you as my woman?”

“You wish,” Carolina huffed.

“With every breath, Sweetness. Now what can I do for you?”

“Who says you can do anything for me?”

“I promise you that there is much that I could do for you, but here is not the place to demonstrate that,” he rumbled as he reached out and pulled her against him so that she could feel his erection.

«»*

Carolina had only come out to ask that fine motherfucker if he wanted to drive to Boulder with her. That’s it. And what did Mackenzie do? First, he had the nerve to be looking all kinds of mouth-watering fine. *Bastard*. Then, he had the gall to talk about making love to her mouth right before making love to her. That’s the point when she was grateful for her panties because she could feel herself creaming. But even that wasn’t enough for him. Oh, no. Mackenzie had put those soft, full lips on the area where her neck met her shoulder and kissed his way

up to her mouth before kissing her like she belonged to him. Damn, in that moment—and in all of the moments that she was alone in her bed, and all of the moments that she allowed herself the pleasure of thinking about it—she did belong to him. And if Mackenzie hadn't backed off, she would've belonged to him...right there in front of his entire work crew who were doing their damndest to pretend that they were working. Poor Tom and Derek wouldn't even make eye contact with her when Mackenzie was anywhere on the property. Tom was a married man with grown kids and Derek was a baby. She wouldn't even think of going after either of them...or any other man when Mackenzie was available her heart threw in.

She attempted to ignore her heart but then Mackenzie had proclaimed that with every breath he wished that she was his woman. And before she could react to that heart-stopping statement, Mackenzie pulled her to him pressing his erection into her. Oh, damn, she should've backed off, but her body had a mind of its own and before her mind could intervene, she'd grabbed a hold of his silky hair and yanked his mouth down to hers. Raking his scalp with her nails, she rubbed her breasts against his hard chest. Purring into his mouth, everything but this fine man in her arms faded from thought. In this moment, her world consisted of Mackenzie and

herself. There's no telling how far they would've gone if Samson hadn't rocked up clearing his throat.

«»*

When Samson discovered that Carolina and Mackenzie were making a trip into Boulder, he decided to add to the list that he was sure his *Somente Mina* had given them. Though Boulder wasn't a lengthy trip, he found that he was loath to leave his *Somente Mina* for any length of time. That was the reason that he'd submitted his retirement papers. He couldn't imagine being away from his woman for any length of time. Heading off to find Mackenzie, he was startled to see them locked in a passionate embrace and even more surprised to witness Carolina being the aggressor in their kiss. Smiling, he would have to relate this interesting turn of events to his *Nizhoni*, who was enjoying her role as matchmaker.

He stood there for a good five minutes before he decided that it would be best if he interrupt. Though he was happy for his friend, he was sure that neither Mackenzie nor Carolina realized where they were in that moment or how close they were to being out of control. Stepping closer, but remaining out of Mackenzie's immediate reach, he cleared his throat...several times before either of them registered his presence. Calling upon his inner strength,

he managed not to fall out laughing at the dangerous look on Mackenzie's visage and the even more dangerous look on Carolina's.

He addressed his question to Mackenzie being that he'd pushed Carolina behind him when he finally realized that they weren't alone.

"I apologize for interrupting, but would you mind making an additional stop if you drive to Boulder?"

"He's not going, Samson, but I'll be more than happy to pick up whatever you need," Carolina answered from behind Mackenzie's back.

"Yes, Samson, he *is* going," Mackenzie challenged.

"I didn't ask you to go."

"You weren't in any condition to ask me anything a few moments ago, Sweetness."

"Like you were in any condition to have actually answered if I had bothered to ask you any damn thing...which for the record I didn't."

"Are you going to Boulder, Sweetness?"

"Yes, I am."

"Then I'm going too," Mackenzie said.

«»*

"Are you going to pout the entire trip?" Mackenzie asked.

“Are you going to be an ass the entire time?” Carolina returned.

“No, but my ass will turn you on the entire time,” he promised.

“I did not need you to come. All you needed to do was to tell me where the place is and I could’ve handled it from there. But for some reason you think that I am incapable of driving all by myself. I’m a grown damn woman, Mackenzie!”

“I know and I appreciate that, Sweetness. And did it ever occur to you that I want to spend time with you?”

“No. Do you?”

Taking her hand he placed it over his erection. “What do you think, Sweetness?”

“That you’re horny,” Carolina huffed.

Laughing, he chuckled. “Boys are horny. I’m a man and what I’m feeling cannot be described with a single word. I’m many things, including patient.” *And beyond that, I’m yours, Sweetness he said in his head.*

Carolina didn’t answer, but he didn’t need her to. The smile on her lips was enough for him. Letting her enjoy her thoughts, which he hoped involved fantasies of him, he continued to drive, enjoying her presence.

It wasn't often that Carolina was struck speechless, but Mackenzie had succeeded. The man might be an ass, but he was sensitive to her need for silence to consider all that had transpired between them. She appreciated that.

Carolina didn't speak until they drove into the city of Boulder...and fell in love. Until then, all she'd seen of Boulder was the stadium where the football team played and the gymnasium where the basketball team played. Ah, but Boulder was indeed a beautiful city. With a population hovering just above one hundred thousand, Boulder had that same eclectic mix of urban hip, old money, artsy chic, and adventure for which Chapel Hill was renowned. If that wasn't enough, it also boasted over two hundred miles of trails, rock-climbing, kayaking, and fly-fishing for those who wanted to get their outdoor adventure on. She enjoyed the vibe of college towns and she had a feeling that before all was said and done, Boulder would be right up under Chapel Hill on her list of favorite college towns.

She wanted nothing more than to further explore the city. Though it was the first week of August, the weather was perfect with a temperature hovering around eighty degrees with less than sixty percent humidity. Taking a stroll on the main beat sounded like fun. Though she didn't want to shop, window-

shopping was something that she loved to do. And she couldn't imagine it getting any better than window-shopping in Boulder. She did it to find which stores called to her. Turning to Mackenzie, she asked, "Do we have time to check out the city?"

"All the time that you need, Sweetness. I know the perfect place," he drawled as he helped her into the truck.

"Where?" She asked.

"The Pearl Street Mall. It has everything you'd ever want to see."

Feeling her inner nerd emerging, she offered him an out. "You know if you want to you can go do your thing and we can meet up somewhere."

"Sweetness, I'm coming with you," he said as he took her hand and led her down the main street, stopping only to grab something to drink. While she indulged in a peach smoothie, he settled for an ice water. She noted that though he loved foods loaded with sugar, it was not so with beverages.

She lost track of time as they leisurely strolled the upscale downtown area. After her second smoothie, she figured they'd better get to shopping. Though a perfect companion, she knew that Mackenzie had a full schedule and he still needed to stop for pizza and pick up Samson's order. On the way back to the truck she spotted the most kick-ass pair of boots she'd ever seen in a boutique window.

She didn't know who Duro Amorvestio was...but she knew she was going to be wearing his boots. The black, knee-length boots boasted 3-inch heels, an alligator lower and an alligator back with a suede upper front. The suede front was crossed by alligator laces that were secured by five buckles that spanned from the ankle to the top of the boot. Those boots should've come with condoms and a warning: *caution, these boots are so fucking hot that they may cause clothes to be ripped to shreds and unplanned procreation*. Those boots weren't just 'fuck-me' boots; they were 'fuck-me-right-now-and-let's-start-our-own-family-dynasty' boots. She was going to get those boots because she knew without a doubt that they'd look good with any outfit she had...and they'd especially look good resting on the shoulders of one Mr. Mackenzie Roberts. *Oh, damn, where the fuck did that come from?* She was so not going to be doing anything with that fine ass bastard...but she was still getting those boots...just in case. Making a mental note of the store name, she told Mackenzie to move his ass. She had chocolate to buy now. Later, she would fantasize about those Duro Amorvestio boots.

Mackenzie had stuff to do but that's why he had a foreman. Tom was quite capable of running the business in his stead. He had a good work ethic and even better sense when it came to people. That man was due a raise and a promotion because he knew that he was going to be noticeably absent as he planned on spending the majority of his time with his woman...even though at this point he was sure that Carolina would rather he be anyplace else.

Taking Carolina into Boulder was a treat for him. It allowed him to be near the feisty woman who had turned him on with damn near everything that she did. True, she'd spent the majority of the trip into Boulder pouting, but if she'd only known how enticing her pout was she'd have pulled in her succulent bottom lip and thrown on something that hid her beauty—something like a snowsuit.

He watched her eyes light up as they entered Boulder. Trying to come up with a reason to delay their foray, he was pleasantly surprised when she asked if they could look around. Hell yeah, they could look around...all day if she wished. It was cute the way she tried to go off on her own like he was going to risk some other male pushing up on his woman. Quickly squashing that bit of nonsense he'd driven downtown knowing that the Pearl Street Mall area was a favorite place amongst both locals and tourists. It offered something for everyone.

They'd spent an amicable few hours simply strolling along. She'd seemed content to simply window shop and he was content to simply be in her presence. He was surprised that she'd let him buy her a smoothie and he was even more surprised when she'd allowed him to take her hand. Heading back to the truck, he was jerked out of his fantasies when she gasped and damn near yanked his arm from the socket. Regretfully taking his eyes off of her he turned to see what had caught her attention. And then he saw those boots. He wasn't much on women's fashion but he knew what kind of boots those were. They were 'fuck-me' boots on everyone else; on Carolina they were 'make-love-to-me-Mackenzie' boots. He had to move her in front of him because his dick had gone from semi-hard to rock hard the moment that he saw those boots. He was coming back to buy those boots...and if they didn't have them in her size, he'd pay Duro Amorvestio to make them in her size regardless of the cost. Feeling Carolina tug on his hand, he looked into her eyes before heading to the truck. He'd let her do her shopping, but he wasn't about to let her run from him.

When she had more time she planned to come back and enjoy the many offerings of the city. But right now she had to shop. She had desserts to bake for her baby, and for some reason her inner voice kept telling her that she needed chocolate...and lots of it. Well, her inner voice hadn't led her astray so far, so she wasn't going to stop listening to it now.

Shopping was completed in less than thirty minutes because she was a pro and knew exactly what she wanted...and what she didn't want. Mackenzie offered to help but she'd merely patted his hand and declined his offer. She appreciated his offer but there was no way in hell that she was taking him up on his offer after discovering that the man actually saw nothing wrong with consuming canned biscuits.

Despite Mackenzie being Mackenzie, she had to admit that she enjoyed his company. She watched him while he, in turn, acted just like Samson and did recon. It was a welcome change being with someone who looked out for her instead of it being the way it usually was with her playing sentinel. While Mackenzie did recon, she got a chance to watch him.

Mackenzie garnered a lot of attention but he took it in stride. Polite to his elders and watchful of children, she also noted that he was respectful to women regardless of whether or not they were respectful to themselves. She watched as he treated

women dressed in next-to-nothing who shamelessly threw themselves at him with the same amount of respect and reverence that he treated an aged woman who was obviously of means—and lots of them. Mackenzie was...decent and she was surprised to discover that. Not because he'd acted inappropriately, but more so because she was jaded.

Mackenzie's voice jarred her from her thoughts.

"Do you need to go anywhere else, Sweetness?"

"Nope, I'm good. Just swing by and pick up whatever it is that Samson needs and the pizzas and we can head back."

* «*» *

Forty-five minutes later, they'd collected Samson's stuff and were in the pizza place well on their way to an argument.

"Oh. My. Goodness," Carolina exclaimed when she listened as the cashier read off their order.

Though he wondered what had her riled up, he definitely enjoyed watching her. "What is it, Sweetness?"

"What do you mean, *'what is it?'* You actually requested broccoli and spinach on your pizza?"

"Yes, and the problem would be?" he asked.

“Are you kidding me? You just ordered pizza with salad as a topping. I am so ashamed to be seen with you,” Carolina scoffed.

“I’m a prime specimen of raw masculinity,” Mackenzie returned.

“Yeah, I’ll give you that, but your choice of pizza toppings is one of the gayest things that I’ve ever seen and I say that having a deep appreciation for gay erotica and a kick-ass collection of male-on-male porn.”

“Okay, a-I so don’t even want to think about your choice in porn, and b-just because I don’t order pizza topped with every meat known to man doesn’t make me gay.”

“I didn’t say that you had to have fifteen meats on your pizza, but is it too much to ask to have at least one red meat on it?”

“Oh, yeah, let’s get a pizza with Southern-style toppings.” Turning to the cashier, he asked, “Do you have deer meat, squirrel or rabbit available as a topping?”

“Southerners do not eat deer, squirrel or rabbit on pizza, you idiot,” Carolina huffed. “You eat those meats with gravy or in stew.”

“The fact that you have recipes for all-of-the-above says it all,” Mackenzie threw out.

“Yes, it says that I can cook,” Carolina threw back.

“It also says that you’re one activity away from being fodder for a country and western song.”

“Look, just because I eat deer and such does not mean that I’m about to marry my first cousin and take up playing the washtub, so you can just shut up.”

“Still you eat meats that you won’t find on the menus of most restaurants,” he spat.

“From the lips of a man who probably eats pussy,” she returned.

At the mention of pussy, Mackenzie’s dick went instantly hard. Pulling her close to him, he said, “Damn right I eat pussy. In fact, I don’t simply eat it, I ravish it. As you Southerners like to say, pussy is good-eatin,’ Sweetness.”

“Dick’s better,” she countered.

“Do you taste dick?” he whispered in her ear as he pulled her tighter to him, not caring that everyone in the place knew that he had a thing for this fine, thick, sassy, and brilliant woman.

“If the man says *please*.”

“Does your intellect ever go on hiatus?”

“No, but since I know how it intimidates you and all, I keep it under wraps as much as I can...you know so I don’t interfere with the pretty girls vying for your attention.”

Fuck, Mackenzie thought. He should’ve never said that line about men preferring beauty over

brains and he never should've started this, especially not here where he couldn't do anything about it. Damn, he wanted her with a fierceness.

«»*

Carolina was mad, but she wasn't so mad that she didn't notice the woman who was caught up in watching Mackenzie. And of course, Mackenzie acted like they hadn't just argued. What did the bastard do? He simply took hold of the pizzas, and her elbow, and guided her to the truck oblivious to the slim, blond that had had him on lock for the last ten minutes.

"Get in the truck, Sweetness," he said as he held open the door.

"Can't. You have an admirer, and I need to make sure that she's not stalker material," she said as she attempted to stand in front of him, blocking his chest region with her own body—not because she liked him but because Mariana would be upset if something happened to him. And if anyone was going to blast him in the chest with a sniper rifle it was going to be her.

"You can and you will, Sweetness or," he began.

"Or what?"

"There is no 'or,' get in the truck and stop trying to use your body to shield me. Besides, statisti-

cally speaking, highway travel poses more danger than the blond hottie who has been eyeing me for the past few minutes.”

“Oh, so you saw her?” she asked.

“Sweetness, how could I fail to see the woman who could single-handedly bring the entire cosmetics industry from the brink of bankruptcy?”

“Oh, damn. That is so wrong. That woman is smoking ass hot. If I did chicks, I’d do her...possibly right here in the parking lot.”

“And if I was twenty years younger I’d purchase some popcorn and watch that, but I’m not a teenager. I’m a grown man, Carolina.”

“Yes, you are a man and *nota bene*, evolutionary psychology asserts that people—regardless of where they are located—tend to find certain traits beautiful. And in America, beauty is generally associated with blond hair and the features that go with it. Women have been dying their hair blond since the Romans,” she said.

“Wow, you’re speaking Latin and it’s not even lunch time.”

“I’m just trying to give you some information,” she huffed.

“Well, I appreciate that and I’m sure your sources also indicate that men prefer beauty over brains,” he teased. “Now move your tempting ass and get into the truck before I have to show that

blond that evolutionary psychology is right and that despite being able to do her own thing, she is right to ogle me knowing that I am an alpha male.”

“Every time I think you’re not an ass, you prove me wrong,” she spat while climbing into the cab, completely missing Mackenzie’s smile.

«»*

Mariana looked at the couple knowing that Mackenzie was about to catch an ‘l’—as in loss—and there was nothing that he could do to stop it. Poor Mackenzie didn’t even know that he’d declared war with Carolina and before all was said and done he was not only going to concede defeat but possibly some territory. Oh this was going to be fun to watch...well, at least for her. Luckily, she had pizza to eat whilst she watched the show; she only had to wait for Mackenzie to say the next stupid thing. She didn’t have long to wait.

“Enjoying the pizza despite the absence of possum topping?”

“For someone with so much to say about my cooking, you sure eat a lot of it.”

“Hunger will cause a man to eat all kinds of things.”

“Ah, I see,” Carolina returned with a look.

Mariana stilled. She knew that look. It was a look that promised things such as copious pain. When her Auntie got that look someone somewhere had a bad day.

Trying to stave off Mackenzie's inevitable defeat, Mariana intervened. "Uh, Mackenzie, you might want to take that back."

"It's okay, baby. Let Mr. Roberts speak his mind. I figure in about two more sentences it should be all used up."

"See, Mackenzie," Mariana joked. "You've made Auntie give you that look."

Turning to her Auntie, she joked. "Be gentle with him, please."

"Yes, be gentle with me, Sweetness," Mackenzie piped in.

"Oh, baby, I'm sure that Mr. Roberts appreciates your attempts to be Geneva, but there's no need to fret. I promise that I won't harm a hair on his head," Carolina smiled.

"What about the rest of his body?" a concerned Mariana asked. She wanted to set them up but she couldn't do that if Mackenzie went missing and her Auntie was the prime suspect in his disappearance.

"Oh, baby," Carolina tsk-tsked her as she reached over and kissed her cheek and rubbed circles on her back.

“Taking Mackenzie’s side is like the Treaty of Versailles—a good idea in theory, but you know how that turned out.”

“Don’t worry Mariana. I can handle your aunt. She simply needs a man who isn’t scared to tell her ‘no.’”

“Oh, you’re so cute when you’re all wrong,” Carolina sighed.

“Uh, oh,” was all that Mariana said.

«»*

Mackenzie was busy getting on Carolina’s last nerve and Carolina was busy trying not to kill him. Watching that fine bastard eat was turning her on regardless of how much she disapproved of his food choice. The motherfucker was purposely trying to entice her...and dammit it was working. And if that wasn’t enough he acted like she was his woman. He found reasons to rub that beautiful body against hers, sensitizing her skin. He spoke to her...in that octave that made her cream her panties. He devoured her with his eyes causing a ruckus in her own body. Regardless of how much she wanted to smack him she refrained from doing so, but then the motherfucker had intimated that he didn’t like her cooking. *Oh, no he didn’t.* Mackenzie Roberts could talk yang about her choice of food, he could talk yang

about her, but he'd crossed the fucking line when he intimated that the only reason that he ate her cooking was because he was hungry. She would show him.

Putting Mackenzie on ignore mode, she planned her siege in silence. She'd need to drive into town for supplies. Let's see, she'd need charcoal, copious slabs of ribs, stuff for baked beans, macaroni and cheese, and mayonnaise for coleslaw and potato salad. Oh, yeah, and she'd need good quality paper plates and plenty of tin foil because she was going to feed his work crew...and see how Mackenzie liked them apples. The fine motherfucker couldn't have thrown down the challenge at a more opportune time. She'd need a good part of the day to pull it off and it just so happened that Samson and Mackenzie were leaving in the wee hours of the morning and traveling to Denver for some business dealings and thus would be gone for the majority of the day. She knew this because Samson had asked her if she'd stay close to the house (translation: please watch over *Somente Mina*).

She would indeed keep a close eye on Mariana. Actually, it would be Mariana who kept a close eye on her because Carolina was going to show her baby how to cook up some revenge. Before the sun set tomorrow evening Mr. Mackenzie Roberts would be sorry that he'd let such stupid words escape his

mouth...and his work crew would be enslaved by her culinary genius. Yep, she couldn't wait.

«»*

Mariana sat and watched her Auntie work. She was quiet not because Carolina had demanded it but because she was sitting in complete awe of her Auntie. Mariana knew that she was in the presence of a master despite the fact that Carolina wasn't classically trained. Carolina put passion in everything that she did and that included cooking and right now her Auntie was straight throwing down.

After serving her a savory breakfast, she'd been bundled into the truck where they'd trekked to the store and made their purchases. Carolina had patrolled the floor of the gourmet store like a field general, watching the butcher cut meat to her exacting standards. And just as when she was a child, her Auntie had bought her a treat at every stop. Of course they'd only made two because Carolina wasn't into dallying...not when she had enemies to defeat and victory parties to plan.

Poor Mackenzie had no idea what he'd done but he'd soon know and if he had a brain in his head he wouldn't do it again. He was going down, and not in a good way. She knew because Carolina's last stop

was at an office store where she'd purchased an expensive fountain pen.

"What's that for?" she'd asked.

Carolina had gently patted her hand before answering. "This is the pen that Mackenzie will use to concede..."

"His defeat?" she'd supplied when Carolina had paused.

"No, darling. Though that fine bastard works my last nerve, I'd never ask him to concede defeat because he'd be doing it all of the time. No, I just need him to glorify my victory," she'd said with a smile.

Yep, poor Mackenzie was going down. She couldn't wait to see that.

«»*

Both Mariana and her baby were full. Actually, they were stuffed...and they hadn't even had lunch yet. They were stuffed because as soon as she'd risen from her nap that her Auntie had insisted that she needed, she'd been sitting at the kitchen island obeying Carolina's commands. Taste this. Drink this. Sample this. And though being Carolina's official taster was a special treat it was a job, although her Auntie had made sure that she was comfortable.

Her Auntie was serious about her cooking. The family had had to take turns being the official taster lest someone be overwhelmed. One didn't merely gobble up goodies and say 'yum,' one had to say exactly how yum it was and had to moan yum with meaning. If the yums weren't moaned in a way that pleased Carolina, that dish didn't make it to the table, much less into someone else's mouth.

By the time Carolina had finished cooking Mariana and her baby were in a food-induced drunk. Not being allowed to do aught but taste, and sit and look beautiful, she lay sprawled on the chaise lounge enjoying the conversation between her Auntie and Mackenzie's foreman, Tom.

"Tom, my baby and I did not spend the better part of a day cooking simply to have you tell me that y'all don't want any food!" Carolina argued.

"Um," Tom began.

"Don't you 'um' me, Tom. Are you trying to malign my cooking?"

"No, ma'am," a flustered Tom responded.

"Then what's the problem?"

"Last time you fed us something Mackenzie kind of, um. Well, let's just say that he didn't appreciate us being fed by his woman."

"Tom, a—I'm not Mackenzie's woman," Carolina began but stopped when the work crew began coughing, outright laughing and such.

Shooting them a look of disgust, she continued. “And b—I’m not going to feed it to you. I’m going to set it out and y’all are going to serve yourselves.”

Tom tried to interrupt, but then her Auntie used her trump card. “Tom, you might work for Mr. Roberts, but Mr. Roberts is working for Samson and Samson’s sole desire in life is to see his wife happy. And if y’all refuse to eat the food, well then, Mariana’s going to be very unhappy, and I assure you, that y’all don’t want to face an angry Samson, especially when the reason that he’s angry is because y’all have caused his wife to cry.”

At that point, her Auntie had turned to her. Mouthing ‘give him the eyes, baby,’ she turned back to Tom. “Look at my baby. Do you want her to be sad?”

That’s when Tom made the mistake of looking at her. And that’s when she’d turned on the look—complete with the eyes and the lip—and that had been the end of Tom’s refusals. The men had washed up and fixed themselves plates. She laughed at her Auntie’s sigh of disgust watching the men fix plates.

“What in the hell is that?” she’d asked while snatching the plate out of the hands of a surprised Derek and going back to the table. Using her skills as an engineer, she piled Derek’s plate high with food before handing it back to him with an admonish-

ment. “That is how you fix a plate, little boy. Understand?”

“Yes ma’am,” he’d said with big eyes.

“Good, now eat,” her Auntie had demanded while fixing a dessert plate and handing it to her.

“Auntie, I’m full,” she’d tried to protest.

“Yes, but your baby’s hungry and wants this sweet potato pie, now hush and eat,” she instructed.

Mariana took the plate and scooped a forkful of pie into her mouth...and sighed. Her baby did cartwheels in her stomach before leading her body in a cheer. All Mariana could do was let out a satisfied sigh. “Ahhhhhhhhhhh,” she breathed. Her Auntie was the motherfucking woman, she thought as she looked at the rapture on the face of the men when Carolina brought out those sweet potato pies with bowls of homemade vanilla-spiced ice cream.

And that was the scene that Samson and Mackenzie drove up to. And that’s when all hell had broken loose. And Mariana could do nothing but giggle her motherfucking ass off and go right back to sleep.

«»*

Samson laughed at Mackenzie’s impatience to return to the ranch. They’d completed their business dealings in record time and at a price that hardly left

the manufacturer any profit. When he'd pointed that out, Mackenzie pointed out that not only could he have zero profit, he could also lose him as a customer. At that point, the manufacturer—who'd been a spur in their side—became quite amenable. Of course it could be due to the look on Mackenzie's visage that promised all manner of unpleasant retribution.

Mackenzie had insisted on driving back.

"I would like to make it home in one piece," Samson had joked when he noticed the speedometer dipping into the triple digits.

He watched Mackenzie sigh as he backed off of the accelerator.

"Is there a particular reason that you're in a hurry to get back?" he asked.

"Carolina," Mackenzie answered with a sound of frustration. "Something just tells me that I need to get back to her with the quickness."

"Maybe you need to give her time to cool off. What happened in Boulder?" he asked.

"Just our usual bickering," Mackenzie sighed.

"And?" Samson prompted.

"And I may have insinuated that she was a backwoods hillbilly on the verge of marrying her first cousin," Mackenzie admitted.

Samson couldn't help it. He damn near passed out from laughter. It was a full five minutes before

he'd gathered himself enough to even attempt conversation. His *Somente Mina* was right. This matchmaking business was entertaining.

Noting the fact that Mackenzie's jaw was tight with anger, he forced himself to settle down. "You do know that goading her last evening was probably not a good idea, right?"

"Yeah, but she's so beautiful when she's angry, when she's pretending not to be angry, when she's trying not to smack me. She's just fucking beautiful, Samson."

"Maybe you need to tell her that."

"I have been telling her."

"Well, make her believe it, Mackenzie."

«»*

Mackenzie thought about Samson's words. He needed to stop baiting his Carolina and start courting her properly. Knowing that Carolina enjoyed the scenic route, he'd decided that he would take her hot-air ballooning. That would give him a chance to hold her while experiencing the beauty of Colorado. Driving up Samson's long drive, he couldn't wait to see Carolina and apologize...right before kissing her protest from her luscious lips. That was his intention until he'd driven up and the aroma of a cookout hit him full in the face.

“Goodness, I don’t know what Carolina cooked, but it smells good,” Samson said.

“And I cannot wait to taste it,” Mackenzie agreed. His thoughts were fully on Carolina until he drove up and saw his work crew having lunch with *his* woman. Oh fuck that. Jumping out of the truck, he stomped up to them, anger evident on his visage.

“What’s going on?” Mackenzie roared.

“The men are having lunch,” Carolina answered.

“I see that and why are they having lunch here?”

“Well, they could’ve gone to town for lunch but then they would’ve left Mariana and me all alone where we’d be vulnerable,” Carolina said without batting an eyelash.

“Vulnerable to what? This place is a fortress!”

“Who knows what lurks in the forest. Roving gangs of ninjas could be hiding out there just waiting for their moment to kidnap us. I know that you hate me, but don’t you want Mariana to be safe?”

«»*

Oh, Creator, Samson silently prayed. Carolina deserved some kind of award for that innocent act that she was putting on. And he deserved some kind of award for not passing out laughing. He decided

that he should intervene before Mackenzie laid waste to his work crew.

“And I thank you gentleman for watching over my woman and her aunt. Mackenzie, why don’t we let them finish enjoying their lunch?” Samson suggested.

“If they enjoyed it anymore, there’d be a porn soundtrack playing in the background,” Mackenzie mumbled.

Sighing, Samson put his hand on Mackenzie’s shoulder. The man was coiled and Samson didn’t know if he would have to stop him from killing one of those men...or all of them. “Mackenzie, come brother, you need to calm down.”

“Carolina, could we get some of that lunch? It smells delicious.”

“It is delicious, and you know that I would be more than happy to make you a plate, but I’m not making Mr. Roberts shit,” she said mutinously.

“Oh you can make every man here food, but not me?” Mackenzie yelled.

“That’s right, because these men don’t simply eat my cooking because they’re hungry like you do. They actually enjoy my cooking. Don’t you?” she asked the men.

Receiving choruses of ‘damn right,’ she continued. “See. And since you have such a problem with my Southern-ness and my culinary choices, you need

to take your vegetarian-prone ass and find a blond woman.”

“What the hell do blondes have to do with this?”

“Blondes are your paradigm for beauty. I saw you ogling that woman yesterday. As soon as you saw her all you could do was find fault with me. And you were only too happy to inform me that women like me were the reason that men preferred beauty over brains. So since we all know that I’m not beautiful, you need to go find a woman who is to make you a fucking plate,” she said as she stormed into the house.

* «*» *

Oh, fuck, Mackenzie thought. He would’ve continued his thought but Derek voiced his outrage before he got a chance.

“You said Ms. Carolina wasn’t pretty?” he asked.

“I didn’t say that, Derek.”

“Then why does she think you did. She is beautiful and smart and any guy would be lucky to have Ms. Carolina,” he stated.

“Yeah, what he said,” Mariana threw in.

“I know the woman is smart and beautiful,” he began.

Mariana interrupted him. “You know what, maybe I’ll just go find my Auntie a man who can appreciate her. Derek, are you involved with anyone?”

“Carolina already has a man and for the record I don’t care if Derek isn’t involved with anyone, if he thinks to be involved with *my* woman he will be spending an inordinate amount of time in traction,” he said whilst storming after his woman.

«»*

After searching high and low for her, he finally located her on the deck. She still looked good and pissed...and he didn’t blame her. He cleared his throat before walking out, knowing that she didn’t like people sneaking up on her.

“Carolina, I’m sorry, Sweetness,” he said as he gently pulled her against his chest.

“You should never apologize for how you feel—even if it makes you sound like a heartless ass.”

“I do like the way that you spare my feelings,” he laughed. “I’m apologizing for being inconsiderate. I was just teasing you, Sweetness. You have to know that not only do I enjoy your cooking, I enjoy your feistiness. That’s part of the reason why I get you riled up. I love seeing the passion bloom on your face. And when you’re put out with me, you at least

talk to me. In fact, I've enjoyed your dissertations. The rest of the time you ignore me and my fragile ego cannot handle that."

"Okay, you can stop."

"No, I can't. You're still mad. You called me Mr. Roberts."

"Mackenzie, I assure you that you can stop."

"Are you sure because I can eat more crow if that means that I get to hold you like this," he said before kissing her forehead, thoroughly enjoying the feel of her in his arms.

«»*

Carolina knew that it was hard for Mackenzie to apologize—and it was partly her fault. She enjoyed crushing his ego because deep down she was angry that despite being white, arrogant, white, honorable, white, fine, white, intelligent, white, gentle, white, beautiful, and white, she still wanted him. Pride was a motherfucker. Turning in his arms, she looked up at him. From the sincerity blazing in those intense, green eyes, she knew that he was truly bothered by the fact that he'd allowed his temper to get the better of his good manners.

Holding his eyes, she answered. "Apology accepted, Mackenzie. Will you also accept mine?"

“You don’t owe me an apology, Sweetness. You can get mad at me all you want...but you cannot go out with any other men.”

“No other men want me, Mackenzie. You’re right. I do display my intelligence like the rich display their wealth, but it’s the only bling that I have. I’m not beautiful or a billionaire, so I have to be smart to have a place...to justify my presence. Guys may hate me but they respect my opinion because they know that I’m not talking out of my ass. On the other hand, women don’t hate me because they like hanging with a woman who doesn’t detract from their beauty. So yeah, I wear my intelligence like rappers wear bling, like bottle blondes wear bleach, and white males wear their privilege, and sometimes I use my intellect like a weapon because it’s the only one that I have.”

“Contrary to what I said, Sweetness, you *are* beautiful. And I’m not just saying that. I’ve been saying it; you just haven’t heard me,” he said as he dragged her to him. “Feel that? That’s a reaction to you. You’re beautiful, courageous and intelligent and I wouldn’t want you any other way.”

Carolina was overwhelmed. She didn’t know what to do with Mackenzie. He wasn’t like any other privileged, white male that she knew. And she knew plenty and was friends with them but friendship was where it stopped. She never imagined that she’d be

attracted to a white man, especially one like Mackenzie who should be with some blond society type that would look good in photographs.

“Mackenzie, I’m sorry that I insinuated that you were stupid. I was angry. I know that you’ve got a hella mind on you and I know that most of the time you back down from arguing with me—not because you couldn’t win...well, you wouldn’t win...but you back down because you’re a gentleman.”

“Sweetness, it takes everything I have to remain a gentleman with you.”

“Ah, you want to fight me?”

“No, Sweetness. I want to make love to you,” he whispered as he gently gathered her in his massive arms.

Despite being irritated with Mackenzie, Carolina melted whenever the fine bastard touched her. She should protest about his handling of her person but the only thing that she could protest without committing perjury was the fact that he was still dressed. Carolina loved the feeling of being engulfed by him for it wasn’t often that she stumbled across a man who a) liked her and b) was markedly bigger than her. She enjoyed being physically smaller and weaker than Mackenzie. The fine motherfucker had lifted her without strain and was having his way with her mouth and body...and she was enjoying every damn second knowing that he would care for her.

“As much as I enjoy having you in my arms, we’re going to have to stop or else I’ll take you right here. I don’t think that Mariana would appreciate me ravishing her aunt on her deck in full view of well, those ninjas that could be lurking in the woods awaiting their chance to kidnap you.”

“You’re not going to let that go, are you?” she asked.

“Never. That was priceless.”

“Well, to stop you from ravishing me and thus getting into trouble with my baby, I’ll go fix you a plate. You look hungry.” *He also looks fine her mind threw in.*

“As hungry as I am, eating will have to wait for a few minutes. I have an entire work crew ready to mutiny against me,” he admitted. “I need to go speak with them.”

“Oh, shit, maybe I should go talk to them. I didn’t mean to start trouble between you and your men.”

“No, Sweetness. I brought this on myself. Plus, if you go out there, Derek may challenge me for you. He’s pretty outraged over the fact that he thinks that I think you’re less than beautiful.”

“Ah, he’s so cute. He’s a good kid. I’m making him another plate.”

“He’s not a kid; he’s a man who’s already half in love with you. He may have been singing your

praises, but I can read between the lines. Derek was telling me in no uncertain terms that I was all kinds of stupid not to let you know how beautiful and intelligent you were...and that I appreciate both.”

“Wow.”

“That’s how I feel every time I see you, Sweetness,” he declared as he carried her through the house before depositing her in the kitchen. He stopped and kissed her once more before heading outside to face his crew.

«»*

After inspecting their work, Mackenzie grunted in satisfaction. His crew did a damn good job. That’s why they worked for him. Going back to where they ate their lunch, he apologized to them.

“I’m an ass and I apologize.”

“Apology accepted, Boss,” Tom spoke for the crew.

“Thanks for making it easy, but I don’t deserve that. Enjoy your lunch and take an early day. You’ve made hella progress and both Mr. Madeira and I appreciate it.”

He waited for the cheers of his crew to die down before continuing. “And Derek?”

“Yes, Mr. Roberts?”

“Don’t try and steal my woman from me.”

“Can I at least eat her food without worrying about whether or not I’m going to die?”

“As long as she’s not hand-feeding it to you.”

«»*

Mackenzie was famished by the time he finally sat down to lunch. After sating his appetite with a rack and a half of the best ribs that he’d ever wrapped his lips around, he sat back in the chair contemplating if he should move or simply sleep here and wake up in time for dinner. Samson interrupted his revelry.

“You know Mackenzie, it’s one thing to want Carolina, but...”

“I don’t just want her physically, Samson. I want to marry that woman. I **intend** to marry that woman.”

“Well then you’re going to have to do more than rile that woman up.”

“But she’s so beautiful when she’s all riled up,” Mackenzie sighed.

“That may be but when you rile her up, there isn’t much difference between you and every other male,” Samson pointed out.

“Most males are scared shitless of her,” Mackenzie stated matter-of-factly.

“And with good reason, but a woman just doesn’t get that prickly without a reason, Mackenzie.”

Mackenzie stilled. Without looking at Samson he asked. “You said earlier that no one touched her in a have-her-man-kill-him-kind-of-way,” Mackenzie spat. “Who’s the dead man that put his hands on her?”

“And I meant it. Mackenzie, her father’s a retired colonel and her mother’s a retired educator. Hell, I’m more scared of her mother than her father. I think that if some man had put his hands on her, he would’ve already been dead.”

Releasing a breath that he didn’t know he held, Mackenzie turned to Samson. He’d never needed help wooing a woman. Hell, he’d never had to chase a woman in his life. That was because he’d been saving himself for a woman who was worthy. He’d been saving himself for Carolina. And wanting her like he did, if that meant humbling himself to learn what made that woman happy, so be it.

“What aren’t you saying, Samson?”

“As males we tend to think that the only threats to our females are physical ones. We learn to help females with physical things. We open doors, hold out chairs, carry heavy stuff, but we forget about the emotional factors. A woman can open her own damn door, hell she can even give herself an orgasm, but a

woman cannot hold herself. She cannot kiss her own hurts better.”

“*Somente Mina* and Carolina both know how to throw mean right crosses. They’re better technical fighters than most men. They hold advanced degrees, do their own investing, change their own oil in their trucks, make their own way—not because they have to, but just in case they ever have to they won’t be in a bad place. Other than their family, they don’t expect anyone to take care of them. They’re not accustomed to it. I basically have to threaten them with destruction of the entire sugar crop in order to get them to let me do the heavy lifting.”

Chapter 6

Recognition

Mackenzie took Samson's words to heart. In between outright ogling Carolina, he took the time to study her. He looked at her...not just the parts that made his dick hard—well everything made his dick hard—but all of the parts that made her the woman that she was. He watched how she reacted to things, noting the expression on her face when she was excited, sleepy, deep in thought, in the throes of rich laughter or in the midst of getting someone told. Usually it was him that was getting told.

He also noted how she looked when she was contemplative. That look disturbed him because he wondered what thoughts brought that particular look to her face. That look was present when her eyes rested on Samson and Mariana and when she watched Mariana holding her puppy. He even noticed that look on her face when she watched one of the work crew wipe down his truck—a pointless task being that the driveway was gravel. It was a look that spoke volumes but still he couldn't name it. Selfishly, he wanted to know all of her thoughts, not because he was nosy, but because he only wanted her to wear contentment on that beautiful visage. He wanted a

lot of things, foremost he wanted to see passion in those watchful eyes and his ring upon her finger.

«»*

Standing with Samson talking about the progress of the guest quarters, which were being completed in record time, they both smiled as they watched Mariana play with her puppy. That puppy was shamelessly spoiled and it was only a few months old. Knowing that if Mariana was out and about, Carolina was somewhere near, he scanned the property for her. When his eyes located her, he smiled. Carolina didn't even know that he was there. Well, security force that she was, she probably knew; she just didn't give a damn. He was thinking about going over there and making her notice him, but then he noticed that look on her face. Still puzzled by it, he turned to Samson.

"I've seen that look on my woman's face a thousand times, yet I still cannot name it."

Dragging his eyes off of his *Somente Mina*, Samson glanced at Carolina noting the look that she wore. "Longing...the look on her face is longing," he said before turning back to his woman.

"It can't be longing," Mackenzie said.

"Trust me, Mackenzie. It's longing."

“How the hell can it be longing? If you’d said that while she was looking at a woman with me as her man, I’d agree. Well, no that would be envy...but yeah, I don’t understand why you think that look is longing. She had that same look when Tom was wiping down his truck.”

“Think about it, Mackenzie. Tom loves that truck. *Somente Mina* loves that mutt that she’s playing with. Tom touches that truck with love and *Somente Mina* touches that dog the same way. People tend to touch the things that they love with tenderness. Carolina probably hasn’t been touched with much tenderness being that she doesn’t care much for touching...unless she’s inflicting harm,” he said.

“Yeah, that look is longing. That woman is in need of some good loving.”

“Hmm,” Mackenzie said.

“If you’re serious about her, I’d make a move. When women have an itch that needs scratching, it ain’t hard for them to get it scratched. Good-looking woman like Carolina...it wouldn’t be hard at all.”

Ignoring Mackenzie’s growl, he continued. “Thing is, Carolina could be placing herself in danger because she doesn’t know the guys around here. Even if they did only what she asked, they might hurt her. Then there are those that would strive to hurt her. You know how some men like to break willful women...and Carolina is a mite willful.”

“And she’s mine,” Mackenzie grumbled before walking away.

* «*» *

Carolina could feel *his* eyes on her...*again*! Obviously, completely dissing him meant nothing to that man; it sure didn’t mean shit to her pussy. If she was honest with herself she would’ve admitted that it meant nothing to her heart either because she found herself going soft in his presence. His attention made her feel desirable, beautiful, like the only woman in his world. Of course the only other woman around was Mariana and no man better be looking at her baby like she was a woman else Samson would eradicate their existence from the earth.

It seemed that all Mackenzie did was watch her. He didn’t just look; he watched her, he studied her, as if he was a lion and she was a gazelle at the watering hole. He needed to find something else to glue his eyeballs to like his fucking job—whatever the hell that was.

She knew that Mackenzie was watching her and she wasn’t going to turn her head even for the point of glaring him down. First, because it didn’t work; and, second, because zeroing in on that fine mother-fucker only resulted in her having to change her panties. She wasn’t going to look his way. No way; no

how. Oh shit. Who was she kidding? She turned her head slowly and sure enough there *he* was in all of his fine ass glory. Dammit. Why did Mackenzie have to be so damn fine? Why did he have to be so damn big? So damn ripped with muscle? So damn intelligent? So. Damn. White?

To everyone else it probably appeared that he was simply engaged in casual conversation with Samson, but she wasn't everyone else. Carolina *knew* that those fuck-me dark green eyes of his watched her every move. She also knew that they glinted with something else that she refused to acknowledge.

"Is everything all right, Auntie?" Mariana's voice cut into her meandering thoughts of how to somehow kill the big bastard without anyone noticing. Who was she kidding? She knew exactly how she'd kill Mackenzie. She'd fuck him to death, and probably herself in the process. That'd make for an interesting obit.

Flashing a smile at her baby, Carolina threaded her arm through Mariana's and gently pulled her away from the building site, and away from the dark green eyes that glinted with amusement...and promises.

"Everything's fine, baby. Now let's go get some tea and sit on the back deck while we can. I have a feeling that it's about to storm," Carolina said in an attempt to distract Mariana and herself. Mariana

might be a grown woman now, but she was still her baby. As such, as well as Carolina knew Mariana, Mariana knew her just as well. Carolina knew that her baby was contemplating ways to throw her and Mackenzie together and she suspected that Mariana knew that despite her shortness with the fine bastard, that she wanted him.

«»*

Carolina was right—partially. Mariana did know that she wanted Mackenzie, but she wasn't contemplating ways to throw the two together. She'd already systematically plotted out those ways. Carolina needed Mackenzie regardless of her not wanting to need him. And Mackenzie needed Carolina and as soon as he got some uninterrupted time with the object of his obsession, he would understand that Carolina was in his system to stay. He'd always be greedy for her. Like Samson was with her, his lust wouldn't ever be sated; it would grow.

Looking over her shoulder, Mariana caught her husband's gaze. She grinned when she realized that her husband and Mackenzie had the same look on their faces. They wore looks of undiluted hunger. Oh, yeah, this was going to be so much fun, she thought as she watched Mackenzie watch her aunt walk away.

«»*

“Most people would pretend to listen,” Samson laughed.

“And I’m not most people,” Mackenzie answered without taking his eyes off of Carolina who stood stiffly beside her niece. He knew that she knew that he was watching her for he’d seen the quick looks she sent his way when she and Mariana had passed near them. She’d been close enough for him to see her thick eyelashes lift and her beautiful brown eyes narrow as she’d looked at him. Knowing that she was looking at him, he’d put on a nice show for her, stretching his body on the pretence of grabbing something, ensuring that Carolina saw his big body in all of its corded-action-readiness. He’d wanted her to see him. He needed for her to see him, to appreciate his mass and his rippling muscles, not because he was vain but because the caveman in him needed her to know that he was a male in his prime.

Mackenzie had heard her stumble over her sentence when he’d bent at the waist to pick up something he’d *accidentally* dropped so he *knew* that she liked his ass. Well, it was tit-for-tat if the truth be told. Watching her walk by had him battling with himself not to reach out and grab the full and juicy globes of her fine ass before throwing her to the

ground and claiming her. He'd barely been able to restrain himself. Only the fact that he knew the ground was too hard for her womanly softness and the knowledge that he wouldn't be satisfied with having her just one time stopped him.

«»*

“That you definitely are not,” Samson said softly as he watched Mackenzie stare at Carolina. Taking a look into his friend's eyes, he was shocked at the unconcealed hunger that he saw there. The only thing missing was Mackenzie's tongue hanging out for he was already panting. He wondered if he had the same look in his eyes when he looked upon his *Somente Mina*.

Samson turned his head slightly and felt the overwhelming need to rush his woman. He wanted to snatch her up into his arms and head back to their bedroom but he knew that she needed her time with Carolina so he sent her a look that promised multiple climaxes later that evening.

Forcing his eyes away from his beautiful *Somente Mina*, he turned to Mackenzie. “What are your intentions, Mackenzie?” he rumbled with menace intertwined in his baritone. He saw the way that Mackenzie looked at Carolina and how he reacted to Carolina. The man was literally in heat for that

woman. And as much as he liked Mackenzie, damn if he was going to allow him to use Carolina simply as an outlet for his sexual release.

"She's going to be my wife," Mackenzie answered without pause and without taking his eyes off of Carolina.

"You keep saying that, but so far all I see you doing is ogling her and getting nothing but a hard dick and a thorough cussing out for your efforts."

"Foreplay," Mackenzie answered.

Samson knew that Mackenzie meant his words but his senses screamed at him. Mackenzie needed to stake his claim a hell a lot faster than he was doing or he would be in danger of some other male usurping his claim. He didn't want to enrage Mackenzie, but he felt obligated to share his vision.

"Mackenzie, you need to piss or get off of the pot because if you cannot," he began, "some other male will attempt to..."

"Commit suicide because messing with my woman is a death sentence," Mackenzie growled.

"Are you willing to fight the world for her?" Samson asked to see where his friend's head was at.

"And every motherfucker in it," Mackenzie said with conviction.

"And you may have to because males are coming here...from great distances...and Carolina is part of the reason why they are coming. After they get

past Carolina's prickly demeanor and see that she's unattached, some are bound to want her."

"Well no need to worry because as of the moment she careened up your drive way, her prickly demeanor belonged to me" Mackenzie announced.

"Mackenzie, I know that you like her," Samson began.

"Love her," Mackenzie interrupted.

"Have you considered that you may not be her type? I don't think that she dates white men." Samson said.

"And she's still not going to date white men. However, *this* white man," he said while jabbing a thick finger into his own chest, "is courting her with the intention of making her my wife."

«»*

Mackenzie watched as Carolina turned and caught him watching her. Carolina simply glared before looping her arm through Mariana's and strolling further away from the work site and heading towards the house via the scenic route.

Sighing at his beautiful woman who called to his body and his mind, he smiled at her, more determined than ever to put his ring on her finger. Samson said males were coming. He knew that Samson *knew* things and he didn't question them. That's

why he had a seven-thousand square foot home, featuring eight bedrooms, six bathrooms and a kitchen so pimped-out that a chef would have a torrid affair with it. Samson had told him he would need it. Now that he'd met Carolina he knew that Samson was right about him building a home that big. Mackenzie knew from experience to listen to everything Samson said. Though an affable man, Samson didn't waste words or censor them. If Samson said there would be males coming—then there would be. And if any of them made a move on his Carolina, there would be males disappearing too.

Finally taking his eyes off of Carolina, he turned to Samson. "I'm not letting her go, Samson—regardless of whom I have to fight—even if it's her."

"Don't hurt her, Mackenzie."

"Agreed," he said. Blowing out a breath he turned to Samson, "It's going to storm. I'm going to order the men to wrap it up and send them home. That should take no more than an hour. After that I'm going to make use of your gym."

«»*

"After doing strenuous labor all week, the first thing you want to do on a short day is workout?" Samson asked, knowing how hard Mackenzie and his men had been working. Despite being the owner of a

lucrative construction company, Mackenzie didn't merely hold plans and give orders. He rolled up his sleeves and worked right beside his men. Damn near every project he worked on came in before time and under budget, and this was no exception. Mackenzie didn't loaf; if anything, he'd kicked it into overdrive. His crew worked from damn near sunup to sundown, despite Samson telling him that they didn't have to work like that. Mackenzie had just shrugged it off saying that he was paying his men a good wage to give him their best, and as always they did. Despite being demanding, Samson knew that Mackenzie did indeed treat his men with fairness and respect. Not a slacker in the bunch, his men were well-compensated, well-insured, and well-treated.

"No, I don't want to go to the gym, but if I don't wear myself out, I'm not sure that my good intentions will be enough to guarantee that Carolina will remain un-pregnant."

"Ah, so it's like that?"

"It is. And though I wouldn't mind impregnating her, I'd like to get a ring on her finger first knowing how she feels about...well, so many things. I don't want to do anything to make her feel shame or cause her to regret anything that we do together."

"You're a good man," Samson said.

“Thank you, Samson. How about doing me a favor?”

“You only have to name it,” Samson declared.

“After I finish my workout, can you distract Mariana so that I can have Carolina’s undivided attention?”

“Distracting my woman is not a favor, it’s my privilege,” Samson drawled.

“Well do you think that you can distract her for a long time?” Mackenzie asked.

“Mackenzie, I am a man...not a boy. I can distract *Somente Mina* for days on end. The real question, my friend, is what you can accomplish with Carolina during that time.”

“Everything that I need to,” he stated while heading off to talk to the men.

«»*

Mackenzie didn’t have far to go. The layout of Samson’s spread was top notch. The worksite was less than a quarter mile away from the main house, still every second it took him to traverse the gently sloping land was a second too long. He needed to be near Carolina...needed to peruse those womanly curves at leisure, needed to see her roll her eyes at him and put on a put-out expression. Most of all he needed to hear her voice. Carolina’s voice

was...magic, a tangible expression of passion, goodness, rightness. Her voice was impressive even when hurling invectives, preaching from her metaphorical, but ever-present soapbox, spoiling Mariana or teasing Samson. And now that he knew what her voice sounded like in song, he was greedy for every syllable that spilled from her succulent lips. He loved hearing her sing and was amused by the fact that she didn't even realize that she sang all of the time.

When he finally got her to accept his presence with a smile instead of with barely restrained hostility, he was going to entice her to sing. He had things he wanted to hear her sing—for example, the entire Motown collection. Recalling the melody of her voice, his dick hardened to painful proportions. Ah, he couldn't wait to hear her sing his favorites, but he had other things that he needed for her to sing first. For starters, he needed her to scream his name...in decibels that only animals can hear...and then he wanted to hear her say '*I do*' with God as the officiant, his kid brother as his best man, and his friends as witnesses.

«»*

Carolina loved the massive deck attached to Samson and Mariana's home. It was the perfect place to sit and read, or sip iced-tea, or simply sit

and do nothing but enjoy the day. Relaxing on the built-in seating, she inhaled, dragging the fresh scent of pine and wildflowers into her lungs.

“Do you like it, Auntie?” Mariana asked.

“Like isn’t the word, baby. It’s beautiful. Thank you for sharing your home with me,” she said as she reached out to hug her baby.

“Welcome,” Mariana mumbled from somewhere in the depths of Carolina’s cleavage.

Hearing her baby’s mumbled reply, Carolina loosed her hold and smiled. “Sorry baby, I get caught up when hugging you.” She was going to say more when the sounds of thunder rolled in.

“That’s our cue to get inside, young lady,” she said as she hustled her baby into the house.

“But I like it out here and you love thunder storms,” her baby protested.

“I do indeed enjoy a good thunder storm but being struck by lightning isn’t on my agenda now move your hips, child.”

Chapter 7

The Oh, No, You Didn't

Sending the work crew home turned out to be a good move for several reasons. Not even an hour later the land boomed with the sound of thunder and the skies lit up with lightning, though not a drop of rain had yet to fall. Still, that was dangerous weather to be out in and Mackenzie was glad that his men had all had time to make it to their homes. Soon after, there was a massive power outage in the area. Luckily, Samson had taken his advice and had a state-of-the-art generator installed. Though they had power, they still conserved energy. Instead of chasing Carolina, Mackenzie powered up his laptop and checked the weather and such. Betting on inclement weather, he'd spent the next couple of hours on the phone contacting his men and telling them to stay with their families until the weather cleared.

«»*

After spending the rest of the evening seeing to work-related errands and a sleep filled with fantasies about Carolina, Mackenzie headed straight for the gym upon waking. Finishing his workout, he took

time to wipe down the workout bench. Samson didn't have a housekeeper because Mariana didn't see the need for one. Even if they would've had a housekeeper, he still would've been careful about cleaning up after himself. His mother had taught him that. He chuckled recalling one of her favorite sayings. *Behind every great man, there's probably a woman who has to do his laundry or wash his dishes.* His mother had been that woman for most of her working life. Having two sons and no husband, she'd taken whatever jobs were available. He'd vowed never to be a burden to any woman.

Mackenzie was watching the rain splattering against the thick glass that encased the entire gym area when Samson sauntered in. He'd actually finished his work out and was buying time. He wanted Carolina with the fierceness, but it was too early to bother her just yet and he wanted her fully awake when he put his moves on her. Since the weather was still shit, he figured that they'd all end up in the Samson's state-of-the-art media room watching movies.

"You look like a wolf anticipating a good meal," Samson remarked.

"Funny, that's exactly how I feel," Mackenzie answered.

"Still plan on taking your life in your own hands and macking on Carolina?"

“Yep. With the weather like it is, I figured spending time in your media room sounds like a good plan.”

“You’re looking pleased with yourself,” Samson said.

“What?” Mackenzie asked, not missing the fact that Samson’s eyes had narrowed.

“I don’t like that look. I just want to enjoy this day with *Somente Mina*. I do not want to have to spend it attempting to smuggle Carolina to a country that doesn’t have extradition treaties with the U.S.”

“Why would you need to smuggle Carolina out of the country?”

“Because murder is still considered a capital crime and I cannot help but notice that gleam in her eye when she looks at you,” Samson answered.

“That gleam in her eye is desire, not murderous intent,” Mackenzie countered.

“You’re special. Do you know that?” Samson asked with a grin.

“And the lovely Carolina knows that, thus she won’t let me get away,” Mackenzie beamed.

“You’re right. Carolina won’t let you get away. She never lets her prey escape once she has it locked within her sights.”

“I’m Carolina’s man. Her prey on the other hand, is probably stored in a plastic container marked ‘vittles.’”

"I can see that you're not going to be happy until you force that woman to kill you."

"Oh, I dream of ways that woman could kill me," Mackenzie sighed.

"Mackenzie, I also don't want to have to kill you for upsetting Carolina so tread carefully."

Mackenzie threw back his head and roared with laughter. With a light cuff on Samson's shoulder Mackenzie shook his head.

"Samson, you and I both know that that woman was born upset with me so if you didn't kill me when I first glimpsed that beauty, than you won't ever have to worry about doing so. Plus, Mariana likes me so you can't kill me. It would upset her and you know that she has you wrapped around her little finger."

"*Somente Mina* was ready to help Derek kill you yesterday," Samson reminded.

"It was all a misunderstanding, which I explained to both Mariana and to Carolina."

"And knowing how dangerous that woman is you still want to do this?"

"Have to do it, Samson."

"Your funeral my friend, just remember: if Carolina cries, someone dies," Samson promised.

Mackenzie became serious for a second. Giving Samson a curt nod, he responded. "I understand."

"I called the guys and told them to stay at home until this weather clears. Though it's not raining

now, I've checked the weather reports and it looks too iffy for me to feel comfortable calling them out. We should be able to get back at it before the end of the week though."

"Whatever you think is best."

"Okay," he said. And as if a curtain had lifted, he grinned, transforming his face.

«»*

Samson knew that grin. Mackenzie had something up his sleeve and he knew that it was going to annoy the hell out of his *Somente Mina's* Aunt but of course it would only serve to further convince his beautiful wife that the big American Scotsman should be with her aunt.

"I think that this is going to be a quick workout. Something tells me that I need to keep *Somente Mina* in the bedroom."

Looking back at Mackenzie who was literally grinning his ass off, he amended that statement. "For the rest of the day."

"Before you sequester your beautiful bride in your opulent suite, you have to at least show your face. If you don't make an appearance, Carolina will simply hole up some place—some place where I am not."

“What’s wrong with that?” Samson asked just to mess with Mackenzie.

“What’s wrong with it is that she’ll be holing up without me. Instead of being snuggled up with the senior Roberts man, she’ll probably be snuggled up with another one of her infernal books. Carolina might need to seek help for her reading fetish. She isn’t even picky about what she reads. If it has words, she’ll read it. I bet she has more books than the Library of Congress,” Mackenzie lamented. “I’m going to have to give up a couple of rooms, at least, for her books.”

“You give that woman a library and I’d say you should go ahead and book the church...and the armed guards to make sure that she doesn’t escape before saying her I dos.”

Mackenzie smiled before answering. “Ah, she won’t be running from me. She’ll be running to me.”

“With or without a weapon in her hand?” Samson inquired.

“Probably with, which is why you need to bring Mariana downstairs...at least until it’s obvious that Carolina is struggling to keep her hands off of my hot body.”

“Yep, around your neck, choking the life out of you,” Samson commented.

“Ah, but see I plan to put on the tape of the race. When Carolina starts watching the race, she’ll

get so caught up in it that she won't even notice that I'm in the room."

"How do you know that Carolina will even want to watch the race?"

"She's Southern, which means that besides having a tendency to marry people closely related to them, they also have a penchant for certain activities including deep-frying all manners of things and watching sports—namely football, basketball and racing."

"And when she's so caught up in the race that she ignores you?"

"Well as long as she's on my lap ignoring me, it's all good. Not much beats being cuddled up with your woman while it storms outside."

Shaking his head, Samson once again marveled at the man that was one of his best friends. In spite of being one of the sharpest people he knew, Mackenzie Roberts was insane...and he couldn't help but admire his friend for that very quality—even knowing that it might get him killed by Carolina.

"Well if Carolina ends up beating you within an inch of your life, try and drag yourself some place where you can bleed out without making a mess," he said as he quit the room.

Mackenzie had planned to go directly to the shower before seeking out his woman. That was his plan, really. But that was before he was captured by those vocals. After hearing her siren song, he had to at least peek in at his woman. Loitering outside of the kitchen, mindful of his sweat, he listened to Carolina sing the songs that made his heart pound in his chest. Standing just outside of the doorway, he watched his woman as she sashayed her delectable ass from the refrigerator to the stove, from the stove to the kitchen island and back again all whilst singing *Midnight Train to Georgia* in her hard-on inducing vocals. Oh yes. Carolina sang never noticing the dark green eyes that watched her like a lion watched a gazelle on the plains of the Serengeti.

«»*

“Sweetness,” Mackenzie called as he moved into the kitchen. In spite of his size, he made little sound as he made his way to his woman. He was almost right up against her perfect ass when she screeched and turned to face him nearly leveling him with a wooden spoon.

“You’re mighty dangerous with kitchen utensils,” he joked, recalling the last time that he’d gotten too close to her in the kitchen. Again, he was thankful for his fast reflexes.

“Oh for goodness sake it’s you! Can you make some fucking noise instead of skulking about all of the damn time? And get out of here, you’re sweaty. I told you the regulations that must be followed in order to step foot in my kitchen,” she snapped.

“It’s not your kitchen; it’s Mariana’s,” he said to rile her.

“Possession is nine-tenths of the law, so being that I’m in it, it belongs to me. Now get out,” she ordered. She was about to turn around and ignore him but Mackenzie moved into her personal space and dragged her out of ‘her’ pristine kitchen. He’d bet that that kitchen was cleaner than any operating room ever hoped to be. Carolina was good and riled up and more beautiful than ever.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” She asked when she gathered herself enough to restart cussing at him. He was close enough to feel Carolina’s body heat but far away enough to not be dry humping her in the kitchen. He watched as Carolina tilted her head back to glare up into his amused dark green eyes.

«»*

“Nothing’s wrong with me. I just wanted to wish you good morning, Sweetness,” Mackenzie’s voice rumbled seductively causing his massive chest

to vibrate. That wouldn't have been bad in itself, but being as close to him as she was, Carolina's nipples were in danger of grazing aforementioned chest...and as such Mackenzie was in danger of being fucked. Damn, she wanted him. Mentally shaking her head, she decided to stand up to the bully. She wasn't about to be intimidated by this sorry mother-fucker any longer. Raising her brow, she moved that last scant half an inch that separated them so that their bodies were plastered against each other. Damn, this motherfucker smelled good and that was really saying something being that he'd probably just come from working out. *He smelled like...man. Hot, delicious, fuckable man.* Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she lifted her eyes to his...and promptly got lost in the passion that was burning there. *Concentrate, concentrate, she instructed her body.* Okay, she could do this. Glaring at him, she finally got it together enough to tell him off.

"Don't call me that!" she snapped as she watched his grin turn predator-like.

"Well, I've got to call you something before I start calling you Mrs. Roberts," he said.

Oh, fuck. Did this motherfucker just say that? Oh shit, he did. Oh, damn. He had to be playing. Yes, that was it. He was playing. It was just a game to get her to sleep with him. Okay, she could handle that. Oh, damn, he was alpha. And he was crowding

her...not exactly grinding up on her but close enough for her to smell.

She made to move back but she realized that in the midst of losing her motherfucking mind, Mackenzie had backed her against something. How in the hell? Before she could protest he took the wooden spoon out of her hand and slowly licked the peanut butter chocolate filling that covered the ladle. She'd been in the midst of making the brownies that she'd promised Mariana when someone had interrupted her. As she watched him lick that spoon, she couldn't help but wonder if he used that same technique when it came to eating pussy. Right now she hated that fucking spoon. When she got back to the kitchen she was going to fight it. *Bitch! Home wrecker!* Oh shit. Did she just cuss out an inanimate object? She needed to get the fuck away from Mackenzie because obviously his insanity was rubbing off on her. She would've gone but she was trapped by Mackenzie whose slamming ass body effectively caged her in.

"Hmmm, something definitely smells sweet in here and I know it's not me..."

"Damn right, it's not you. You're sweaty," she protested.

"That I am, but it's better that you know now how I smell when I'm sweaty especially since the

next time that I'm sweaty and this close to you, you'll be sweaty too...and wearing nothing but me."

"Oh, my goodness! You don't even care, do you?"

«»*

Not care. Was she kidding? Was she really that clueless? "On the contrary, Sweetness, I care more than you know," he said as he leaned in and inhaled a lung full of her. As always she smelled good and coupled with the fragrant smells wafting in from the kitchen, it was too much. Chocolate was his weakness when it came to food, but when it came to women his weakness was the woman trying her damndest to lean away from him. Savoring the distinctive aroma of Carolina's full-bodied delicacy, he breathed her name. "Carolina."

"Get away from me, pervert. I'm trying to bake my baby some brownies."

"Will you bake me some?"

"No."

"Please," he asked as he covered her smaller hand and trapped it against his chest so that she could feel his heart beating beneath the hard muscle.

"No."

"Well, if you won't bake me any brownies can't you at least let me have a taste of those sweet lips?"

Mackenzie watched as Carolina continued to glare at him. As he leaned closer to her mouth, she twisted her head so her neck was exposed. The woman obviously didn't know that that was a total turn-on. He did like to bite, but he'd save that for later. First, she needed to grow accustomed to his love-making. Feathering light kisses on the column of her neck, he smiled into her skin.

* «*» *

"You motherfuck—oh," Carolina gasped as she felt his teeth nip at her collarbone. She couldn't stop the sigh of pleasure as his tongue began to lave the spot. Feeling him grin against her, she arched into him. "You are still an asshole," she spat, although not as fiercely as she wanted when she felt Mackenzie move his big body so he could rub that damned hard dick of his against her.

"Well, an asshole is a step up from a sorry motherfucker, right?" he asked as he held her close.

Carolina hoped against hope he couldn't feel her thighs tremble, although it would've been virtually impossible as she was having a hard time telling the *rest* of her body **not** to join in. "Oh," was the only word that she could manage.

"You might call me names but it sure smells like you like me, Sweetness."

"Maybe I'm thinking of someone else," she threw out.

"Really? Tell me his name, Sweetness."

"Why?"

"So that I can explain to him how deadly liking my woman is."

Oh, fuck. As soon as she sent him away, she was so going to take another shower. "Get away from here. I've got to cook for Mariana," Carolina said though she knew that most of the sting was missing from her words. She sighed when Mackenzie quickly brushed his lips against hers and headed for his room before she could hit him. Once he was gone, Carolina licked her lips and tasted Mackenzie. She wanted to inflict some violence on the big man but not for making her cream, but for making her cream and not doing jack about it. Returning to the kitchen, she rinsed the spoon before laying it in the scalding, soapy water. Setting her timer, she ran upstairs to shower.

«»*

Mariana sighed and nuzzled her face into her husband's neck. She smiled, hearing Samson's breathing hitch at the brush of her lips. Yeah, she owned him. Spread out atop his massive body she felt his cock thump. Despite their rigorous lovemak-

ing, which had left her boneless, Samson was still deep inside of her. Though they'd been married for about three months, she still marveled at his staying power.

"Are you asleep?" she whispered into his skin that was salty from the sheen of sweat that he'd worked up as he'd taken her to the pinnacle of pleasure and beyond.

"No, *Somente Mina*, I am not asleep, but tell me why you are still awake," he demanded as he stroked his big hands down her spine before cupping her ass in his more than capable hands.

"Just thinking..." Mariana said as she absently caressed his chest. She smiled noticing his flat nipple peak at her light touch.

"About what?" Samson asked with a grin in his voice.

"Carolina and Mackenzie," Mariana said as she turned her head so that she was looking up into her husband's deep blue eyes.

Hearing him laugh, she frowned marring the expression of mischief and joy that had settled on her face. "Mean Samson. I am not your friend."

"Ah, *Somente Mina* you are more than my friend. You are my everything. Even though Mackenzie asked me to keep you occupied so he could romance Carolina, those two are still at each

other's throats," he pointed out as he adjusted his hips beneath her.

Mariana's eyes widened slightly at the sensation that followed that subtle movement. Hands braced on Samson's hard abdomen, she sat up and made a circular movement with her own hips, smiling as she watched her husband's eyes darken. He slid his hands up her body. She knew that his ultimate destination was her breasts, but he stopped to caress her stomach, acknowledging the life growing within her. Reaching her heavy breasts he rubbed his thumbs over the stiff peaks of her nipples. Mariana's head dropped back exposing her throat to his mouth. Sitting up, Samson wrapped his arms around her and nestled his face between her breasts.

"But...that's...just...foreplay," Mariana gasped out as her husband began to leisurely move her up and down his cock at his leisure.

"Is that what it is?" Samson teased.

"Absolutely. You know that my Auntie wouldn't want a man that she could walk all over. That would bore her, the fact that ah..." Mariana ceased speaking as Samson reversed their position and pinned her beneath his big hard body. If she could think straight, she would've preened at the picture she made: Head thrown back, her riot of hair fanned out completely covering the modal-covered pillow; her eyes were heavy with desire and love; her lips were

parted as she panted in time to Samson's thrusts. Peering up at him, she reveled in the feel of his hard cock sliding into her hot and welcoming sheath.

"You were saying, *Somente Mina?*" Samson grunted as he thrust harder and deeper.

Mariana's eyes were bright with passion as she stared at him. "Huh?" she moaned as she lightly raked his scalp with her nails causing him to shudder.

"I never tire of seeing that look," he gasped.

"What...look?" she moaned.

"The look you wear when you're lost in your pleasure. It looks like you love me—like you're giving me all of your love."

"You already have all of my love. This is just the new love that my heart makes every day," she said as she dragged him down to her lips. Mariana marveled at the fact that this man was so vulnerable to her.

"I love you, Samson...with everything within me."

Reclaiming her lips, Samson ravished her mouth just as he was ravishing her body. "I love you, *Somente Mina Nizhoni* Madeira."

"I love you too, Samson...oh goodness...oh yessssssssss!" Mariana cried out as she attempted to keep up with her husband's thrusts. All thoughts about her Auntie and Mackenzie were forgotten as Samson unleashed her pleasure and her orgasm

thundered through her body. Only Samson could make love to her so completely that nothing else could fit inside of her head except for the infinite love that she held for him.

«»*

Fresh from her recent shower, Carolina meticulously worked cocoa butter into her skin. She was old school when it came to skincare, choosing shea or cocoa butter in lieu of designer lotions and expensive perfumes. In her opinion, the cosmetics industry was simply another cartel. In fact, it was one of the most intelligent, well thought out cartels in existence, hooking entire populaces by indoctrinating them on what beauty should be and then selling them ways to attain it. Carolina was by no means a granola woman, forsaking grooming and all cosmetics, but damn if she was going to allow someone to talk her into spending a small fortune to put on a face that she didn't recognize when she looked in the mirror.

She was what she was, and if a man didn't like it, well then, he wasn't the man for her. *That fine ass Mackenzie likes us, her body screamed.* Slipping on a pair of dry panties, she vowed that they were going to remain that way. Her pussy actually hollered with laughter at her assumption but she ignored the way

that her body mocked her. Knowing that it might have a point, she slipped into light sweatpants, foregoing her customary jeans. Putting on her lip balm, she thought of Mackenzie, which did nothing for her panties-staying-dry goal. Shaking her head, she was in the process of tying back her locs when her cell phone rang.

“Hello?” she said, wincing at the slight echo that informed her that it was a long distance call.

“Carolina, it’s Carl.”

Smiling, she gave up tying her hair back and slipped on her sky blue Crocs before curling up in the window seat. She always enjoyed talking with the young man, despite the fact that his cousin was a fucking asshole of the highest order. Carl had an easygoing disposition and he could cook his fine ass off—but nowhere as good as her, of course. Carl specialized in the kind of cooking that left a lot of the plate exposed. No self-respecting Southerner would even think of such nonsense. Any and all bits of exposed plate were covered by either more food or gravy in a pinch. If he’d have been ten years older, she might’ve been tempted to be all over that, but he wasn’t. Carl was just a kid and he was white. *Mackenzie’s white her mind argued. Yeah, but Mackenzie is a man her pussy countered.*

“Hey, Carl. What’s up?”

“Hi, Carolina. I’m good. I was just calling to see if you still wanted me to camp out at your place when I come to America. I should be in Raleigh at the beginning of next month.”

“Oh shit, I’m in Colorado, honey. We just found out that Mariana’s pregnant and I need to be here...”

“Mariana’s expecting? Wow, Samson didn’t waste any time did he?”

Carolina shook her head at the whisper of bitterness in Carl’s voice.

Inserting a warning in her voice, she answered. “Carl, I know that you’re not begrudging my baby her happiness.”

She relaxed hearing Carl sigh.

“No, I could never do that Carolina. Mariana is one of my closest friends and I can’t be anything but happy for her. I know she’s overjoyed at the prospect of being a mother. It was just a lapse Carolina, nothing else,” Carl apologized in his long winded way.

Carolina knew that it was indeed a lapse. Carl was one of the sweetest people she knew...and one of the loneliest despite being surrounded by women who wanted to be Mrs. Carl Lefevre. He was merely infatuated with Mariana because she was the one woman who paid him no damn attention. What Carl needed was a woman like her baby who was hella intelligent, had a kick-ass sense of humor, curves for days—but was a wee bit softer on a man’s ego. Yeah,

that's what he needed...and she knew just the woman. Smiling, a plan began to form in her head. Ironically, Carolina had the same look that Mariana wore whenever she was scheming to throw her and Mackenzie together.

“Look honey, change your flight. Instead of arriving at RDU Airport in Raleigh, change your destination to Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport in Atlanta. I'll call my girl, Teijana and tell her the switch in plans. She'll look after you in my absence.” *Oh yes, that definitely sounded like a plan.* The more Carolina thought about it the better the plan seemed.

“Oh, Carolina I can't—” Carl protested.

Carolina cut him off. “Carl, I'm not offering, baby, I'm telling you. I promised that I'd help you find a location for your restaurant and I meant it. And by the way, when you open your new restaurant I'm eating there free. Anyway, Teijana will be even better at helping you being that she's a native of the Atlanta area. Besides, we were going to stay with her whilst in Atlanta so it isn't a problem. She already requested the days off and she reserved two of the nicest guest rooms for us.”

“Well if we were going together then you know that we'd only need one room,” he joked.

“That’s right—the kitchen, you consummate flirt. And by the way, I’d be the victor in either of those rooms.”

“I might have to concede the bedroom—and I’d be a happy man doing so—but no way am I conceding the kitchen,” he retorted.

“Oh, you are so cute and misguided but I won’t hold that against you. Neither will Teijana.”

“Should I eat before going to her house or...” he began before Carolina interrupted him.

“Plane food? Did you just insinuate that you’d eat plane food? I am so ashamed of you right now.”

“I’m a chef, Carolina. I wouldn’t eat plane food. I’d bring food with me. I just don’t want to impose anymore than necessary. I don’t know what time my plane will arrive. Teijana might not be up to feeding me.”

“Teijana is a proper Southerner. Southerners feed people, period...even before we execute them. Of course Teijana will feed you.”

“Probably something drowning in gravy,” he joked.

“Carl, don’t get smart with me. Of course, Teijana will feed you and if it has gravy on it definitely don’t eat it. She’s more of a snack cakes kind of chick. Tell her you want some chicken and waffles and she’ll stop by a restaurant.”

“Why would I want chicken and waffles?”

“Because, it’s slamming, that’s why. Now hush. Make sure you get a flight that lands in the daylight hours. Teijana can’t be hanging about at night. Atlanta’s not Auckland, okay. As much as I love the south, we do have our own dangers, such as having more guns than people.”

“Are you sure, Carolina? I don’t want to impose. Teijana might...” he started before being cut off by Carolina.

“Teijana will be all too happy to show you around,” she said. *Teijana will be happy to do it or else I will tell her brothers about that fight that she got into.*

“Okay, but only if she doesn’t mind having me around. I will do my best not to disrupt her life more than necessary.”

Carolina’s smile widened even more as she thought of her absent-minded best friend. She was sure that Carl’s stay in Atlanta was going to be quite interesting to say the very least.

“Oh, she won’t even notice that you’re around half the time. But a word of warning: be prepared to feed both of y’all because she’s been known to live off of potato chips and gummy bears when she’s deep into her books.”

“She can’t cook at all?”

“Don’t know and never plan to find that out. Carl,” she hesitated.

“Yes, Carolina.”

“Do me a favor.”

“Anything,” he said and she knew that he meant it.

“Teijana is different. You’re probably going to do more caring for her than she’s going to do caring for you. The reason that I decided to stay with her is because she’s one of those people that could forego the sun and live in a library if you let her. You know sunlight makes Vitamin D. Anyway, be gentle with her...unless she’s in danger of blowing something up. If that’s the case, simply drag her ass away from the smoking inferno kicking and screaming if you have to,” she added before being interrupted by Carl.

Carolina was surprised when the normally extremely polite Carl interrupted her. “Carolina, I promise that I’ll take care of her and treat Teijana with the utmost respect.”

“Thank you, Carl. Now change your ticket and call me back tomorrow.”

“Thank you Carolina...” Carl let his sentence trail then on a sigh he continued. “And let Mariana know that I’m happy for both her and Samson.”

“Why don’t you ring her and tell her yourself? I know that she’d love to hear from you.”

She paused hearing Carl laugh.

“I think that it’s best that I don’t do that, Carolina. I’m definitely not on Samson’s favorite person list,” Carl commented.

“The only person on Samson’s favorite person list is Mariana. You might not be on his list, but you are on mine, else I wouldn’t have shit to do with you. And Mariana is Samson’s wife Carl—not his prisoner.”

“I just don’t want to rock the boat.”

“All right then, I’m not going to force the issue, but know this, you’d better not leave the States without seeing me. Don’t forget to call me tomorrow with those details.”

“I will. Thank you again, Carolina.” Carl said sincerely.

“You’re welcome, sweetheart,” Carolina responded as she closed her phone.

Carolina sighed as her thoughts wandered to her best friend. Though six years her junior, Teijana Bailey was not only her best friend but her very ‘bestest’ friend. Teijana Cadence Bailey was special, and not simply because she was a genius who was prone to do things like wearing two completely different tennis shoes at one time. Teijana was special because that chick had moxie and lots of it. Underneath that lab coat was a chick with a pair of balls matched only by her intellect and sense of humor. They’d met on campus. She was in the throes of

committing felony assault on her laptop when Teijana had come up and stopped her from delivering the *coup de grace*.

"Don't stop me. I want to kill this bastard," she'd pled.

"I know you do but how about you let me take a look at it and you save all of that killing rage for something important like those stoplights downtown that don't match up worth a damn."

"Fine, gosh," she'd replied.

Not only had Teijana fixed her laptop in no time flat, she'd invited her to lunch, and how could she not go to lunch with the woman who was like an entire computer repair department by herself. If she ever initiated a coup, she was so getting Teijana to be in charge of the technical stuff. Sitting down in the posh restaurant, she was surprised when the table was quickly filled up by some of the finest men she'd ever seen. She'd looked at them and said the only thing that she could say: 'mercy'. Though Teijana introduced them, she'd quickly dubbed them Mr. Fine Ass Motherfuckers one through five. Two of them looked vaguely familiar, but her mind was overloaded with too much visual fine to give it more thought. Plus, she was tired and hungry.

She was all set to order when she'd caught the tail end of Teijana's order. That chica actually ordered a bowl of tomatoes, a piece of cake, liver,

scrambled eggs and a slice of cheddar cheese. If she'd eaten this morning, she would've yarked all over the place.

"If you're not pregnant with an alien baby than you're not eating that shit!"

Teijana had tried (in vain) to convince her of the merits of that order: it had vitamin C, and iron and...Carolina had simply tuned her out and turned the crazy momma voice on her and the waiter. She knew that Teijana had wanted to protest but being a Southern woman, she'd recognized the crazy momma voice and had quickly hushed.

All was well until Mr. Fine Ass Motherfucker Number Six joined them...and got on her last damn nerve so bad that it diminished his finenesss...well a tiny bit, a little bit, a miniscule amount. Okay, his fucked up attitude didn't do shit to diminish his fineness but he was working her nerves without even opening his mouth. He'd stared at her with...suspicion. And then he'd opened those fine, pussy-eating lips.

"Where did you come from, Miss?"

She'd managed to hold on to her temper—barely.

"First, my title is 'Doctor' not 'Miss.' Second, I came from my momma, via her vaginal canal. Third, you should write this day down because you've set a new world record for fastest time to

work my last nerve. Fourth, there is no fourth, don't speak to me like that. I'm not your dog, your sub, or any other thing that you think that you can dominate."

The silence at the table was shattered by the sounds of Teijana laughing her ass off. Teijana literally laughed so hard she'd spit her drink all over *Fine Ass Motherfucker Number Two*. Though she was concerned that Teijana was going to pull a muscle, she couldn't help but smile. Already a good-looking woman, laughter only served to highlight her beauty.

"Ha ha! You got told off, "Teijana sing-songed.

"Finally, Franklin has met someone who's not scared of him," one of the other *Mr. Fine Ass Motherfuckers* commented.

"Yep, and she's my best friend," Teijana said.

"For real?" she'd asked, never having someone claim her so fast.

"Yep, I promised myself that any woman who didn't notice my brother's looks was going to be my best friend."

"Well chica, I hate to tell you this. I noticed how fine your brothers are, I just don't give a shit. But you said I was your best friend and you don't get to take it back."

"I don't want to take it back, Carolina."

“Good, because I’d hate to have to show up at your job wearing the crazy best friend outfit, threatening to kill off all of your other friends.”

And that’s how she’d been introduced to the Bailey family. She already knew what Teijana’s reaction would be to Carl: mild annoyance that she had to leave her ‘secret lab’, followed by a comment about his sexuality. Having her brothers and father as her prime example of manhood, she’d thought damn near every male who wasn’t them was gay.

She could only imagine what the extremely proper and meticulously groomed Carl would think of the beautiful mad scientist whose usual look was disheveled. Sometimes Teijana’s clothes were so wrinkled they looked like they were in 3-D. Even if he could get past her ‘outfits’, she wondered if Carl would be able to keep the look of horror off his face when he realized that she wasn’t simply engaging in hyperbole when it came to Teijana’s food. That chick thought nothing of making a five-course meal out of things she got from vending machines. Carl’s sense of culinary propriety would surely be nicked. And his wellbeing would be in danger if he pissed off Teijana. Oh, this was going to be so much fun. Picking up the Zora Neale Hurston novel, she headed off to the kitchen to put the brownies in the oven...completely oblivious to the danger that she was in.

«»*

Mackenzie entered the kitchen with the intention of interrogating his woman. He was passing by her room when he'd heard her phone ring. Hearing another man's name upon her lips did not sit well with him. *Who the fuck was Carl and why did she smile when saying his name?* His name was the only name that should spill from her luscious lips. After the kiss they'd shared, oh, damn, he needed to change his train of thought before he needed another cold shower. His body did so not like him right now. It was pissed that he kept exposing it to cold showers that only served to leave him cold because his dick was still hard when he finished. His body was also pissed that he was keeping it from Carolina, not understanding the need to take his time with this woman.

Entering the kitchen, he was all set to grill her, then kiss her senseless, when he saw her. She was sitting at the breakfast island reading a book. Her chin was propped up by her palm and she was totally engrossed in her reading. Green eyes watched every movement she made reveling in the way that she read. Carolina was an active reader. Taking a few minutes to watch her read, he smiled at her reactions. She sighed. She laughed. She sucked her teeth and shook her head. All the while her face remained

animated. He felt an unreasonable pang of jealousy at the book, hating it for being able to elicit her passion. As much as he enjoyed action movies, watching the emotions flit across his woman's beautiful face enthralled him more than any movie ever did. Even though he was sure to make noise as he walked into the kitchen, Carolina was so engrossed in her book that it took her a few seconds to acknowledge his presence, but when she did it was worth the wait.

«»*

Carolina's eyes left the words on the pages in front of her as she felt someone watching her. Her body knew who it was before the rest of her registered it—Mackenzie. Turning in her seat, her gaze moved over him, slowly traversing Mackenzie's body, starting with his sweatpants-encased cock, which was right in her face, and working its way up taking in his abdomen, his wide chest, his thick neck, those pussy-eating lips, and those smoldering, green eyes set in the face that haunted her most erotic dreams.

The first words out of Carolina's mouth were, "What do you want now?" She watched as his sensuous lips spread out in a smile that had her clit throbbing out of control. Carolina squeezed her thighs together in an attempt to stop the throbbing but it just made it worse.

“You, Sweetness,” Mackenzie drawled.

Those were the only two words that Mackenzie said but he might as well have said them whilst his tongue was buried in her pussy. Biting her lip, she tried to think of something other than her fingers buried in his golden hair and her lips parted as she screamed with ecstasy. She tried to think of other things but it was a fruitless task and her panties could attest to that—dammit! How did he manage to make her cream for him with just two words? How?

“I’m busy,” she snapped, more pissed at her body’s betrayal of her wishes than at the fine motherfucker standing in front of her. *Liar, liar pants on fire* her pussy sang to her. Her brain cackled and it felt like her panties had actually disintegrated. Goodness! What was wrong with her?

«»*

“Uh, huh, so when do I get lunch?” Mackenzie asked his beautiful feisty woman. He saw the light of anger spark to life in her eyes at his impertinent question and had to stop himself from smiling. Oh, this was going to be good. He was going to be cussed out and he was going to enjoy every syllable of it!

“When you feel the need to eat why do you think that I would want to know about it?” Carolina asked him with a frown.

Mackenzie flattened both of his hands on the breakfast island top and leaned forward so that their lips were almost touching.

“Because all I think about is how sweet you’re going to taste on my tongue, Sweetness. At night, I imagine how you’re going to pant my name when I’m buried so deep inside of you that you can feel me at the back of your throat.

«»*

“How—” Carolina whimpered as she moved her head back, away from the sensuous mouth that was enticing her with vivid images—the same images that made her want to beat Mackenzie to the floor and fuck him into a coma. Dammit!

“Stop it, you pervert!” Carolina ordered. She wondered when her voice had gotten so husky. Moving to the refrigerator in an attempt to escape him, she began to pull out plastic bowls that held contents for a hella sandwich. Placing the food on the kitchen island, she then grabbed the homemade bread she’d made earlier that morning after her first encounter with Mackenzie fine ass motherfucker Roberts.

“What should I do?” Mackenzie asked.

“Stand there and look stupid. Oh, you’re already doing that” Carolina said without looking at him. Carolina didn’t need to look up to know that

Mackenzie was grinning his fine ass off. She felt him grin as she made sandwiches that could only be described as monstrosities. Two thickly sliced pieces of warm soft bread with the contents of a deli, green grocer and butcher's store were all involved in those sandwiches.

«»*

Mackenzie just watched with glee and hunger as Carolina—who was a whole foot away, which was too damn far in his opinion—worked in silence. He knew that it was killing her to ignore him but she was doing a commendable job. As always, he was in awe of how his woman could whet so many of his appetites with an ease and a gracefulness that blew his mind. His mind might be blown, but he wasn't so far gone that he'd forgotten about the motherfucker poaching on his territory. He still wanted to know who the fuck this Carl fellow was that she'd been talking to on the phone when he'd passed her room. He wanted to know who the fuck Carl was and where he could find him so he could beat him to a pulp for daring to flirt with his woman, but he held that all in check...after all, Mackenzie Roberts was a very patient man.

“Take a seat,” Carolina ordered. Instead of being put out, he did as he was told.

“Thank you so much, Sweetness,” he said with a sigh as Carolina placed the bulging sandwiches in front of him before grabbing the pitcher of sweet iced tea and a plate of peanut butter brownies and setting those before him too.

* «*» *

Carolina watched as Mackenzie reacted to those sandwiches. He reminded her of an excited child. She didn't want to like, let alone lust after, Mackenzie but she couldn't stop the smile that came to her lips as Mackenzie waited impatiently for his lunch. Carolina enjoyed cooking and even more than that she enjoyed watching other people enjoy her food. Though she didn't make the ingredients, she did cook the ham, the turkey and roast beef. And she did make the iced tea and the brownies. But she didn't make the brownies for Mackenzie, she'd made them for her baby. Of course, she'd already put a container away for Mariana so she could allow Mackenzie the privilege of partaking in those kick-ass brownies.

* «*» *

Mackenzie bit into the sandwich and sighed. Damn, he wanted to kiss Carolina again and again.

The sandwich was so good that he'd even suffer through the iced tea that she poured him. When she placed those brownies in front of him he couldn't help the glitter in his eyes. Though he'd yet to taste them, he could smell them and he knew that he was in for a treat. Holding on to his sandwich like someone might take it from him, he watched Carolina nibble on a brownie while he inhaled his lunch.

"How's the sandwich?" she asked.

Too busy eating to form a proper answer, he simply moaned before swallowing the last bite. Sighing from the memory of those sandwiches, he took a sip of tea before tackling the brownies, which he finished in record time. He was going to kiss Carolina. How could he not after a lunch that was that damn good? Getting up and placing his dishes in the dishwasher, he walked to her.

"You know you're meant to chew right?" Carolina asked with wide eyes.

"Mmm hmm," was all that he said as his eyes came to rest on her lips. He watched Carolina's eyes glaze over.

"May I kiss you?" he drawled.

"Yes," she answered, surprising them both.

Mackenzie wasn't taking any chances that Carolina would change her ever active mind. Hearing her yes, he reached out for her. Making sure that he was gentle in spite of his dick's insistence that he

ravish her and assert dominance, he backed her against the kitchen island. Sparing a moment to glare at that fucking book, he swatted it to the floor before lifting her onto the counter. Ignoring Carolina's gasp, he tunneled one hand through her multitude of locs and used the other to hold her chin before stepping between her legs. Slowly, he lowered his head. When their mouths were no more than a breath away he paused and smoothed a thumb over her full bottom lip. He groaned as the tip of Carolina's tongue came out to tease his finger.

His dick was always hard around his woman but whenever he touched her, his body burned with fever and his dick prompted him to bury himself, balls deep, inside of his woman. He lowered his head, closing the distance between their mouths, and immediately felt the rush of blood to his head—both of them. *Carolina, Carolina, Carolina* his heart beat and his body sing-songed. *Carolina, Carolina, Carolina* everything within him chanted. She gasped under his lips and arched into him making him dizzy with longing, want and need.

«»*

Oh. My. Good-ness, Carolina sighed when Mackenzie lifted her onto the counter. He'd lifted her easily as if her 190 pounds wasn't shit. Visions of

him lifting her and spreading her out on his bed filled her head. Carolina wanted this motherfucker with the fierceness. Her body demanded him. *Explore him. Conquer him. Infect him with scurvy and then steal his land.* Oops, wrong fantasy. Where was she at? Oh, yeah, *Ogle him. Take a year-long expedition over the terrain of his body. Plant your flag in him and claim this man—who is all man—in the name of your pussy that hasn't had any dick in soooooooooo long.* Yeah, that sounded like a plan.

She was about to do that if Mackenzie would stop fucking around and kiss her like he truly meant it. For a man that wanted her, he was sure taking his sweet time about it. Instead of plundering her mouth, he leisurely explored it. Carolina wanted ravishment dammit, not the gentle kisses that Mackenzie placed upon her lips as if he were sipping from a cup of hot coffee. She wanted him to devour her. Wriggling beneath his gentle, but big, hands, she silently begged for his ravishment, but he kept taking quick pecks at her lips. Frustrated didn't even begin to describe how she felt as he seemed to disregard her need.

"Mackenzie," she whimpered against his soft kisses. She arched further into him hoping to convey how much she needed him.

He continued to overwhelm her with his gentleness as he answered. "What is it, Sweetness?"

“I need...I want...” she whispered on a gasp as he ground his hard dick into her abdomen.

“What Sweetness?” he rasped.

“You...harder,” she answered, her words disjointed.

She was sure that Mackenzie got the meaning but he continued to peck at her lips. Attempting a different approach, she thrust out her tongue in order to attack his mouth. Mackenzie simply smiled and backed off a little, causing her to groan her dissatisfaction. The fine ass motherfucker had the nerve to chuckle!

“How hard?” he asked as if they were talking about the weather. Trying not to grind her teeth in frustration, Carolina told him exactly what she needed. She wasn’t a girl fresh from the convent, she was a woman who knew what she wanted and when she wanted it! She might sound wanton, but whenever she was in his presence, she was wanton...and a small part of her reveled in that.

“Kiss me like you mean it, motherfucker,” she demanded.

Mackenzie simply aimed that sexy ass grin of his at her before crowding her into the corner where he held her in place with his big body. Thrusting his magnificently hard dick against the apex of her thick thighs, he pierced her with a look full of promise

before lowering his head and taking over their kiss—just the way Carolina needed.

* «*» *

Mackenzie was so busy grinding his hard dick into Carolina and plundering her mouth with his tongue that a pack of ninjas riding a herd of elephants could've run right through the kitchen at that moment and he wouldn't have noticed...unless they tried to take Carolina from him. Carolina was his. *Damn straight his body thundered.* His hunger only intensified when Carolina moaned her satisfaction into his mouth whilst gripping his hair like a lifeline.

Thrusting his tongue into her mouth the way his dick was begging, pleading and screaming at him to do, his fingers tightened on his woman's hips. Dragging her harder against his grinding hips, they were virtually melded together and still it wasn't enough!

"Who is he?" Mackenzie asked as he reluctantly freed Carolina's lips so that they could both suck in much-needed oxygen. Though the necessity of breathing forced him to let go of those luscious lips, he couldn't let go of her. Moving his lips along Carolina's cheek, he leaned back a fraction of a fraction of an inch to look down into Carolina's dazed eyes. She licked her lips and his eyes followed the movement,

and then his tongue did. Carolina moaned and Mackenzie dropped his forehead onto hers as their ragged breathing intermingled into a symphony of desire.

“Who?” she asked him as his words penetrated her lust-fogged brain.

“The dead man that you were speaking to on the phone. Who is he?” Mackenzie reiterated as his eyes darkened at the thought of another man trying to claim *his* woman.

“You’ve got a tap on my phone?” Carolina asked still looking soft and delectable, but a whole lot less welcoming. Mackenzie could feel the fight coming. Hell, whenever he and Carolina were around each other if there wasn’t a fight, argument, or a thorough cussing out, then obviously they were both unconscious. Of course, knowing his Carolina, she would find a way to connect on a subconscious level and tell him off.

“No, but I’ve got ears and when I walked past your room I heard you talking to someone named, Carl,” Mackenzie sneered the name of the man who’d been speaking with Carolina not so long ago.

“Oh, he’s just one of the many men that like to pleasure me on occasion,” Carolina said snidely.

Feeling his face tighten with anger and his lips morph into a scowl, his fingers bit into her hips. As angry as he was, of course Carolina wasn’t the least

bit intimidated. Instead of struggling to free herself, she got closer pushing her tempting softness into him. He groaned and his dick that was trapped by clothing thrust against her aching wet pussy, pleading its case.

“You are mine woman! No other man has any right—” Mackenzie growled but was cut off by Carolina as she pushed against his chest. Any other man would’ve tried to get the hell out of dodge hearing the curses that spilled from his woman’s lush mouth. Not him, he simply remained still, enraptured with that tempting mouth. At some point in her tirade she pushed at him and he moved—a whole inch from where he’d been plastered against her.

She was still reaming him pretty good although as usual, he was so caught up in her beauty that he missed part of what she said.

“You don’t tell me who I can talk to and who I can’t, motherfucker! You don’t have any fucking rights whatsoever so you can get that shit out of your fucking head...”

It was an impressive tirade but he refused to move back. Finally, Carolina’s words slowed to a stop. If he’d had just a little more blood somewhere other than his dick, Carolina wouldn’t have managed to wriggle away from him. Dazed, Mackenzie watched as Carolina picked up the book that he’d

swept onto the floor, glared at him while shooting him the bird, and flounced from the kitchen.

Running a frustrated and slightly unsteady hand through his wheat-colored hair, Mackenzie remained in the kitchen alone for a whole thirty seconds before seeking out the one woman on God's green earth that could make his emotions run the gamut from hot to cold within nanoseconds.

Chapter 7ish

A Little Boom Chica Now Now

While the storm outside raged, the storm inside was steadily brewing. Samson and his Mariana were on smoldering. Mackenzie and Carolina were on simmering. Carolina just didn't know it.

«»*

Samson brushed his lips against her forehead loving the silken feel of her skin. The beast in him purred when he felt his *Somente Mina* sigh and snuggle closer. Though they were all supposed to be watching the race, none of them were very successful at it though Carolina was giving it a hella try—in between reading yet another book. He'd told his woman what Mackenzie had planned and *Somente Mina Nizhoni* had been only too happy to help. From his vantage point he had a good view of Carolina and Mackenzie on the other couch.

Hiding a smile in *Somente Mina's* neck and a raging hard-on against her voluptuous ass, Samson tightened his arms around his woman and breathed in her scent. He felt *Somente Mina* sigh and knew that she was smiling. Shifting her in his arms, he

watched her as she surreptitiously watched Mackenzie and Carolina. Watching her beautiful mouth stretch into a grin, he reluctantly dragged his hungry eyes from the beautiful woman in his arms and took a look at the couple occupying the sofa in the opposite corner. He smiled noticing that Mackenzie had commandeered Carolina's foot—which was almost in Mackenzie's lap—and was slowly sliding his other hand up the length of her leg. Mackenzie's hand had almost reached her knee before Carolina slapped his hand away. Carolina didn't even bother to admonish him, she simply continued to read her book as if having a determined Scotsman dogging her every step was par for the course.

«»*

Being that Carolina already knew the results of the race at Michigan International Speedway, she only kept one eye on the race and the other on her book. Well, at least she was trying to. She hadn't turned a page since Mackenzie had sat his fine ass down beside her. Samson had a media room that could comfortably sit both an offensive line and a defensive line, yet Mackenzie had to be right up under her.

It didn't even seem to matter that she'd stretched out on the comfortable couch. Oh no, that

motherfucker just had to sit at her feet. And he wasn't happy to just sit there and mind his own business. No, he had to keep touching her. Currently, he was playing with her feet. She'd moved them but he'd simply dragged them back so that the soles of her feet were resting against his big, hard thigh that was way too close to his big, hard dick.

Carolina couldn't help but notice his dick. Each time she looked his way it was just so there for her to ogle and drool over. Of course the big, fine ass motherfucker did nothing to hide the damned thing!

Mackenzie tempting her was one thing, but then there was the fact that he was trying to touch her...with her baby in the same room of all things! Bastard! Fine ass, big, hard-dicked bastard! Her pussy yelled but she ignored her baser instincts and shushed it once more. That was the problem. Every time she was sure that she could disregard Mackenzie the motherfucker did something that would make her have to acknowledge his fine ass!

"I'm tired," Carolina heard Mariana murmur to her husband. She watched as Samson paused the race and rose easily despite having an armful of a pregnant Mariana. Walking the short distance to where she and Mackenzie sat he offered them the remote control before dipping Mariana low enough so that she could kiss her. Carolina was so caught up in hugging her baby that she'd missed the wink and

grin that her baby threw at Mackenzie. With the departure of Samson and her baby, the media room fell silent.

Carolina immediately rose and settled on another couch before restarting the race. Her book was quickly forgotten as she wasn't really reading it anyway. She glued her eyes to the screen, hoping that the race could keep her attention off of the man sharing the room with her. How wrong she was.

«»*

Mackenzie stared at Carolina as she set aside the book and turned her attention to the race. The race was playing on a state-of-the-art projection screen and the sound system made the viewer feel as if they were sitting in the stands instead of in the comfort of their own home. Normally, the sounds and sights of the race would've captured his complete attention, but currently Mackenzie was watching something more meaningful. And that something was really a someone—the future Mrs. Mackenzie Duncan Roberts.

“You’re watching me,” Carolina said without taking her eyes off the screen.

Mackenzie simply smiled knowing exactly what he was doing. He was trying to make Carolina ac-

knowledge him the way a woman should acknowledge her man.

"I know."

"Do you mind?" Carolina asked.

"Not really," he assured her.

"Well, I do," she snapped.

"Why?"

"It's rude for a start—" she began.

"But I like to watch you—" he finished.

"Well you can just stop it," she huffed.

"No. But feel free to watch me back," Mackenzie said softly knowing that his deep voice was husky with need.

"I don't think so," Carolina said not even bothering to look at him much less glare at him.

"Ah, but I think it's such a good idea, Sweetness. Don't you want to see the look in my eyes before I take your succulent lips beneath mine and make love to your mouth?" he asked.

"No," she said with a pout which turned into a strangled cry of outrage when the screen went blank.

He watched her reach for the remote and then he waited for her to realize that he still had it. It only took a moment for her to turn to him, fire in her beautiful eyes.

"Made you look," he practically sing-songed.

"Fine...I'm looking at you," Carolina said rolling her eyes.

“Come here,” Mackenzie commanded in an even voice. His eyes never left Carolina’s face, which is why he saw the scowl develop and denial settle over her features.

“No,” she stated.

“I wasn’t asking,” he countered.

«»*

Carolina could not believe the fucking nerve of that man. There he stood looking all arrogant and delicious and commanding, but she refused to back down from the challenge that Mackenzie was issuing. Looking him directly in the eye, she responded.

“And I wasn’t answering. I am telling you no.”

“Carolina,” he drawled.

Oh, damn. Why did he have to go and say her name like that? Why? On anyone’s else’s lips it was merely a moniker, just a fucking name...but when Mackenzie said it with that deep burr, with the husky tone, with the look of concentrated emotion in his eyes as he watched her, her name was an endearment. No, it was more than that. The way that he said her name was hungry.

“Carolina,” he practically purred when she didn’t respond.

“What?!” she cried as she looked at the big, fine ass bastard.

“Come. Here.” Mackenzie commanded.

Carolina didn't answer verbally, she merely shook her head.

Mackenzie growled low in his throat as he stood and stalked her way.

Oh shit! Carolina got to her feet and was about to make a run for it (yeah right) but Mackenzie reached her before she could take the first step.

Gently grabbing her around the waist, Mackenzie pulled Carolina against his chest and ground his dick against her before hefting her in his arms and re-taking his former seat. He didn't say anything. He simply settled his big ass feet on the ottoman before picking up the remote and flipping through the various channels on cable.

Oh. My. Goodness. Did this motherfucker just a) cut the power to the screen; b) walk his fine ass over to her and grind that big dick of his into her; c) pick her up as if she weighed nothing; and, d) sit down and turn the television back on like nothing had transpired? Like he hadn't caused her panties to get wet? Damn, she should fuck him. She should fuck him but she wasn't going to. Oh, no, she was simply going to drive him crazy with her running commentary. Being that her panties were already full of her cream, she decided to get comfortable and as such turned so that she was sitting across his lap. Using his shoulder as a pillow she toed off her

shoes and stretched before snuggling closer and resting her head against his hardness. Damn, this motherfucker smelled delicious. She enjoyed the feeling of being in his arms...not that she was going to tell him.

* «*» *

Mackenzie wanted Carolina in the best way, but he would never force her. He would, however, do everything in his power to get her to want him back. But before she would probably give in to her desire, she'd need to be a whole lot more comfortable with him. Fucking her senseless might do that, but he wasn't going to settle for just one time, just as he wasn't going to settle for her having second thoughts after they did make love. If he had any idea of what Carolina was thinking...he might've been worried for a second, but he wouldn't have changed a thing.

After flipping through multiple channels and hearing Carolina tell him exactly why each movie was unacceptable, he settled on a nature program. He really didn't give a damn what was on that television, he merely wanted to hold the feisty Carolina in his arms. Carolina kept resettling herself in his lap, which was doing nothing for his control. The longer he sat, the harder his dick got. And Carolina wasn't helping the situation. That woman smelled like se-

duction and she tasted like love. She was a whole lot of woman and his body recognized her, wanted her, and demanded her.

"Do you mind?" he drawled when she yet again moved in his lap.

"Do I mind what?" she asked.

"You keep moving," he accused.

"Yeah, and?" she purred in that husky, come hither voice that had him on the brink of coming.

"Yeah and if you keep doing that, I'm," he rasped.

"You're what?" she purred in his ear.

Dammit all to hell. His woman was killing him...and enjoying every damn second of it.

"Carolina," he pled.

"Mackenzie," she responded as she turned those luminous eyes on him.

Leaning down, he confessed. "I want you, Sweetness."

"I want you to want me," she responded as she reached up and grabbed a handful of his hair and pulled him down to her.

Mackenzie wasn't about to pass on that invitation. Offering up copious thank yous he took her lips. Using one hand to steady her, he used the other to palm one of her heavy breasts. Feeling Carolina arch into his touch and moan out his name, he exerted

more pressure, pinching the nipple that threatened to cut through her shirt and bra.

“Mackenzie,” she panted. “Harder, please,” she demanded.

“Mine, Carolina. Mine,” he decreed.

“Yes,” she admitted as she took his hand and guided it under her t-shirt and under her bra.

He reveled at the touch of her silken skin; he reveled at the feel of her bountiful breasts; he reveled at the fact that her breasts overflowed his big hands; he reveled in her moans, her pants, and her smell. Most of all, he reveled in her acceptance of him. This woman was so beautiful. She was so his. And when she snaked her hands under his t-shirt and raked her nails across his nipples, he was through.

“Yes,” he hissed. “Touch me, Carolina. Touch me, and mean it,” he demanded.

“I always mean it when I touch you,” she rasped. “I always mean it. I don’t touch people lightly.”

Pushing her breasts up, he leaned down and took a nipple in his mouth...and watched her go wild. Pausing to strip off his shirt, he threw it to the floor before rising with his woman in his arms. Carefully placing her on the floor, he buried his face in her cleavage inhaling her womanly smell and loving the way her womanly curves fit him. Using her hips as handholds he ground his hard dick into her. He

wanted nothing more than to touch that sweet-smelling pussy but if he went anywhere near her pussy, he'd have her impaled on his dick. And he'd keep her there for as long as it took for them to procreate.

He was going to make out with her and leave it at that before running upstairs and taking an ice cold shower. That was his plan but then, she spoke and blew his good intentions all to hell.

"Mackenzie, please," she moaned.

"Please what, Sweetness?"

"Please, please, do something. Please Mackenzie," she asked again as she lifted her hips.

Without releasing her lips he put his hand into the waistband of her sweatpants and sought out the treasure within them. Snaking his hand into her panties he paused to caress her mound before searching out her entrance with his middle finger. Finding her entrance, he plunged a thick finger into her and reveled in the heat that surrounded him. The world around him dimmed. All he could focus on was the beautiful woman beneath him. She was so fucking beautiful and her passion only intensified it. He felt Carolina wrap her thick legs around him. He felt her arch her softness into him. He felt her tremble from pleasure. He even felt her mark his back with her nails, but all he could do was watch her come apart from pleasure. *How could a woman be*

this beautiful? Leaning down to capture her lips, he caught her screams in his mouth loving the way his name tasted on her lips.

Mackenzie watched her come down from her climax. Rolling onto his back, he pulled her atop him. Settling her in his arms he listened to her harsh breathing knowing that this moment had changed everything. She was his and he knew then that he'd always been hers. He also knew that he couldn't go any further regardless of how much his dick raged at him. His woman took him to the brink. She took his control and she gave him back more than he ever wished for. Carolina was the master of his heart and when he made love to her, it was going to be done properly...and in his home. Gaining his feet, he pulled her up. Lifting her into his arms he took her to her room. He wasn't worried about not being able to hold back from making love to her; he was too busy thinking of taking her to his home.

«»*

Though she was loath to admit it, Carolina enjoyed Mackenzie's attention...and that's what bothered her. Few men had ever triggered all of her fuck-me-now fantasies yet Mackenzie had tripped them all. She wanted that motherfucker with the fierceness.

She enjoyed being in his arms and from the feel of his big dick he enjoyed it too. It wasn't often that she found a man that could make her feel delicate. Whenever she was around Mackenzie she felt every bit of her femaleness. It wasn't simply the fact that Mackenzie was physically bigger, it was the fact that he always treated her in such a way that she was continuously reminded of her femaleness. That was a first. To other people she was a woman but with Mackenzie it wasn't just that she was a woman. She was *his* woman.

As much as she liked the sound, and thought, of that, it scared her. Loving a man like Mackenzie left her vulnerable. It left her vulnerable not only to being hurt, but vulnerable to being broken. But she knew that she couldn't pretend anymore. She might play hard to get, but she could no longer pretend that Mackenzie didn't affect her. Mackenzie turned her on so good—so damn good—and it wasn't just sexual. The man turned on her mind...tapping into her deepest fantasies.

Admitting her need was scary but it was also liberating. And the storm in Mackenzie's eyes only served to bring the seductress to the surface. After he placed her in his lap, she took full advantage of that position squirming around to get comfortable knowing that she was making him impossibly harder...and loving that. He'd warned her and instead of backing

off, she'd continued to tease him knowing that he wouldn't go further than she wanted him to.

She was all set to drag it out but then he'd gone and said her name—like that. Mackenzie said her name like it was the only word that he knew. Mackenzie said her name like his life depended on it. And she was fucking lost in the promises in his voice and his eyes. She could no longer keep her desires to herself, especially not when Mackenzie held her so gently, touched her so perfectly, and listened so well. He didn't just hear her, Mackenzie listened to her...even when she didn't say a word.

Oh goodness, the way he touched her. The way he touched her, the way he touched her. That man touched her on the outside and she felt it all the way to her heart. Mackenzie's touch not only had her requesting his touch, his touch had her admitting all kinds of things. And when he'd inserted his finger into her, it had her seeing not just stars, but the whole fucking universe. She'd come so hard, so quick, that she could do nothing but lay there and try and catch her breath.

She didn't know how long she lay there. Hell, she didn't even recall where she was until she'd felt Mackenzie roll her onto his hard chest and kiss her as she calmed down. When Mackenzie got up, she was sure that he was going to request his pleasure, but he'd simply kissed her into pleasure before carry-

ing her to her room where he laid next to her...demanding nothing, yet giving her everything.

«»*

Mackenzie stood under the hot spray of the shower. The echo of Carolina's climax was still thundering through his body. In fact, her climax was permanently imprinted on his mind and in his heart. He could still taste her, smell her, and feel her. Leaning his hands against the wall of the shower, he thrust his head under the nozzle and groaned as he saw his predicament staring at him from between his thighs. His dick was angrily red and he felt like his balls were going to explode but he'd kept his cool. He'd tortured himself just that little bit more by delving into Carolina's heat and now his dick was reminding him of his noble gesture. Actually, his dick was mocking him for his gentlemanly ways. Mackenzie was unable to block it out, just as he could block nothing out when it came to his woman. Groaning, he felt his body shudder as he remembered the smoldering heat of his Sweetness' pussy when he dipped his fingers inside of her. Gripping the base of his dick, which was hard as granite, Mackenzie moaned as he slowly stroked himself.

«»*

Carolina woke when Mackenzie left her bed. He'd only just walked out of the room and already she missed his heat, his smell, his presence. She perked up when she heard the shower go on in Mackenzie's room. Moaning, she thought about all of that hard, naked man. Biting her lip, she stopped fantasizing about Mackenzie and admonished herself knowing that Mackenzie hadn't gained his satisfaction, yet he'd unselfishly gifted her with continuous pleasure. Mackenzie hadn't pressured her into giving him what she knew that he wanted. Instead, he'd caressed her and held her until she came down from a series of mind-blowing orgasms. Carrying her upstairs to her room, he'd gently laid her on her bed and held her until she'd fallen into the best sleep she'd ever had. Normally, she was a light sleeper—not liking her vulnerability when she was asleep. But with Mackenzie beside her, she'd slept soundly, albeit briefly.

Smiling, she recalled the gentle kiss that Mackenzie had placed on her lips before he'd left her room. She didn't know what to think of Mackenzie now. On the outside Mackenzie was everything that she fought against: a privileged, white male. Yet on the inside, Mackenzie was most of the things that she'd dreamed of: giving, intelligent, gentle, and alpha. Sighing, she had to admit that regardless of

being a badass woman with a mean right cross, she still craved a man who could dominate her...without hurting her. A man who she didn't intimidate, but gave as good as he got. A man—just...like...Mackenzie.

As she lay alone in her bedroom, the orgasms that she'd experienced were still tingling through her body. Her ears once again tuned into the sound of Mackenzie moving about in the shower. She was assailed with images of Mackenzie, in particular, the expression on his face as he watched her orgasm.

Carolina moaned as she felt the tingling increase under her skin. She moaned, recalling the look of pained ecstasy on Mackenzie's face as he'd stroked his fingers deep inside of her overheated creaming pussy. Her fingers went to her breasts. They were achy so she stroked her breasts, paying attention to her protruding nipples that were begging for Mackenzie's hands and tongue. Rolling them between her forefingers and thumbs, a moan fell from her mouth and her clit began to throb.

«»*

Mackenzie's head was thrown back as he gasped for air. With his hand on his hard dick, he stroked up and down, slowly torturing himself as he envisioned his Carolina beneath him. Like a favorite

movie, images of Carolina flashed through his mind. Her eyes flashing caveats, her mouth curved into a grin whilst her eyes threw silent daggers his way. He groaned thinking of her mouth. Damn, that mouth; he had fantasies about it. He could watch her mouth all day long whether it was spitting invectives, dropping knowledge, or moaning out her pleasure. *Who was he kidding?* Everything she did with that mouth turned him on. Watching her drink her iced tea gave him hard-ons all day. Her throat moved like a lapping wave on the shores of a beach when she drank.

He increased his stroking thinking of her climaxing. Her mouth parted as she gasped in short breaths while he tugged her nipple between his teeth. His Carolina's breasts spilled over his hands and considering the size of his hands that was saying something. With a growl, he'd pushed his face into those soft mounds and breathed in his destiny. Laving the sweet flesh with his tongue, he latched onto the pebbled nipple and sucked hard.

With one hand wrapped around his engorged shaft, he slammed his hand flat against the shower wall. He moaned as he felt the tightening in his balls as he neared his orgasm. The image of Carolina's luminous eyes staring at him as his fingers stroked her into her climax pushed him over the edge. He shuddered remembering how Carolina threw her head back and moaned his name as her entire body

shuddered from pleasure. As the orgasm slowly sapped her strength, he'd wrapped her in his arms. Holding her against him as she rode out her orgasm, he shook recalling the sound of her choking out his name. His name on her lips was a serenade that would resound in his heart and soul for all eternity.

«»*

Carolina groaned as her fingers slipped over her inflamed and swollen clit. Whilst her other hand plucked at her nipple, she pictured the way that Mackenzie had looked wearing nothing but that fucking towel around his waist. She moaned knowing just how that body felt. Mackenzie's body had felt better than all of her fantasies combined. Sighing, she slid two fingers deep into her pussy. Stretching, she worked her fingers in as far as she could reach. It was good, but it wasn't enough. It...wasn't Mackenzie.

Carolina played one of her favorite fantasies in her head. *Who was she kidding?* All of her fantasies now involved Mackenzie. *Bastard*. Fine, pussy-eating, big-dicked, orgasm-inducing bastard. She especially enjoyed the way that he touched her. He touched her slowly, he always touched her slowly, but when he'd touched her the last time, he was as naked as the day he was born. His hot skin slipped

and slid over her overheated flesh as his fingers plucked at her clit. When his strong fingers slid into her creaming pussy, his hot mouth took turns pleasuring each of her breasts.

Recalling the pleasure, Carolina sighed. “Oh yes...yessss...oh there,” she moaned as her fingers increased the pressure inside of her pussy and her fingers pinched her nipples harder. The image in her head showed Mackenzie’s eyes lightening to almost pure jade as he whispered husky words of encouragement.

“Take your pleasure, Sweetness. Take your pleasure,” he’d commanded her, and for the first time, she’d obeyed.

«»*

Mackenzie’s breath hissed through his throat as he stroked his dick harder and faster. Recollections of Carolina’s breathy moans continuously taunted him, drawing his orgasm closer and closer to the surface. He gasped.

“Carolina...Carolina...oh sweetness,” he moaned as his dick began to twitch in his firm grip. He stroked harder and finally felt the response of his rigid flesh as he pictured his woman in the throes of her orgasm. The light in her eyes brightening to the point of flash lightning; the feel of her creamy pussy

gripping his fingers pulling his digits deeper into her body; the heat that generated from his woman's pussy; and the feel of her fingernails digging and gouging into the skin of his back as she screamed out his name.

"Mackenzie...oh yesssss...Mackenzie," she yelled before collapsing.

«»*

Carolina gasped as her climax began clawing up her body. She dug her fingers deeper inside of her body feeling the muscles clenching as she pinched her nipples harder. She wanted to drag out the sensation of her orgasm but that was impossible when images of the finest motherfucker she'd ever seen flashed through her mind. Gasping, she shuddered and groaned before the climax hit her. When it finally crashed over her, she sobbed and screamed out the only word that mattered in that moment.

"MACKENZIE!!!"

«»*

Mackenzie's hips pumped his dick through his tight fist as he grunted through the exertions. The water streamed over his head mixing with the sweat that he could taste. His eyes closed tightly as he allowed his solo climax to tear through his body. His

mouth opened as he hollered the name beating within his chest.

“CAROLINA!!!”

Chapter 8

Hot, Chocolate Lovin'

Carolina had been cooking since the wee hours of the morning. She'd made all manner of desserts including chocolate chip pecan pie, homemade chocolate ice cream, and her ass kicking quadruple chocolate slam cake. In a few hours she would put on the steaks and chicken breasts that she'd had marinating for the last two days in vacuum sealed bags. She was throwing down like that—okay wait, she always threw down—but she was going all out because her sister, Virginia, was due to arrive today. Virginia wasn't a culinary snob but her husband Mosé owned a chain of Southern style restaurants so she was accustomed to great food.

After cooking all morning, Carolina was fiending for a glass of sweet iced tea. She had the ice, she had the tea, and she had the sugar. What she didn't have was a taster or the ability to judge sweetness after sampling so many desserts. Mariana was napping and Samson had gone into Denver to collect Mariana's momma. It wouldn't have been a problem if she'd had access to her preferred brand of sugar, but she didn't.

Sighing, she grabbed up a slice of the quadruple chocolate slam cake she'd plated and covered with foil, poured a glass of tea and trudged out to find Mackenzie. After walking the quarter mile to the worksite, she stopped and towed off her brow before admiring the guest quarters. Mackenzie's skill as an architect was obvious. Despite its opulence the home didn't look out of place; it looked as if it belonged there. In fact, it looked as if the landscape had been grown around the house.

"Mackenzie!" she yelled.

It took less than a minute for the fine motherfucker to come ambling out.

"Yes, Sweetness," he drawled in that sexy fucking voice.

"Can I have Derek?" she asked just to rile him, knowing good and damn well that he wouldn't allow such a thing.

"No, Sweetness. I like Derek and it would pain me to kill him."

"That's what I thought. Taste this," she demanded thrusting the thermal cup of tea at him.

"What is it and why do I need to taste it?"

"Pussy juice and because you get all pissy when I entice other men with it," she snapped watching his eyes darken.

"Well, if that's the case, I'd rather drink it from the source," he said as he took the cup.

Biting her lip, she watched him take the cup.

"Is this tea?"

"Yep."

"Sweetness, I don't like iced tea."

"Yeah, and I'm trying to like you in spite of that disturbing fact. Now taste the damn tea because I need to sweeten it while it's still hot and I'm not sure if it has enough sugar in it."

Reluctantly, he tasted the tea.

"Is it sweet enough?" She asked.

"If by sweet you mean that it can give you diabetes then yes, it's sweet," he choked out.

"Ah, so it needs more sugar," she said before snatching the cup, thrusting the plate at him and flouncing off.

«»*

Mackenzie uncovered the plate Carolina had thrust at him and smiled. She'd figured out his obsession with all things chocolate. In the midst of wondering if his dislike for iced tea would prove to be problematic in their relationship, he tasted that cake...and lost his ability to think. After knowing everything he did about that woman and tasting that cake, there was no way in hell that he was going to take it slow. She was his. He planned to have a Roberts on the end of her name before autumn. He had

to go home...now, and make his place presentable for his future wife. Without moving from that spot, he yelled for Tom.

“Tom!”

A minute later his foreman hurried up. “Yes, Boss?”

“I need you to take over. Maybe for the rest of the week. I’ll let Samson know. Please inform the crew.”

“No problem. Is everything all right, Boss?”

“It will be when I get that woman to marry me,” he said as he hurried off.

* « * » *

Anyone seeing Dr. Virginia Williams-Semisi would know that despite her diminutive stature, she was a—Mariana’s momma and, b—a woman who got things done. She had a backbone reinforced with titanium steal and a will that had jumped on the back of obstacles and rode those motherfuckers into the ground. Pregnant at sixteen, she’d not only stayed in school—she didn’t miss a day. Her parents had had to place her in another school being that many public schools didn’t allow pregnant girls to remain in school. Being unmarried, black and pregnant didn’t help her cause. Then again, she hadn’t remained unmarried for longer than it had taken

Mosé Semisi to beg, plead, and finally threaten her daddy for her hand in marriage. With her family rallying around her and her husband Mosé willing to sacrifice everything for her, she'd graduated with a perfect 4.0 before enrolling at Atlanta University (now Clark Atlanta University) where she earned both a Bachelors and a Masters in Social Work before going on to the University of North Carolina where she earned her *juris doctorate*. An advocate for marginalized peoples, she was a force to be reckoned with. Not bad for a woman who had a toddler on her hip all through undergrad *and* grad school.

A year shy of fifty, she had a great presence about her—the same kind of presence that the greats had. She rarely raised her voice, then again she rarely had to. She had that momma-look and being that she'd spent most of her life being a momma, she had that look on lock.

As soon as Virginia disembarked from Samson's truck, she had an armful of her baby girl.

"Momma!" Mariana sighed.

"My baby, or should I say Carolina's baby?" she joked.

"Both," Mariana said.

"You are so spoiled. I'm going to talk to my sister about this."

“And you’d be wasting your time being that you’re the one that spoiled her so bad,” Carolina said from the porch.

“How you doing, little girl?” Virginia called.

“Fine! And you old lady?” Carolina called back before hugging her older sister. She loved Virginia something fierce.

“Where’s that fine husband of yours?”

“First you covet my baby and then my husband,” Virginia pouted.

“Well, Mariana is a beautiful, intelligent—although somewhat spoiled—child, and Mosé is fine. Speaking of which, where is he?”

“Maybe I’ve run off,” Virginia sassed.

“And maybe he’ll be tearing up both hemispheres looking for your crazy ass. That man has been on you like white on rice for over thirty some years.”

“Well, he does have good taste,” Virginia said.

“And he makes beautiful babies and a kick-ass barbeque sauce,” Carolina threw in. “Now where is he?”

“Asleep in the back seat,” Virginia laughed.

“Which means that you must have freaked him all night long,” Carolina teased.

“Damn right, little girl.”

Their teasing was interrupted by Mariana’s insistent and loud singing. “La, la, la, la, la, la.”

“What is wrong with you, child?” Mariana asked.

“I don’t want to know about my parents having sex,” she pouted.

“So sayeth the pregnant woman. How do you think you got here, baby girl?”

“I’ll tell you,” Carolina offered. “Your parents are freaks.”

“La, la, la, la, la,” Mariana sang as she covered her ears and walked into the house, much to the amusement of both her momma and her aunt who were busy giggling their asses off.

“Come on in here, so I can feed you,” Carolina said.

PART TRUE
DAVID

The Light in the Storm

Chapter 9

The Best Laid Plans Often End with a “WTF?”

Mackenzie was home in record time. Ten minutes after swallowing that cake he'd already talked to Samson and was on his way home. He made a list as he drove. There was a laundry list of to-dos to complete: landscaping; flowers; re-stocking the refrigerator and freezer; new bedding for the master suite. First, he'd have to clean, not that there was much to clean as only three of his eight bedrooms were occupied—his, the suite reserved for his mother when she came in from Scotland, and the one his kid brother used when he wasn't off traipsing the world. He'd have to be sure to call his mother and let her know that she was soon to have a daughter and a grandson. Right after, he'd call Griogair and let him know that he was going to need to bring his ass home so that he could be his best man. Ticking off the cleaning supplies he'd need to get, he thought about his kitchen. Pristine because he rarely used it, he'd have to go over it with a fine tooth comb knowing how finicky Carolina was about the place that she cooked in. He made a mental note to make sure the kitchen island was especially clean because he planned on

eating Carolina on that counter—several times. Never had he considered kitchen islands particularly erotic, but ever since seeing Carolina next to the one in Samson and Mariana's home, he'd had vivid fantasies of having Carolina on one. Ah, yes. He was going to have her; the only question was whether it would be with or without chocolate sauce.

Mackenzie estimated that he could have everything done in a day, two days tops. The bulk of his time would be spent convincing Carolina that she needed to take up residence with him...as soon as possible...for the rest of their lives, which hopefully would be long and happy. Thoughts of his woman had him smiling. In fact, he couldn't wipe the grin off of his face. Pulling into his driveway, he got the same feeling that he always did when he came home, but this time it was even sweeter. It was like one of those scenes in a G-rated animated film. The ones where bluebirds were chirping, furry animals were doing odd dances and singing songs that rhymed, and strange men with crowbars were casing his garage. *What the fuck?! The crowbar-wielding man did not belong in this scenario.* Slamming on brakes, he briefly wondered if he should call the sheriff first as he jumped out of the truck.

David was so hungry. He couldn't remember the last time that he'd had a decent meal; you know one that had actual food groups. Surviving the last month on potato chips, candy, and soft drinks, he dreamed of a future where he never had to consider eating or drinking anything that came from a vending machine. He'd been fending for himself for as long as he could remember and he couldn't remember anything before he was about seven.

If he wasn't known for being a thief, he would've tried to find another place to steal from. He hated stealing, which was probably why he wasn't very good at it. It shamed him to do so, but it shamed him more to admit the reasons why. His father neglected him...that was, when he wasn't beating him. Unconsciously, he winced not even wanting to know what the bruises that riddled his body looked like today. Two days ago they'd been an interesting medley of blues and reds.

Lost in memories of pain and hunger, he didn't hear the vehicle drive up until he saw an angry man running at him with a look of rage painted on his face. Knowing that he was too weak from hunger and sleeplessness to outrun this man, he curled into a ball hoping that he could protect himself from the blows that he knew were to come. *Oh, God*, he began praying. He stopped there not because he didn't believe but because he didn't know any prayers. He

figured that begging for food or a quick spiral into unconsciousness so that he could escape his pain wasn't a prayer. *Oh, God*, he began again seeing the man get closer. *Oh, God, help me or send me someone who can help me...who will love me.* Unaware that tears fell from his eyes, he didn't even realize that he had prayed a complete prayer.

«»*

Mackenzie was pissed. How dare this man violate the place where he was going to bring his woman? He was about to lay into him when the intruder dropped to the ground, squeezing himself into a ball.

"Please," he said with tears leaking from his eyes. "Please," he said again.

In that moment all of the rage went out of him. This wasn't a man. It was a boy—a boy almost as tall as him, but a boy nonetheless. Painfully thin, he reeked of fear and filth. Mackenzie was angry, but not at the kid. He was angry at whoever had put this kind of fear into this boy. What the hell was he supposed to do with him? From the looks of him he should feed and bathe him, and not necessarily in that order.

"Get up," he said.

"No," the kid said.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I'm going to feed you. Get up."

He watched the kid rise. Still shaking, he kept a good distance between them. "Come in," he instructed. He went to the door expecting the kid to follow, not flee. Leaping down the stairs, Mackenzie quickly caught him and threw him over his shoulder surprised at how light he was. "I said I'm not going to hurt you," he reiterated.

"Let me go. I promise I won't come back," he said before passing out.

"That's what I'm afraid of, kid. You won't come back here where it's safe but you'll run somewhere else where you're in even greater danger," he said as he opened the door of his truck and placed the kid inside. Feeling for a pulse, he found it, along with some nasty bruises.

Mackenzie didn't know what to do, but he knew one thing for certain. No way in hell was he about to take him to the authorities until he found out why this kid was in such sorry shape. The kid needed protection from something. He also needed attention and a bath. Damn, he was rank. But more than that, he needed food. Suddenly Mackenzie knew exactly what to do. He was taking him to Samson's. If you ever needed someone to watch your back Samson was the man and if you ever needed a proper meal who better to turn to than Carolina? While Carolina

was feeding him, he'd find out the deal on this kid. He made quick work of the twenty-mile drive praying that the kid would remain asleep for a while.

* « * » *

Carolina, Virginia, Mosé, Mariana, and Samson were sitting in the kitchen enjoying Carolina's take on chocolate cake when Samson sighed. He seemed agitated.

Immediately the kitchen went quiet.

"Samson?" Mariana inquired as she placed her hand atop her husband's.

"Yes, *Somente Mina?*" he inquired.

"What is it? You seem agitated."

"Do we need to give you privacy?" Mosé asked.

"No. Forgive me, *Pai* (father) Semisi. "I have a feeling. Mackenzie needs to come here. Now."

"Then call him and tell him to come, son."

"But he is busy. He is doing things of great import," Samson began throwing a look at Carolina.

"Do you trust in your feeling?"

"Yes," Samson answered without hesitation.

"Then call him and tell him to come," Mosé advised.

"Tell him that I need him, if that will help," Carolina offered.

"Do you need him?" Samson asked.

“Unfortunately, I do and that fine ass bastard knows that,” she sighed and handed him the phone.

They were quiet as Samson dialed Mackenzie. None even bothered pretending that they weren’t listening to every word he said. As a rule, they weren’t nosy; but as a rule, they were protective and supportive. If one of theirs was in trouble, they gathered the troops and circled the wagons. They left no one behind even if it meant dragging them kicking and screaming the whole way. And Mackenzie was one of theirs. Full motherfucking stop.

«»*

Flipping open his cellular phone to dial Samson, he was surprised when it rang.

“Mackenzie,” he answered.

“Mackenzie, this is Samson. I know that you are readying your house for Carolina, but I have a feeling.”

“About Carolina?” Mackenzie asked distracted. “Samson, I’m not giving her up.”

“No one’s asking you to, but you need to return here...with the quickness.”

“Look, I have a situation. I found a kid on my,” he began before Samson cut him off.

“Bring him with you, but come now,” Samson demanded.

“Are you sure? This kid is hungry. He needs a hot meal...and a bath...and...” he began.

“We have plenty to eat here. Come now.”

“Look, the kid needs,” he began again.

“To be here with you, Mackenzie. Come now,” he practically ordered as he cut the line.

«»*

David woke sometime during the call, but he didn't move. He was accustomed to pretending to be asleep or unconscious. He was in the midst of deciding if he should try and jump out when he heard the man named Mackenzie speaking on the phone. From the conversation he surmised that whatever else might happen to him, he was going to at least get something decent to eat...and a bath. Opening his eyes and sitting up, he looked at Mackenzie.

Mackenzie didn't even look at him as he spoke. “Go back to sleep, kid. You look like you need the rest.”

He did need the rest and if Mackenzie hadn't beaten him yet, he probably wouldn't...at least until after he got some work out of him. He knew that he was a good worker having done it for most of his life. It was a good thing that he didn't mind work. Even if he did mind it, he'd had to do it. Soon, he'd gotten used to performing backbreaking work. Many a day

he'd worked from sunup to sundown hiring himself out to anyone who would take his help. Since he was so tall most people thought he was a man albeit a rather dumb man. Maybe he was dumb, but he wasn't as dumb as people thought. He was merely hungry and tired all of the time.

That was part of the reason he did so poorly in school. He'd hated school, tired of the teachers using big words to demean him. Funny, he knew most of the words having to do with humiliation and pain including belittle, demean, and denigrate. If school had taught him one thing it was that he didn't belong, which is exactly the same thing he'd learned at home. He wasn't wanted. Regardless of how much he'd tried, how hard he worked, his father hadn't wanted anything of him except the money that he made, which wasn't much being that everyone thought he was slow. Sometimes the bosses didn't even pay him minimum wage knowing that he wouldn't complain because he had no other options.

His life was humiliation and pain. At home it was mostly pain—pain from hunger, constant beatings, and being told that he wasn't shit on a daily basis. Everywhere else it was humiliation at his sorry, unkempt state. He'd stuck it out at school for as long as he could before leaving. He wasn't surprised when no one came looking for him. The teachers were simply glad to be rid of him being that

his poor grades counted against the school in multiple categories.

Oh, God, he prayed. Please let Mackenzie let me work for him. It'd be nice if he fed him first, but even if he didn't, just being someplace where he didn't live in constant fear would more than make up for that. Sighing, he shut the door on those fantasies. He knew it was weak, but he was tired...tired of being hungry...and scared. Perhaps if he'd had a clear head he would've given thought to why he was rarely cold—even in the harsh Colorado winters.

«»*

Mackenzie saw Samson as soon as he pulled up in the driveway. And so did David, who paled even more under the dirt. Before he could properly stop the truck, the kid had already opened the door and was running for all he was worth—which wasn't much considering the sorry shape he was in. Cursing, he put the truck in park and went after him. Easily catching him, he was in the process of dragging him to the house. Before he could speak to Samson, Carolina came flying out of the door and got all in his face.

«»*

As soon as Carolina heard Samson mention that whoever was with Mackenzie was hungry, she'd gotten up and put together a plate. She didn't need to know who they were or why they were hungry. It was enough that they were hungry. She couldn't have that. Hunger was a sin that the haves of the world would have to answer to come Judgment. Not knowing what Mackenzie's guest liked or disliked, she'd put together quite a spread. She'd got the grease out and fried up a fresh batch of chicken. She'd also warmed up some fluffy homemade biscuits, greens and stuffing and some of those chicken breasts she'd marinated. She put out the potato salad and even made a club sandwich just in case Southern cuisine wasn't to their taste. Having finished that, she was digging about in the fridge for the sweet tea when she heard Mackenzie drive up. Carolina didn't question why she was concerned about the person Mackenzie was bringing home; there was no need. Quickly storing the plates in the microwave, she rushed outside.

Whoever Mackenzie's guest was, he obviously didn't want to be there judging by the way he took off before Mackenzie had brought his truck to a full stop. She watched Mackenzie curse and easily run the man down and drag him back. Carolina's momma instincts were kicking in hard. She didn't know what it was until the scruffy male turned in her

direction and made eye contact with her. Carolina had kick-ass eyesight, but in that moment it was as if she had eagle eyesight for she clearly saw everything in that man's face and knew many things at once. First, this was not a man, but a boy. Second, he'd been sorely abused. Third, he'd known pain and lots of it. Fourth, there was no fourth. This boy was hers and right now he was scared. And who the hell wouldn't be scared with big ass Mackenzie all in your face and Samson standing sentry. Samson might've told Mackenzie to come home but that didn't mean that he was slacking on the security where his wife was concerned.

Before Carolina knew what she was about to do, she'd rushed down the steps.

"What the fuck is wrong with you? Can't you see that you're scaring this boy?" she said while snatching said boy behind her. She got all in Mackenzie's face, poking him in his massive chest.

"You get your fucking hands off of him and you keep them off," she demanded. "Or I'm going to kick your ass all over Colorado, you got that?" she screamed as she hugged the scared boy tighter to her.

«»*

"Yeah, what she said," Mariana yelled.

She tried to venture further out but Samson, being the crazy man that he was, easily intercepted her and held her tight to him.

Mariana didn't know what was going on but whatever side her Auntie was on was the side that she needed to be on.

"Be still, *Somente Mina*," Samson said.

"No, I won't. That boy is scared!"

"That boy could be dangerous."

"Do you feel any danger in him, Samson?"

"No," Samson admitted after pausing.

"Then listen to Carolina. She's fighting for that boy and there's a reason why. You felt that Mackenzie needed to come home and bring his guest with him, and there is a reason for that. Maybe Carolina and that boy need each other. Maybe Mackenzie needs them both."

"You may be right, *Somente Mina*. I will not interfere, but until we know what he's about, I will not leave you unguarded."

"Fair enough."

«»*

Carolina had finally taken a pause from cussing out Mackenzie. Turning to the boy, she hugged him to her in spite of him being filthy and reeking of sweat and fear. Right now this boy needed love and

acceptance way more than he needed a hot bath and a nourishing meal. She hugged him and when she felt ribs, she wanted to beat the living shit out of someone. Holding that boy closer, she kissed the top of his matted hair and revised her earlier opinion. This boy needed copious nourishing meals while he was getting love and acceptance. It was a good thing that she put love in her cooking.

“Samson said someone was in need of a good meal. It’s obviously not you, Mackenzie, so it must be you,” she told the boy.

Now that she’d gotten her temper under control, she pulled back so that she could look into the boy’s face. “Hi, honey. I’m Carolina. What’s your name?”

“D-David, ma’am.”

“David, you look famished and we can’t have that. Come, let’s get you something to eat,” she said as she gently pulled him away from Mackenzie.

“Carolina, we don’t know,” Mackenzie started as he reached for little David.

“Get your hands off of this baby! He’s hungry and I *am* going to feed him!”

She was about to really lay into Mackenzie when David made a sound of distress and covered her body, practically surrounding her (as best he could with his thin, but tall frame). At first, she didn’t know what he was about but then he spoke.

"Please, don't hit her," he begged. "It's my fault. You can hit me."

Everything within her stilled and her heart screamed out. *DIBS! Keep Him! He's ours! Her heart said.*

"Baby," she told him as she attempted to gently pry him off of her. She was surprised that she had to use damn near all of her strength to do so considering the fact that she was damn near six feet tall and two hundred pounds in her bare feet and this boy was practically a walking skeleton.

"Baby," she repeated as she wrapped him up in her arms. "No man on this property would ever hit a woman. Mackenzie might be an asshole of the highest order but if any male even looked like he was thinking about hitting me, he would end him. And furthermore, no one here is going to strike you—for *any* reason. Now come inside so that I can feed you," she demanded.

"But," David began.

"No buts," she said as she began walking him into the direction of the house.

"If you could get him something to eat, we can eat it on the way into town. I need to," Mackenzie stopped her.

"No," Carolina said as she pulled David tighter to her bosom.

“What do you mean *no*?” Mackenzie asked with a perplexed look.

“I mean, not yes, not happening and if you try and take my baby from me, than you’re going to be limping...for starters,” Carolina said.

“But, Carolina we don’t know anything about this kid,” Mackenzie started.

“And that proves what exactly? I know plenty about you and still, you’re allowed to be here,” she snapped.

“Carolina, the boy is coming home with me. If you could give him something to eat,” he suggested.

“Are you sure that little David is going home with you?” Carolina asked.

“Yes,” Mackenzie gritted out through clenched teeth.

“Then I’m also coming home with you,” she said.

“I need to make sure that you and Mariana and her momma are safe from the kid,” Mackenzie attempted to reason.

“First, stop calling him boy or kid, his name is David. Second if you take him to your home, I am going with you to make sure that *he* is safe from *you*.”

"What is the problem out here?" Virginia asked as she stepped onto the porch. "I can hear y'all carrying on from the living room."

"Mackenzie is being an asshole. He's trying to make off with little David when the baby's obviously in need of a decent meal," Carolina said.

"The kid was casing my house," Mackenzie said.

"And?"

"He was probably going to steal something."

"Do you know that for certain?" Virginia asked.

"Yeah, do you know that for certain?" Carolina echoed.

"Yeah!" Mariana threw in for good measure.

"Sneaking around a house with a crowbar normally indicates shady behavior."

"Mmm hmm," Carolina said.

"Did you ask him what his intentions were, Mackenzie?" Virginia asked.

"No ma'am," he began.

"That's my Momma. You watch how you talk to my Momma, Mackenzie," Mariana yelled.

"He was trying to steal something and you guys are yelling at me?" Mackenzie asked incredulously.

"That's because you're an asshole" Carolina piped in. Turning to David she instructed, "Don't say those kinds of words, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am," he murmured.

“David, were you trying to steal?” Virginia asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered truthfully.

“See!”

“Shut. Up. Mackenzie!” Carolina yelled before turning to David who she was damn near hugging to death and addressing him in a softer tone.

“David, why were you trying to steal?”

“I needed the money,” he admitted.

“Were you getting money together to start a meth lab?” she asked.

“No.”

“Are you an arms dealer?”

“No.”

“Are you trying to finance a *coup*?”

“I don’t know what a *coup* is, but I don’t think so.”

“Are you trying to buy the services of mercenaries so that you can infiltrate a drug cartel and take it over?”

“Um, no. I was just hungry.”

“That’s it. The baby is hungry and he is going to eat, right now,” Virginia said as she walked into the house.

“Yeah, what my big sister said,” Carolina said as she took David with her.

“Mackenzie,” Samson interrupted. “Between the two of us, we can keep this young man out of trouble.”

“Ha, ha!” Carolina taunted as she took David into the house.

Chapter 10

The Claiming

Virginia watched her little sister as she gathered food for the skinny little boy, well little might've been pushing it considering he was a head and bony shoulders taller than Carolina, which was saying something being that Carolina was damn near six feet tall. Nonetheless he was still a baby, a very hurt baby if the way he moved his lanky body was anything to go by.

“*Alofa* (love),” Mosé Semisi whispered into his wife's ear as he wrapped his arms around her.

Sighing, Virginia leaned against her husband's wide chest

“What's wrong?” he asked as he rubbed his cheek against hers.

“Mackenzie found a boy trying to steal from him.”

“The *palagi* (white man) that loves our Carolina?” Mosé asked with a smile.

Nodding, Virginia replied, “Yes, and he brought him here.”

“Is he safe to be around my *pepe* (baby)?” Mosé asked quickly.

Noticing that her husband was straightening his large frame and going into battle mode, Virginia quickly turned in his embrace and wound her arms around his neck. Kissing his chin, she made him look at her. Even though it had been over thirty years, she always got lost in his eyes. His liquid brown eyes were surrounded by lashes so thick and black that he could advertise mascara. He was a beautiful man even when his face became that of the Samoan warrior that he was. She smiled, loving the fact that he was so protective of the women in their family. Even now, when Mariana was married off to a giant, he stood ready to do some major damage to anything that might harm their baby. Rubbing herself against her husband, she watched his eyes liquefy into pools of lust.

“He’s a baby, Mosé. He’s actually an abused baby.”

She felt Mosé relax under her touch. Looking up at him, her breath caught. He was giving her *that* look—that look that had caused them to have to marry in the first place because it had heralded the making of their first baby. She knew that look...and she liked it.

“That giant sitting beside our Carolina is a baby, you say?” he asked.

Virginia simply nodded.

“And someone has hurt him?”

Virginia nodded again and they both turned to watch Carolina speak with the baby giant in the kitchen. The boy was eating with his head bowed. There was something definitely pained about the child, and Mosé shook his head angry that someone would dare hurt a child.

“We need to sort things out for him—” Virginia began.

Mosé kissed her effectively stopping the flow of words that she had at the ready. When he allowed her to breathe, he pressed his arousal into her effectively interrupting her train of thought.

“You are not registered or licensed in this state, *Alofa*. We will need the help of those that are so that we can do this right the first time.”

Virginia wanted to argue but her calm husband was right. With a sigh, she wrapped her arms around her husband’s waist and buried her face in his comfortable chest.

“I know that your sense of righteousness is stirring, but we will do this, *Alofa*. And it looks like you are going to be a grandmother *and* an aunt—a hot and sexy grandmother and aunt—very soon,” Mosé finished.

Virginia smiled for the first time in the past half hour thanks to the calm words of her husband. Even after thirty some years, Mosé still inspired her trust. He always knew what to say to bring a smile to her

lips. Closing her eyes, she sent a silent prayer of thanks to Jesus for the many, many blessings that her family had received.

«»*

Carolina watched the waif-thin boy sit at the table where she'd placed the food-laden plate in front of him. He sat with his head bowed and had yet to touch his food. With a frown she put another tall glass of milk in front of him before sitting beside him. Normally, she would've given him iced tea but he was clearly malnourished and needed the calcium that the milk offered.

"What's wrong, honey?" she asked him softly.

"Nothing ma'am."

"Is your name really David, Sweetheart?"

"Yes, ma'am," he answered without raising his head.

"How old are you, Sweetheart?" She asked.

"I'm almost thirteen," he said.

This baby was only twelve? He was so young to be trying to care for himself. Well, now he had her and she would see to his care.

"Well then, little David, I'm Carolina, but you can call me Momma or Momma. Now why aren't you eating? Do you want me to cook you something else?" she asked him gently.

“No ma’am. The food looks good. It’s just that I’m dirty,” he said.

“Honey, this ranch is full of men who work out in the sun all day and not only are they dirty—they look like they’ve spent the day inventing dirt,” Carolina said.

“But,” he began.

“But nothing, honey,” she calmed him. “You need to get some food in you, baby,” she suggested as she firmly pressed the fork into his hand. “And then I’ll run you a proper bubble bath. Okay?”

“But, I haven’t had a bath,” he began.

“I understand honey, but you need to eat,” she said while holding the fork out to him.

“But I smell,” he started.

His voice had yet to break but it was definitely on the verge. Carolina carefully touched little David’s hand noting that it was practically bones beneath skin. The boy didn’t move away but he stiffened and his painfully thin shoulders tensed.

Yes, he does smell; he smells like fear and we cannot have that. “No buts, baby. You need to get something proper in your stomach. You do smell. You smell like hard work and there’s nothing wrong with that. I’m surrounded by men who work hard and they’ve got grown man funk, so a little sweat isn’t going to put me off.”

“But, it’s different,” he began again.

“Why is it different, Sweetheart?” she asked.

“You smell good,” he whispered as he looked at her with awe.

“And you smell like you’re mine,” she said as she gently kissed his forehead. And you also smell hungry, and I cannot have that, now eat, baby. I already warmed up this food and I fried the chicken fresh. You don’t want it to get cold.”

“Okay.”

“Good, now eat the hot stuff first, and then eat that sandwich while I prepare your dessert.”

She watched as he shook his head and attempted a small smile. Her heart constricted and she ran her fingers through his hair. Like the rest of him, it was dirty, but this baby needed to be touched with love and she would scrub both the kitchen and herself later. Unknowingly, she lapsed into a song, gently stroking the little baby as he ate. Though she had a million questions, she didn’t talk, wanting him to focus on eating. Accustomed to males who inhaled their food as if someone might steal it from them at any second, little David’s method of eating caused her to raise her brows.

She noticed that he’d take a bite or two out of the food before placing it to the side. He did it with the chicken, with the biscuits, with every single thing on his plate. Perhaps he didn’t like the food and was being polite.

“Baby, do you want me to fix you something else? I don’t mind.”

Little David still didn’t look up as he answered, “No thank you. I’m fine.” Carolina watched him do the same with the remainder of his food. He took a few bites then put that on the side of his plate to join the other half-eaten items.

“Baby boy, why aren’t you eating properly?”

“Am I using the wrong fork?” he asked with concern written on his features.

“Baby, I don’t care what fork you use as long as it gets food to your mouth so that it can get to your stomach. What I mean to ask is why you aren’t eating *all* of your food? There’s plenty of food here.” Concerned that he wasn’t eating properly, she was contemplating what else she could whip up in a hurry. She wasn’t at all prepared, in anyway whatsoever, for the answer that she received.

With his head still bowed the child replied. “I need to save some for later.”

Scowling, Carolina answered. “Baby, if you’re hungry later then you just let me know and I’ll cook for you.”

The baby shook his head vehemently. It was the first real movement that he’d made since she’d dragged him into the kitchen. Raising his shaggy head, he looked at her. Her heart broke when she noticed that his eyes were swimming with tears that

hadn't fallen like the rest. Green eyes—almost like Mackenzie's but flecked with gold—stared at her. Carolina swallowed as little David spoke clearly whilst meeting her gaze.

“I can't stay. He *will* come and take me back,” he said matter-of-factly as the tears fell from his pained eyes.

Carolina had already claimed him but now everything within her echoed that sentiment. *No one will take him and live.*

“Baby boy, know this...” Taking hold of his hand, Carolina held it tightly in hers. She waited while he looked in her eyes so that he would know that every word that she spoke was a promise. When she was certain that she had his complete attention, she spoke.

“No one is taking *you* any-damn-where. Do you understand?”

Little David stared at her and without any hesitation nodded jerkily.

“Good. Now you need to finish that plate so that I can refill it. And after you clean at least three plates I will fix you dessert. Now what do you prefer: homemade chocolate ice cream and quadruple chocolate slam cake or quadruple chocolate slam cake and homemade chocolate ice cream?”

She watched as little David's eyes widened with wonder. It took him a moment but he soon smiled

when he realized that he really had no choice at all. He was getting some dessert and that was that.

“Surprise me, please,” he said while attempting to smile at her.

Carolina smiled even though the need to hurt someone was thundering through her veins. “Well then, how about homemade chocolate ice cream and quadruple chocolate slam cake with a sliver of chocolate chip pecan pie as garnish?”

“That sounds wonderful,” he whispered in awe.

“It is honey,” she assured him as she placed four more pieces of chicken on his plate and heaped on more greens and stuffing. “Now eat so that I know that I haven’t lost my touch when it comes to cooking.” Kissing him on the head, she got up and began preparing little David’s dessert. “And don’t forget to call me Momma.”

«»*

David had been watching the lady named Carolina since he arrived. It was hard not to watch her. She was a force to be reckoned with and she was beautiful. And she accepted him and treated him like he mattered.

He watched as she went to the freezer to get the ice cream. It seemed as if she scooped out enough to feed a whole football team except that she placed it

in one bowl. *All that was for him?* Everything was so weird. When he'd been casing Mackenzie's house the best thing he'd been hoping for was a fridge full of food, something small and valuable that he could steal, and a clean getaway.

Being caught by Mackenzie had scared him. He knew that he couldn't win against that man and when Mackenzie had approached him, he'd simply curled up and waited for the big man to begin beating him for his crime. Instead the man had dragged him to the truck and drove him here. At first he was scared when he saw the other man that waited for him. That man was even bigger than Mackenzie, which is why he'd run. Mackenzie had easily caught him and dragged him over to the even bigger man. He was trying to stop himself from shaking, trying to stop the fear that had taken hold of him when he saw the most beautiful woman that he'd ever seen.

Before he set eyes on Ms. Carolina he was thinking of a way to escape Mackenzie's clutches, but as soon as he'd seen her, escape was the last thing on his mind. David had watched her approach. Well, he'd watched her come flying out of the door. For a moment they'd locked eyes and everything within him went still. This woman was...special. She was formidable. Though she was smaller than Mackenzie and the other man, he had a feeling that messing

with her would be worse than messing with both men combined.

Ms. Carolina was beautiful, but she was also angry. He'd wondered if she was angry that Mackenzie had brought him to her house. Her anger was a living thing. He'd seen anger; he'd been the recipient of a whole lot of it, but he never wanted to be the recipient of *her* anger. Flinching, he'd wondered who she was angry at, him, Mackenzie or the really big and silent man.

He quickly discovered that she was angry at Mackenzie whom she'd promptly begun to tell off. Wrestling Mackenzie's hand off of his ratty t-shirt, she'd smiled up at him before pulling him into her arms. She'd looked at him and asked his name; she didn't just call him kid, or boy, or any of the mean names that he was accustomed to being called. She acted like he mattered and instead of being put off by his appearance and smell, she'd simply held him tighter and told him that he needed to eat.

He was about to jump for joy at the prospect of food when a clearly angry Mackenzie had reached out to her. Fear settled over him heavier than he'd ever felt it. Crying out, he'd attempted to shield her from the angry man, even offering himself in her stead. David knew that he could take a beating, it was one of the few things that he was good at. He

could easily bear a beating, but he couldn't allow the one person who acted like he mattered to be hurt.

He was surprised when Ms. Carolina pried him off. At first, he thought that she was going to offer him to Mackenzie to beat, but then she'd simply resettled him and told him that men here didn't beat women and then she promised (he knew that for what it was) that no one here would hurt him. And then she went right back to telling off Mackenzie.

Witnessing this woman—this beautiful woman—fight for him caused David's heart to turn cartwheels in his chest. *She loves us! Keep her! Fight for her!* His brain wrapped itself around that. *Love her!* His dormant heart had demanded. He was surprised that his heart had spoken as he was sure that it was broken. It had never worked, but as soon as he locked eyes with her it almost beat out of his chest with...joy.

David couldn't help the tears that poured from his eyes. Not bothering to wipe them away or shield them, he'd simply snuggled deeper into the shelter of her arms. He was sure that she'd felt him crying and she'd shielded his tears by pushing his face into her strong shoulder and loved away some of his hurt. Rubbing his back, she never released him the whole time she was telling off Mackenzie and he was glad for that. He needed the contact of someone who acted like they cared about him...of someone who

made him feel safe. Though he felt like a baby, he hugged her closer and breathed in the first breath he could remember taking that wasn't laced with fear or pain. Ms. Carolina smelled good. She smelled clean; she smelled sober. And she smelled like all of the best things. She smelled like cakes and cookies and love and trust...and all of the things that he'd ever dared dream.

He hadn't heard much of the argument that had ensued. All he knew was that she and two other women had argued on his behalf telling off both Mackenzie and the bigger man. And then they'd taken him into the house.

All the while, he'd been held and caressed by Ms. Carolina. It was the first time during an argument that he hadn't felt pain. He only felt acceptance and softness. Closing his eyes, he talked to God and told him that if He wanted to take him now, it would be okay. That had been the best moment of his life...and the moments had only been getting better.

David had spent his whole life praying hard to be struck down so that he could escape. It may not have been brave but sometimes he wasn't brave. Sometimes he was just tired—so tired of wanting things that he'd never received such as respect, consideration, care. He hadn't wanted to complain; he knew that many people had it worse. He just wanted...he always wanted and that was why he

constantly wished for death. Of course God hadn't listened because God didn't want him to be a coward. He'd stopped cursing God a long time ago figuring that not even God had wanted someone like him. No one wanted him. But now, he prayed again—thanking God for this moment, for this woman, for her love and being able to love her in return.

Ms. Carolina had taken him into the kitchen and gently washed his face and hands before leading him to the table where she'd invited him to sit down before bustling about the spacious kitchen. He smiled watching her, betting that she didn't realize that she talked to herself the entire time. And she talked about him. It seemed that every sentence began with '*that baby needs.*' She took a covered plate from the microwave and set it in front of him before going to the refrigerator and pouring him a tall glass of milk. The massive plate of food that she set before him stunned him, but what had stunned him more was the fact that she'd sat next to him and pulled him into a hug and kissed the top of his head before bidding him to eat.

Her kindness coupled with all of that food on the plate had *really* made him cry like a baby. Not wanting Ms. Carolina to see him crying like a stupid baby, he ate with his head down. She sat down next to him and talked to him *and* listened to what he had to say. He knew that she had all kinds of questions

but she didn't grill him, she just talked to him. Forgetting his tears for a moment, he looked at her when he answered her question.

He knew that she saw him crying and he felt stupid, but then she'd told him he didn't have to leave...that he wasn't going anywhere. And she'd told him to call her Momma. '*Momma*,' he liked the way that sounded never having anyone to call that. Maybe if he just lived in this fantasy world for now, it wouldn't be so hard to go back to his *real* life later. He believed that Ms. Carolina meant every one of her words, but she didn't know his father. His father would come get him. No matter where he ran, he always came. David knew that it was wrong, but he hated his father as much as he feared him. And he loved Ms. Carolina even more than the hatred and fear that he had for his father. He would let her love him and hope that it was enough to get him through the rest of his life. It would hurt to leave her, but he couldn't bear anyone hurting Ms. Carolina—*oops*, Momma. He was going to play his role and gladly do as he was told. Maybe he'd get to be himself for a few days. Being himself was something that he hadn't done in so long that he wasn't sure that he knew how to do it.

Shaking his head in an attempt to clear it, he almost forgot about his dessert. It was an easy thing to do considering the delicious food that Ms. Caro-

lina—oops, Momma—kept heaping on his plate. He didn't think that anything could be better than the hot meal that she'd served him, but then she'd kissed his forehead and hugged him (which was better than the food) and placed the huge helping of ice cream and chocolate cake in front of him. Picking up the spoon, he simply sat there, stunned at...everything. Ms. Caro—Momma—must've thought that he was too weak to feed himself because she quickly took the spoon and fed him dessert. Sighing, he bit into the cake and he swore the whole Fourth of July happened in his mouth. Delight coming over his features, he closed his eyes and savored the rich taste of the dessert. Chocolate was his favorite dessert, but he'd never had chocolate that tasted like this. He didn't know what was in it, but he did know that he liked it.

«»*

Carolina paused when she saw David take the spoon and sit there dazedly looking at the dessert. She knew that he wanted that dessert and he deserved something sweet. It was obvious that he'd had a life filled with sadness and bitterness—but that shit was over now. Taking matters into hand, she gently took his spoon, pulled the bowl over to her and began to feed it to him.

Samson and Mackenzie entered the kitchen a few moments later, yet Carolina paid them no mind. Her full attention was on the baby boy that she had wrapped in one of her strong arms. His head resting on her shoulder, she alternately fed and hugged him. She didn't see Samson's face as it split into a grin, but she heard Mackenzie growl. Taking her eyes from the baby in her arms, she turned to look at him.

Like Samson, Mackenzie had pulled out a chair and sat down, but unlike Samson, Mackenzie was glaring at her baby with a mean look. And she didn't appreciate that look one damn bit. She'd felt David tense under her and attempt to wiggle out of her embrace. She wasn't having that either. Holding David tighter, she looked at Mackenzie and asked him in the calmest voice that she could muster.

"What is your problem, Mackenzie?"

"What makes you think that I have a problem?" Mackenzie asked.

"The fact that you're being an ass," she answered while feeding David.

"The boy doesn't need you to spoon-feed him, Carolina. He's damn near six and a half feet tall!" Mackenzie grouched.

Carolina was livid. Mackenzie was due a cussing and she didn't want little David to witness her anger. She called Virginia into the kitchen to watch over her baby while she put Mackenzie in his place.

As soon as Virginia arrived, she kissed David and prompted her sister to take her place.

“Virginia, can you watch my baby for a second while I handle Mackenzie?”

“Of course, baby sister,” she said as she took over the feeding of her nephew.

Seeing that David was being cared for, she turned to Mackenzie. Turning to Mackenzie, she spoke.

“Outside motherfu—” Carolina snapped her mouth shut before she swore in front of her baby boy. Waiting for Mackenzie to follow her out of the kitchen, she noted that David’s eyes were wide as he watched them.

“I didn’t mean to—” David began.

“Little David, don’t worry about it, baby. Your Momma is just a little protective over how anyone is with you. You did absolutely nothing wrong and you know that your Momma isn’t going to let anyone—no matter who they are—mistreat you in any way,” Virginia said gently as she continued to feed the boy his dessert.

«»*

“Don’t you **ever** fucking talk to my baby boy like that ever again!” Carolina hissed at Mackenzie as soon as he closed the door behind him.

“He’s not a baby, Sweetness. He’s a young man. You don’t need to spoon-feed him!” Mackenzie exclaimed with a frown.

“Do not tell me how to treat my boy!” Carolina hurled at the big man who just wasn’t getting *it*!

“He’s not a baby, Carolina!”

“Yes. He. Is! He’s **my** baby!” Carolina exclaimed.

Mackenzie looked down into the passionate eyes of his woman and saw all of the anger that she’d kept hidden from David. He sighed knowing that he was fucking up and fucking up royally.

“Sweetness, I apologize. I’m a jealous man. I’ve never been good at sharing and I forgot my head for a bit there watching that little boy eat from your hand,” Mackenzie paused and took one of Carolina’s fists into his big hands. He coaxed her fingers to relax and then kissed her palm, knowing that his woman wanted to hit him with that hand. Holding her hand against his chest where beneath the muscle and bone his heart beat steadily and comfortingly, he spoke. “I apologize for acting as I did,” he said sincerely.

“You *need* to apologize to my baby boy,” Carolina said sounding exasperated.

He knew that she could feel the hard muscles of his chest as he held her hand against him. Lifting her hand to his mouth he again attempted to distract

her. Smiling, he knew that he'd almost succeeded when she gasped and bit her lip to prevent her moans from escaping. Flicking the tip of his tongue over Carolina's finger tips, he felt her body shiver. He would've smiled but he was content to simply let it show in his eyes as he watched her watch him.

"I will, Sweetness. Now how about we kiss and make up?" Mackenzie asked her huskily, his head already lowering as he wound a big arm around her shoulders and thrust his long, thick fingers into her hair. Tugging gently, he tilted Carolina's head back.

"Mackenzie, I need you to promise me that you will treat my baby like you would Mariana," Carolina said as she licked her lips.

His eyes following the movement of her tongue, he answered. "I will."

"I mean it!" Carolina said seriously.

Mackenzie's blazing dark green eyes moved from her mouth to her eyes. He saw that nothing else would happen between them until he promised. Promises were contracts to him so holding her hand still against his chest he declared:

"I, Mackenzie Duncan Roberts, hereby swear to treat little David as a valued member of our family. I will not in any way—now or in the future—give cause for his beautiful, hot ass momma to cuss me out like the passionate protective woman that she is."

Seeing her quirk her brow at him, he kissed her briefly before inquiring. “Will that do?”

Smiling, Carolina leaned into his big body and quickly kissed his mouth. It was a fleeting touch but it made for a hard dick and another order of a freezing cold shower before bed, but he relished the moment. It was the first time that Carolina had initiated any type of touching with him, and he recognized the moment for what it was: *monumental!*

“You’re still an ass,” Carolina threw over her shoulder as she sashayed her fine and luscious behind away from him.

Grinning at her, he responded.

“But you love me anyway!”

Mackenzie laughed heartily when he saw Carolina throw up a middle finger salute as she walked back into the house. Enjoying the view, he followed her and promptly apologized to the frightened boy.

«»*

Carolina walked back into the kitchen oblivious to the fact that her baby had heard her cuss Mackenzie out. Thanking her sister and reclaiming her seat, she smiled seeing that Virginia had dished up another serving of dessert for her baby. She was about to comment when Mackenzie walked his fine ass back into the kitchen.

"David, I'm an ass and I apologize."

"It's okay," David said with his head bowed.

Mackenzie surprised her and dropped to a knee beside David. Carefully putting his hand on David's shoulder he spoke. "No, David. My behavior wasn't okay. No one should treat another being so shabbily—regardless of their motivation. Your momma is right to call me out on how I acted. I hope that you will forgive me, but you are in no way obligated to do so," he said sincerely.

"I forgive you. I wouldn't want someone like me around my woman either," David said.

"Oh, you mistake my anger, son. I get right testy when *any* male is around my woman," Mackenzie returned.

"I'd just like to interject and say that I am not Mackenzie's woman," Carolina huffed.

"Yes, you are," Mackenzie declared just as fervently. Turning to David he continued. "I'll do my best not to be an ass, but if you catch me acting thusly, just tell your momma and she'll straighten me out. Okay?"

"Okay," David said with a small smile.

"Mackenzie, you've scared my baby enough for one day. Now get."

"I'm going, Sweetness, but I'll be back."

"Before you go, take that other plate out of the microwave and go find someplace to eat."

“I knew that you loved me,” Mackenzie smiled as he retrieved the plate from the microwave and snagged a bottle of water from the fridge before ambling out of the room.

«»*

Carolina watched her baby eat and her insides melted. She enjoyed cooking, but she was really going to enjoy cooking for her son. That boy needed her cooking as much as she needed to cook for him. The prospect of cooking for her two babies brought a smile to her lips.

She had so many questions she wanted to ask him (and so many asses that she needed to kick for the motherfuckers responsible for his condition) but first she needed to see to him. Having gotten a decent meal into him, she had to be sure that he was full before seeing to his hygiene.

“Baby, are you full? There’s plenty of food here.”

“I’m full, ma’am,” he said.

“Momma,” she corrected while hugging him again.

“I’m full, Momma. Thank you.”

“Okay, well in that case we need to get you cleaned up. Later, I’m going to run you a bubble bath, but first, I’m going to wash your hair for you.”

"I can wash it myself, Momma."

"I know that you can wash it yourself, but it feels good to have someone else wash your hair for you. You need to have a thorough wash and condition, and it's hard to do it yourself. Plus, when I finish with your hair, you will be able to enjoy your bubble bath. Okay?"

"Okay," he said reluctantly.

Wanting to reassure him, she gently lifted his chin. "Baby, I'm not going to hurt you."

"I know, but my hair," he began.

"Honey, you're talking to a black woman. We know about some hair. Now allow me to care for you, and stop worrying about being human. Don't you want me to care for you?"

"Yes," he whispered.

"Good, now follow me. Samson spoils your sister something awful and actually had a spa room installed, which has a beauty salon sink and hair dryer for her."

Grabbing his hand, she walked him to said room. Draping a smock over him, she settled him into the chair and set to washing her baby's hair, surreptitiously checking his scalp for injury and vermin. Finding none, she spent half an hour washing his hair before applying conditioner.

David had never had his hair washed. He barely washed it himself, being that he rarely had soap much less shampoo. Closing his eyes from shame, he was humbled that this beautiful woman would not only touch him when he was so dirty, but also wash his hair. She didn't rush through it. She took her time and massaged his scalp.

His Momma had amazing hands. She was gentle as she washed his hair, but she was always gentle when she touched him. He knew she was a strong woman for he watched how she handled herself. When she'd told off Mackenzie, she'd poked the man so hard that he'd actually stumbled back. And even though he was thin, she still handled him as if he weighed no more than a container of milk.

It took everything he had not to purr. It wasn't just that his Momma had amazing hands, she had an amazing voice. He didn't think that she realized it but when she wasn't talking to herself, she was singing. He didn't know the song that she was singing as she massaged the conditioner into his hair, but he knew that it was a lullaby. Lullabies were sung to babies. His Momma thought of him as her baby. Smiling, he sat back and lost himself in the comfort of his Momma's presence, the gentleness of her hands and the soothing sound of her voice that was singing to him.

«»*

Carolina spent twice the time needed washing and conditioning David's hair. It wasn't simply because it was dirty. It was because she had the feeling that he'd never been pampered. She planned on changing all of that. But first she had to towel dry his hair so that she could get him into a hot shower and then a warm bubble bath. Toweling off his hair, she was shocked at the color. David's hair was beautiful. In fact, he had the same wheat-colored hair that Mackenzie had.

Taking his hand, she led him to the bathroom in her room. Folding down the toilet seat, she instructed him to sit while she got things ready. Gathering up a new head for her electric toothbrush, she beckoned David and handed him her organic cinnamon-flavored toothpaste and mouthwash so that he could take care of his teeth while she prepared his bath.

Grateful that Samson hadn't skimmed on the luxuries in the guest suites, she turned on the shower knowing that David would enjoy the massaging jets. Digging around in her collection of bath stuff, she selected some coconut-scented shower cream since it was gentle on the skin and didn't smell too feminine. Turning on the bath taps, she poured in copious

bubble bath from the same line. Pulling out several towels and bath cloths, she placed one set by the shower and one set next to the deep tub.

When the tub finishing filling she did a once-over of the bathroom. Satisfied that she'd covered all bases, she waited for David to finish brushing his teeth before giving him instructions. Okay, shower first to get clean. Take your time because the massaging jets will work wonders for your sore muscles. Don't be stingy with the soaps. They smell good and do a good job cleaning and as you can see, I have plenty more," she said while pointing at her massive collection of shower and bath stuff. Pausing to grab a long-handled brush, she handed it to him. "Use this for your back. It's a little rough, but it won't bruise. After you shower, get in the bath and soak. A bubble bath is for fun, it's not a timed event so relax and enjoy it. I'm going to step outside so you can remove your clothes so I can throw them in the wash. Okay?"

"Okay," he said.

"Okay, Momma," she gently corrected.

"Okay, Momma," he dutifully repeated.

"Good, now scoot so I can wash your clothes. We have fun to have today, baby."

David couldn't wait to get into that shower. His stomach was full. His hair was clean and soon he'd be clean. His Momma had turned on the shower and run him a bath. And she kept hugging him...not caring that he was still dirty. Wow. Undressing, he gathered his dirty clothes. He kept his underwear because he, well because they were his underwear. Cracking open the door, he shyly called his Momma. He noted that she was respectful of his privacy and kept her back turned and her eyes averted as she held out her hand for his clothes. When she had them in her hand she bade him to enjoy himself.

"Thank you, Momma," he said.

"Never thank me baby; just love me. I'm your Momma. I'm supposed to take care of you. Now, I'm going to throw these clothes in the wash and I'll be back up. You don't have to rush. I just want to be close by if you need me. Okay?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Yes, Momma," she corrected.

"Yes, Momma," he agreed before closing the door.

* « * » *

David stepped into the shower and sighed. Showering with hot water was a new experience for him. Nearly hissing from pleasure, he stood under

those sprays and let the warm water cascade over him. Grabbing the bottle of coconut-scented shower gel, he made good use of it. At first, he was shamed to see the dirty water swirling down the drain. But gladness pushed aside his dismay and his heart spoke to him. *Your old existence of fear and shame are being washed away just like this dirt.* Yeah. His Momma may not be able to keep him, but no one could take away the love she'd given him. And he knew that she loved him because she said it with everything that she did for him.

Scrubbing until the soapy water ran clean, he stopped the shower and headed for the tub. He thought the shower felt good, but that was before he settled into the bath. Groaning, he leaned his head back on the bath pillow and enjoyed yet another rare treat.

«»*

Carolina waited to hear David step into the tub before leaving the room. She needed to clean the spa room and disinfect the kitchen. Considering the work ahead of her, she almost ran into Mosé.

“Hey Mosé.”

“*Talofa (hello)*, little Caro,” he said.

Hearing his nickname for her, she couldn't help but smile. Mosé was the only one who nicked her

name and the only one who referred to her as little. Of course, Mosé was a big, strapping man...as were all of the men in his family. He looked like the Samoan warrior that he was. Standing around 6'4" and weighing around two hundred seventy-five pounds, he projected a calm demeanor...until someone fucked with him or his family. She'd seen the warrior emerge and the damage that the warrior could do. And so did the rest of the town, and thusly, no one dared fuck with Virginia or any of the women in their family. Hugging him, she held on to him for a minute, glad to have him as part of their family.

"Ah, Mosé, I love you."

"You just want the recipe for my secret barbeque sauce," he grinned.

"Not true," she said.

Watching him raise an eyebrow, she quickly amended her statement. "Okay, so I do want that recipe, but my love for you has nothing to do with your culinary skill. It has everything to do with the man that you are."

"Ah, that's better," he said as he gently turned her back to the direction of her room. "Don't you have a baby giant to watch?"

"I do, but I'm just going to clean up my mess while he's in the bath."

"It's already being handled, Caro."

"What do you mean, it's being handled?"

“My *pepe* has already seen to the spa room and I am taking care of the kitchen,” he said.

“I am going to swat her behind,” Carolina said. “Mariana is supposed to be resting.”

“She is resting, little Caro. It isn’t as if she re-tiled the room or had to don a Haz-Mat suit so that she could remove asbestos. She simply put away the shampoos and conditioner and put the smock in the wash. I know, because I kept an eye on her as I helped. Now stop fretting.”

“I’m not fretting; I’m just saying. Since you guys cleaned the spa room I can see to the kitchen.”

“I can do the kitchen,” Mosé interrupted.

“But the kitchen needs sanitizing” she began.

“I understand this, Caro, and I assure you that even in my old age I can handle it.”

Looking at the strapping man, she quickly formed an apology. Though Mosé was a gentle man, even when reprimanding someone as he had just done with her, he didn’t brook any nonsense. By attempting to push aside his help, she was not only questioning his expertise as an older individual, a parent, a husband, and a professional chef, she was challenging his right to care for his family. And she knew better.

“I apologize, *Matai (Chief)* Mosé. I know that you are not simply capable but more than capable and you’ve done an excellent job caring for our fam-

ily. I just didn't want to take advantage of you," she began.

"Apology accepted, little Caro. Now do you think that I would allow someone to take advantage of me?"

In his early fifties, Mosé still had that dangerous look about him...and it wasn't just a look, he could still handle himself.

"Well, other than my sister who is a complete whore for you, no," she smiled.

"There are certain advantages to letting my *Alofa* take advantage of me," he said while waggling his eyebrows.

"I am so ashamed of her wanton behavior but at least I got a beautiful baby out of it."

"Yes, and now you have another baby who needs you," he said as he gently turned her in the direction of her room.

"Will you at least get Virginia to help you?" She asked.

"*Alofa* is doing more important work," he answered.

"Ah, she's getting on her back for you?" she laughed.

Grinning with her, he kissed the top of her head before answering. "That will come next. Right now, she's putting together everything we need so

that you may keep the baby giant. Now go see to him, Caro and let us see to the other things.”

Chapter 10½

The No-Fucking-Way/The Hell-to-the-Motherfucking-No

Smiling, Carolina went back to her room. Hearing the shower still going, she quickly grabbed up a fresh outfit and headed to an empty room to shower. David had been a mess and since she'd been hugging all on him, she too was a mess, albeit a happy mess. She was showered, dressed and back in her room reading when she finally heard David move about in the bathroom. Picking up the laundry bag that she'd tossed her and David's clothes in, she waited for David to come out so that she could toss the towels in. David's clothes looked a little worse for the wear but she was going to wash and mend them as best she could for two reasons. First, the clothes might have special meaning to him. And even if they didn't mean anything to him, she would ask his opinion before disposing of them as it was obvious that too many people had made decisions (very fucking stupid, bad and fucked up decisions) for him without any consideration to his wishes. Second, she didn't want to hurt his pride any more than it had been hurt. If she tossed his clothes into the trash bin, he might equate himself with the clothes and think that

he was in some way trash. He wasn't trash—no human beings were—but she didn't think he knew that just yet.

Her musings were interrupted by the door opening. Knowing that her baby was coming out caused her face to stretch into a ridiculous smile. Her baby shyly poked his head around the door and smiled when he saw her. Even though he was probably hungry again and in need of a rest, she noticed that he didn't forget to gather up his towels. He'd even wrapped them in one clean towel so that she wouldn't soil her hands. Clutching the bundle to his chest, he spoke before handing them to her.

"I can wash them myself so you don't have to," he started.

Smiling, she kissed the top of his head and took the bundle and placed it in the bag. Knowing that he was going to be chilled, she grabbed her robe off of the chair and handed it to him...and damn near lost her mind.

«»*

At first, Momma's scream shocked David. And then he saw what she was pointing at. If he'd thought about the condition of his body, he wouldn't have walked out dressed in only a towel. But he didn't think about it because he was simply eager to get

clean so that he could hug his Momma back without feeling shame. He didn't want her to worry so he decided that he'd just downplay his body. It didn't even hurt all that much anymore. Besides, everyone else who'd seen it had simply ignored it. If he ignored it, maybe Momma would too.

«»*

Not having had a momma since he could remember, and not having Carolina for a momma, he didn't know that that shit wasn't going to happen.

«»*

"David," Carolina questioned. She didn't know that her voice was shaky or that she was screaming. She only knew that she saw something that was in the 'hell-to-the motherfucking-no, someone-must-have-lost-their-whole-damn-mind, I'll-take-no-fucking-way-for-a-thousand, Alex, this-bullshit-isn't-going-down-on-my-watch categories.'

"Yes, Momma?"

"What happened to you, Sweetheart?"

"What do you mean, Momma?" her baby asked in such a perplexed voice that she knew that he'd been abused so frequently that he didn't give his bruises a second thought.

"I mean why are there so many bruises on you?"

"Oh, because," he faltered.

"Who. Hit. You? What motherfucker dared to put his fucking hands on you, baby? Tell Momma, Sweetheart. Tell me who hurt you, please," she begged.

"It's okay, Momma," he said.

"No, baby. It. Is. Not. Okay. It will never be okay for some motherfucker to touch you inappropriately or to touch you in anger. That shit will never be okay. Tell me who did this."

"My father," he said without blinking an eye.

Carolina tried hard to retain her calm. She fought a good battle but the combination of her baby's stoicism in light of such violence against his person and his bruised body brought out the bitch, the jigga, the motherfucker, and all of the negative stereotypes out there in her. She didn't realize that she had screamed or had yelled each word. The blood thundering in her veins, her sense of righteousness crying for revenge, her heart weeping for her baby, she wrapped her baby up in a fierce embrace. Hugging her baby tight, promising that she'd protect him, she rocked him trying to comfort and reassure David...and herself...that he was safe; trying to reassure them both that he was hers and that she would do everything to keep him that way.

“Baby, please sit down. I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going, Momma?”

“Oh, I’m just going to go kill someone. But don’t worry, I’ll be back in time to make you a snack.”

* «*» *

Mariana smiled thinking about Little David’s face when he realized that her Auntie was taking him over. Taking over people was one of her Auntie’s specialties and no one did it better or made being taken over so much fun. And if anyone needed taking over and some fun it was Little David. She liked David and since she was sure that her Auntie was keeping him, she had to let David know that since she was the big sister that he had to do what she said. Smiling, she thought about the fun that she and Little David could have. He was so adorable even under all of that dirt and fear. Carolina was already taking care of the dirt, but they’d all have to work together to take care of the fear. No one messed with her baby brother...and lived to tell about it. Whoever had messed with Little David was in so much trouble. She was on her way to her Auntie’s room to see if she needed any help when she heard Carolina go shell. Without thinking, she sprinted to the room ready to do battle.

«»*

Mariana gripped her Auntie's hand tightly not allowing her to move away from her like she was trying so desperately to do. Seeing the sorry state that David was in, she understood her Auntie's outrage, but she knew that if she let Carolina go that someone was going to die. And it was going to be hard for Mackenzie to court Carolina if she was on death row.

"Auntie, please calm down," Mariana repeated her plea knowing that her husband and Mackenzie would've been alerted by her Auntie's scream of absolute rage.

"Baby, please don't try and stop me. Please, please let me kill that motherfucker. Please, baby. Just let me do this one thing," Carolina ground out between clenched teeth.

"Auntie—" she pleaded.

Carolina shook her head. "No baby. That baby's already a walking skeleton and he's covered in bruises—bruises made by a grown fucking man! A fucking adult has been beating Little David and I won't fucking have that!" Carolina's voice increased in volume with every word she spoke until she almost screamed the final word of her sentence.

No, they couldn't have that but they couldn't have Carolina committing murder all over the state of Colorado either. Mariana knew that it was taking everything in Carolina to keep her anger at simmer. David was probably the only thing stopping her from going full out shell. She knew that Carolina wouldn't want to scare him. She didn't want David to witness more violence but right now he was the only thing that would calm Carolina. Carolina had sent David into the bathroom so that he wouldn't see her rage but she bet that like a typical teen, he was listening to every word his momma screamed.

"David, come here, honey," she called. "Your momma needs you."

She smiled inside watching the boy run to Carolina and put his arms around her.

"Momma, it's okay. It's okay." David reassured her.

Hearing the thundering sound of her husband and Mackenzie coming their way, Mariana sighed in relief.

«»*

"The boy is hurt," Samson said quietly as he and Mackenzie walked towards the house.

Mackenzie nodded his agreement.

“I have no idea who could have hurt the kid, but they did a real good job of it. He’s scared shitless of males,” Mackenzie said as he removed his work boots.

“I’m guessing it would be a male relative of his that needs...*talking* to,” Samson growled as he and Mackenzie walked side-by-side towards the kitchen in search of sustenance.

Mackenzie stopped Samson with a hand on his arm. “David might look like an adult and someone has worked him like one and beat him like one, but those eyes...”

Mackenzie faltered. Running a hand through his wheat-colored hair in a gesture of pure frustration he raised his eyes to meet those of his friend. “He’s in so much pain.”

Samson nodded and was about to comment when the calm of the house was shattered by what could only be described as a battle cry. And it was coming from Carolina. Going into battle mode, both men took off running.

Reaching Carolina’s bedroom, Mackenzie ran straight to Carolina who was hugging David so hard he feared that she’d crack the boy’s ribs. He felt the tension in the room. It was obvious that everyone was concerned for Carolina, even David who he noticed was covered in bruises and trying desperately to hold on to both Carolina and his dignity.

Mariana looked ready to spit some venom of her own even though he also sensed her relief. His woman looked like she was in danger of going on a wild-out.

“What’s wrong, Sweetness?” he asked, concerned for his woman whose chest was heaving with her effort to hold it together.

“Some motherfucker has been beating *my* little David!” she choked out.

Looking up at him with fury in her eyes, she yelled her outrage. “He put his hands on *my* baby!”

Mackenzie was pretty positive that Carolina had no idea that she not only approached him, but was also touching him.

* «*» *

“What’s going on?” Virginia asked from behind Mosé’s large back since he wouldn’t allow her to run into any situation that he hadn’t checked out. All eyes turned to Virginia and Mosé who both looked somewhat disheveled.

“Little David’s been beaten. *Someone*, no some *thing*, has put its hands on *my* Little David!” Carolina said between choppy breaths.

“What?!” Virginia screamed her outrage.

“Some motherfucker has put their hands on my baby!” Carolina reiterated.

“What is his name?” Virginia asked in a you’re-getting-a-lethal-injection-only-because-most-states-are-too-pussy-to-hang-pieces-of-shit voice.

“Yeah, what is his name?” Mackenzie and Samson asked simultaneously.

“We should find him and end him,” Mariana said.

«»*

Mosé understood their anger. Hell, he too felt rage bubble up within him on behalf of the little giant.

Speaking low so that only his woman could hear him he said, “Forget what I said earlier, *Alofa*. We will do whatever we have to, by fair means or foul, to secure the baby giant’s safety.”

Aloud he said, “Before we start planning murder, which I’m pretty sure is still illegal, let’s sort this out.”

“Why do we have to sort anything out? Why can’t we just start killing people?” Carolina asked.

“Because then we might kill the wrong people,” Mosé explained.

“Okay, but after we sort it out we get to kill people?” Carolina asked hopefully.

“Maybe after you’ve had a nap. Why don’t you get David something to wear and we can all meet in

the den. Virginia, why don't you do that lawyer thing that you do," he suggested.

"Can't we beat whoever did this while Mommy does the lawyer thing?" his *pepe* whined.

"I know that all of you want to beat whomever did this abominable thing to our David but think about all of the unpleasant things we can do to him *legally*," he stressed that last word hoping that it would penetrate the minds of the adults.

"But," both Carolina and Mariana protested.

Mosé wrapped an arm around his wife's shoulders and tried to reason with the occupants of the room. "Did you all forget how vindictive my brilliant attorney wife can be when she's upset?"

"Oh, yeah, for a second I forgot how mommy likes to stick it to the man," Mariana smiled.

"Oh, yeah, this could be good. This could be really, really good," Virginia said while rubbing her hands together. All she was missing was the maniacal laugh.

"We are going to sort this out little Caro," he promised Carolina whom he loved like one of his own children. Carolina had served as Mariana's second mother since the day his *pepe* had taken her first breath and she'd done a hell a job. Whatever harmed his little Caro also harmed everyone in their family and thusly had to be destroyed. And he would gladly do the destroying.

«»*

The logical part of Carolina understood that Mosé made sense, however the illogical part was currently stomping a mud hole in the logical part and walking that sombitch dry. Her blood was pounding; her heart was pounding; her stomach lurched. She couldn't breathe.

Turning to look at her beautiful baby she kissed the top of his head. He was so beautiful. All of the bruises on him hurt her, but the look in his eyes broke her heart. He didn't believe that he would get to stay. Oh, he was staying. She hugged him tighter and rained down kisses upon his head. "Know this, little David. I won't let anything else hurt you. You are mine. And I'm stingy with my stuff."

"Hell, she's stingy with *my* stuff. I had to damn near ask her permission to hold my own baby," Virginia said.

"See, little David. Like I said, I'm stingy. I found you and I'm not giving you back," she choked out.

"Technically, I found him," Mackenzie said.

"Whatever, possession motherfucker. I called *DIBS!* on David so he's mine," she said fiercely, her chest heaving with suppressed anger.

Sweeping the adults in the room with an 'I don't give a damn' glance, she spoke. "I. Am. Not. Giving. Him. Up."

"No one's expecting you too, Sweetness," Mackenzie responded.

"Good, because I mean it," she said looking again at her baby. She held him impossibly tighter. And like a caged animal she looked wildly around the room as if she planned to escape. "He's hurt. My baby's hurt," Carolina breathed. She tried to take another steadying breath but it shattered into a sob. Looking into David's eyes, she promised. "I'm...never," she huffed. "Going...to," she panted. "Allow anyone or anything to hurt you with impunity. I love you. You're mine," she breathed. "Do you..." she choked out. "Believe me?" she sobbed.

"Yes, Momma. I love you too," David said.

"Promise?" Carolina asked.

"Yes, I promise, Momma."

"You're not just saying that because I asked you to?"

"No, Momma. I'm saying it because I mean it. Honest promise."

"Thank you," she said as she hugged him so tight that she couldn't breathe.

Mackenzie, like every other person in the room, had been watching Carolina. It was clear that she was in shock. And it was clear that she was in danger of doing something rash. He'd stayed right up on her, and it was a good thing for when she went down, she was still clutching David like a lifeline. If he didn't have fast reflexes, she would have taken a hard fall and taken the boy with her. Easily catching them both, he deposited them both on the bed, noting that even semi-conscious Carolina didn't let go of David.

"Momma!" David screamed.

"It's okay, baby, I'm fine."

"You are not okay, Sweetness. You damn near passed out. You need to rest."

"No, I don't need to rest. I need my baby."

"Can't you rest while we take care of things?"

"No. No, I cannot. I need to do something. If I rest someone might try and take my baby," she protested.

Mackenzie knelt at her feet. Taking her hands into his, he spoke. "Look into the eyes of these people and know that none present will allow him to be taken from us."

"You promise, Mackenzie?" she asked.

"I promise."

"What if?" she began.

"Then I will run with you," he answered knowing what she was thinking.

Mackenzie held her tight to his broad chest. Rubbing her back with soothing circular motions, Carolina and David missed the look that passed between Samson, Mackenzie, Mosé, Virginia and Mariana. They said nothing but the look was clear: *Someone needs to pay for hurting that child.*

“While you Southerners plot the demise of the bastard that did this, I’m going to call my mother,” Samson said. “David needs to be checked over to make sure he doesn’t have any damage that we cannot see.”

Mackenzie smiled knowing that Samson couldn’t have found a better doctor if he’d tried. Dr. Yishdloh Madeira was both a damn good internal medicine specialist in the white man’s world and a valued traditional healer in the Navajo community. She was also an advocate for women and children.

“She won’t try and take David away from me, will she?” Carolina asked. “I know that there are rules about reporting abuse and such.”

“More than likely mother will get her rifle and help you hunt the bastard down,” Samson said before leaving the room.

«»*

David held onto his Momma for dear life. Not because he was afraid, but because he was scared

that if he let her go, she'd make good on her threats and start killing people. He didn't know what to think of this woman who didn't know him but was ready to do battle on his behalf, but he knew that he loved her.

His Momma was real protective. Even when the really big man's mother came to check him out, she'd stood right there making sure that his modesty and the shreds of his dignity remained intact. Dr. Yishdloh was nice and also insisted that he call her mother. She was like his Momma in many ways being smart, beautiful, feisty and gentle...but she wasn't his Momma so he'd decided on calling her Mommy Yishdloh. When she'd checked him out, she didn't make him seem like a freak or make him feel embarrassed. Even if he should have felt embarrassed—like when she'd told him to cough—he was too busy being amazed at the unusual arrangement of cuss words and threats coming from her mouth. He wasn't sure but he thought that she was cussing in a whole bunch of languages. After pronouncing him fit, she'd washed her hands and massaged some kind of oil into his bruises before putting some warm stones on his back. His Momma had held his hand the entire time...all the while trading ideas of the many ways that they could dispose of his father's body without being caught. Later, he'd come to appreciate the irony of these women being named

Carolina and Yishdloh. Carolina being the Latin form of Charles meaning 'army, warrior' and Yishdloh being Navajo for 'I am laughing.'

Chapter 10^{2/7}

Flexing Some Muscle

Carolina knew that her family would do everything in their power (which was considerable) to help her; but she had no faith, whatsoever, in the justice system. She did however, have faith in God. God wouldn't have delivered David to her only to snatch him away from her. And since God helped those who helped themselves, Carolina was going to help herself...and protect her baby. Digging through her baggage for her one-use cellular phone, she dialed her twin. Georgia Gilchrist-Williams did 'back-the-fuck-up' like nobody's business and had been doing so since she was old enough to get her first spanking for saying the word 'fuck.' Well, she didn't simply say the word, more like she put it to song and did a little dance with it. Of course, Carolina had joined her because she just couldn't leave her sister out there like that. They'd gotten kicked right out of play school. She and Georgia were tight despite the fact that Georgia was undiluted adrenaline, always involved in adventure, and she was laid back.

Waiting for the number to go through, she wasn't surprised when the phone was answered before the first ring finished.

"What?"

"I need you," she said.

"You still in the mountains?" Georgia asked.

"Yep."

"I'm on my way."

"Thanks."

"I'm your sister; you don't need to say thanks. You only ever need to ask," Georgia admonished.

"Do you want to know what's going on?" Carolina asked.

"I don't need to know what's going on. It's enough to know that you need," Georgia said with finality.

"I love you," Carolina breathed.

"I know that, but I'm not sharing a womb with you anymore because you hog all of the space."

"And there's my twin, always able to work pork products into the conversation," Carolina laughed.

"Are you crying?" Georgia asked with an edge to her voice.

"No," Carolina lied.

Silence.

"Okay, maybe," she amended.

More silence.

"Dammit, yes. Are you happy now?"

“No little sister, I am never happy when you are crying and whoever has made you cry won’t be happy when I finish with them.”

“I didn’t call you to kill anyone,” she started.

“No, you called me because you need me; now hang up. I’m throwing my shit into a bag and hiking out of here. I’ll need about a week to get to civilization, and then a few days to get stateside, but know that I’m on my way—unless you need me faster and in that case I can kick it into high gear and be there in two days.”

“I don’t need you right this second. I just need to know that you’re coming. Biggest sister is here right now, so she’s helping to hold it down,” Carolina said.

“Which means that the dangerous Samoan warrior is with her, so you’re in good hands,” Georgia said with a satisfied sigh.

“When is she ever without our brother?” Carolina smiled.

“True.”

“I know that you said you don’t need to know but I need to tell you. I called dibs on a baby. He’s covered in bruises because a grown man has been beating on him,” her voice broke on a sob. “They’re doing everything they can, but...” she stopped. “I might need to run with him.”

“No one’s taking your baby or my nephew. Look, I’m already packing my shit. I’m heading to you. Go take care of my nephew. Don’t worry, Twin 2; Twin 1 is on her way.”

“And normally, that’s when I’d start worrying, but not this time. Thank you,” Carolina sighed.

“Just cook me something good when I get there. Get rid of that phone you made the call from,” Georgia instructed.

“Okay.”

Carolina sighed with relief. They might have all kinds of repercussions. They might even go down. But there was no way in hell that her baby was ever going back to that hell...not while she lived, and not after.

«»*

Looking down at *Somente Mina*, who was nodding off next to him, Samson smiled knowing that he’d married into an amazing family. Currently, they were all assembled in the den, awaiting Virginia who’d cloistered herself in his office. His mother had already come and gone having seen to David and pronounced him fit, but abused. Lucky his father, Benigno, accompanied her because as he predicted his mother was ready to go find the bastard who’d

hurt the thin boy that she'd decided was a second son to her.

Mosé had passed out tall glasses of iced tea to everyone except David—whom he'd dubbed the baby giant. To him, he gave milk instead. The baby giant hadn't moved. And why would he want to? Currently, David was snuggled up against Carolina who'd insisted that he needed a blanket in spite of the fact that it was August—in the Northern Hemisphere. The baby giant had been in that position since they'd gathered in the den two hours ago. And he'd been fast asleep just as long. It was obvious that the boy was exhausted. And he had every right to be.

Samson had felt sick as he'd listened to David tell Virginia the truth. He'd run away. His father had perpetually beaten him and generally treated him worse than a dog. Pulling him out of school, he'd hired him out as a day laborer. His father would take his money and spend it, leaving the boy to fend for himself, which is why he'd resorted to stealing, which he wasn't very good at. The kid had a record of thievery, though all of the charges had been dropped when people discovered who his dad was. Apparently, it was widely known that his father was a piece of shit.

It was obvious that David would not be returning to anything that resembled the hell that had been his life BC—Before Carolina. And it was just as obvi-

ous that they belonged together. He didn't think that Carolina had to worry about someone trying to take David away from her. They had to worry about someone trying to take Carolina away from David. And they really had to worry about trying to take either Carolina or the baby giant from Mackenzie who was sitting with an armful of Carolina looking good and protective—like the proud papa he was going to be if he harbored any hopes of being Carolina's man.

«»*

Finally, Virginia emerged from the office. Wearing her tortoise-shell glasses and carrying her laptop and a sheaf of papers, she looked every inch the high-powered attorney that she was. Taking a moment to settle herself in the oversized chair that practically swallowed her, she gratefully took the glass of tea that her husband pressed into her hand.

“We need to find the man masquerading as his father—who from this point on shall be referred to as POS—piece of shit,” she said in a no-nonsense voice.

“Yes, we do so that I can beat the living shit out of that sorry sack of shit—my apologies to shit,” Carolina said.

“Amongst other things. But first things first; this is the information that I gathered on POS. And

these are the things that he has done wrong,” Virginia said as she passed Carolina the stack of papers.

“What is this? A print out of the Old Testament?” Carolina asked as she took the thick stack. Flipping through it, she noted how thorough her sister was. Virginia had everything from a to z. And yes, she’d alphabetized the list.

Reading over her shoulder, Mackenzie whistled. “The only thing missing is ‘failure to signal while turning.’”

“And if I had a witness who would testify to that in a court of law, I would’ve added it,” Virginia said.

“I don’t see ‘being a sorry motherfucker’ on this list,” Carolina stated.

“That’s because being a sorry motherfucker isn’t a crime,” Virginia answered.

“Okay, fine,” Carolina pouted.

“Now, here’s what we need to do. We need to contact POS. I have attempted to call but the last known phone number is disconnected. Therefore, I wrote a letter, which we will send certified to his last known address informing him that we will be caring for his son until he returns so that he cannot accuse us of kidnapping. We will send a copy to each of your attorneys to cover our asses. Meanwhile, I have the address and phone number of every agency that has failed David...and a long fucking memory. When we

have him safely in our clutches, we're going after these sons of bitches."

"Virginia, will you get into trouble?" Carolina asked.

"Baby, if doing the right thing gets me into trouble those motherfuckers can have my license."

"But you're going to need a license to practice law."

"I might need a license to practice law, but I don't need a license to raise hell. I'm not going to trade decency for a career. I'm not going to choose money over family. You are my family. David's yours so he belongs to all of us now," Virginia exclaimed.

"Okay, so now I've been properly told off by everyone," she said.

"Not yet. Momma hasn't had a go at you."

"You told Momma?" Carolina asked.

"Damn skippy. I'm not stupid. She's going to want to know that she has another grandson."

"Thank you, Virginia."

"You're welcome, little sister."

"I need to know why you're so confident. We need to know what we're up against," Carolina breathed.

"Why are you so confident that David belongs to you?" Virginia parried.

"Because God gave him to me."

"And God gave me signs," Virginia said.

For the first time, since he'd woken, David spoke. "What if my father," he began.

"You better not be talking about that sperm donor. POS is not your father; Mackenzie is," Carolina gently, but firmly, told David. She was so concentrated on her baby, she completely missed the looks that all of the adults shot her at that comment.

"What if he challenges that?" David asked.

"POS can challenge God if he wants to, but I would recommend against it. Look how that turned out for Pharaoh."

"I'm guessing that was bad," David questioned.

"Yeah, anytime you get pestilence and nine other things it's bad. That sucks on a whole 'nother level of sucking. Now hush darling and know that you belong to me. Lay back down, you're tired. Are you hungry?"

"No, I'm fine.

"Well, in a little bit I'm going to fix you a snack."

Turning back to Virginia she asked. "So God gave you a sign?"

"Not just one but a multitude of them."

"For real?" Carolina asked.

"For real," Virginia nodded her head.

"I prayed all the way to that office. *God, give me strength. God, give me strength.* I went to pick up the phone and before I could dial, the phone rang.

Of all people, it was one of my classmates from way back—Dr. Freedom Jamison-Grey of the prominent and affluent Jamison and Grey families. She's good people and though we don't talk on the regular, when we do talk it's good times. Before I could even get in a greeting she told me that she woke up with me on her mind and asked me if I was ready to pray."

"She didn't ask?" Mariana required.

"When Freedom Jamison-Grey feels something in her bones, she instructs, does, or demands, She will move everything under Heaven, but she doesn't ask. And you know what, when she finished praying, the knot of anger that I had in my chest dissolved. Then again, Freedom puts so much hallelujah in her prayers that her prayers could dissolve damn near anything."

"Ah, so she's one of those kinds of women?" Mosé smiled.

"Damn skippy," Virginia smiled back before continuing. "As soon as the *Amens* were out of our mouths, she asked me what it was that I needed. When I told her a good attorney who is familiar with family law and Colorado statutes she fired off a phone number...to her daughter who is licensed in the state of Colorado and lives for cases like this."

"Did you call?" Carolina asked.

“Absolutely, and after giving her the rundown, she let loose a string of cusses that would impress even Carolina. Long story short, she’s on her way. She’s bringing in a handful of attorneys—and a couple of women who just want to come along to break some kneecaps and raise a little hell—apparently that’s what they do. I’m sure that I don’t want to know the details but I know this, we suddenly have a lot more guns at our disposal—working *pro bono* because they believe in—and I quote—‘beating the ever-loving shit out of motherfuckers who need it.’ I feel good about this y’all—real good. I know Freedom and she’s one of those women who doesn’t have a title, but doesn’t need it. Her words carry weight and right now that weight’s in our corner.”

«»*

David snapped out of his daze when he felt his Momma start to get up.

“Little David needs clothes,” his Momma said. It was clear that she expected Mackenzie to do as she said but David knew that Mackenzie would protest. *He had to right? Why would the man he tried to steal from try to help him?*

“It’s close to three p.m. We may have to wait until tomorrow,” Mackenzie said.

"I want him to have new clothes *today*," Carolina ordered. "I don't care where we have to go to procure them."

"Perhaps he can wear something of mine until we get him some clothes," Mackenzie answered.

"I don' know how well that will work. You're too big. Mosé's the same size as you are and Samson's even bigger than you. Virginia is too small and Mariana's breasts are so big that all of her shirts have boob prints in them."

"Auntie!" Mariana wailed.

"What? It's not like everyone cannot see those things from ten miles away. Why do you think Samson has you tucked away way out here? So you don't put anyone's eye out with those," Carolina replied.

"I'm sure that we can come up with something," Virginia said as she took David's hand and pulled him in for a kiss. Looking back at the occupants of the room, the small woman belted out. "Let's get moving people." And with that, everyone hustled to various rooms looking for clothes for him.

He wasn't trying to offend his Momma's sister. She was nice and pretty and really smart and was helping him...but she wasn't *his* Momma. Dragging his feet, he called out. "Momma?"

"Yes, baby?" she asked.

"Are you coming?"

“Yes, baby. I’ll be up in a minute. I’m going to make you a sandwich and do a little chore and then I’ll be right up,” she said as she kissed him. “You’ll be safe with them and if any of the men scare you, I’ll be right up to kick their asses.”

“Okay.”

“Come on, little giant,” Virginia commanded.

“Yes, ma’am,” he muttered.

“Yes, Auntie,” she corrected.

These women were nice...and bossy, but he liked them.

«»*

David looked at himself in the mirror. It was one of the first times that he looked at his reflection without cringing. He couldn’t believe that his hair was so light and that his skin was so...clean. He smiled looking at his outfit. He had on a shirt of Mariana’s that she called ‘her-favorite-back-when-she-was-skinny’ shirt. The big man with her had growled and said that she would never be wearing anything that small again because he liked her like she was. He was wearing a pair of Mosé’s shorts—with one of his Momma’s belts. He was wearing a pair of Mackenzie’s socks and sports sandals (which almost fit).

Walking out of the bathroom, he spotted Mariana on the bed. She was casually reading a magazine. As soon as she saw him she got off the bed and rushed to him. Before he could do anything he was once again engulfed in a tight and warm embrace. This lady smelled nice too—not like Momma, but she still smelled good. Like fruit...no kind of fruit that *he'd* ever sampled but he was guessing that's what a sweet, exotic fruit would smell like.

“Welcome to the family, Little David,” she squealed as she pulled him down to the bed and sat beside him.

“Um, thank you,” he said as he gave the woman a wide-eyed look. Like all of the women, she referred to him as little, which was funny being that he was taller than all of the women. He was going to say something else but she talked very fast so he couldn't find a place to squeeze in any words.

“I'm your big sister, Mariana, but you can call me Big Sister. Carolina is my second momma and your first momma, which makes us siblings. I'm older so I get to tell you what to do, but I'm still the baby. Okay?”

“Um, okay,” he said.

“Okay, great. You've already met my parents—Virginia and Mosé. They'll be like your grandparents as well as your aunt and uncle, which is kind of like a country and western song, but not really. Now you're

going in Carolina's truck with your momma and Mackenzie and my husband Samson and I will follow in his truck. Oh, you're so handsome!" Mariana said as she kissed his cheeks again.

David knew that he was probably blushing. He'd never been called handsome before. Hearing a growl from the doorway, he looked up into the face of the big man. He was ready to jump up but Mariana threw a pillow at the giant before giggling and holding him tighter.

"You leave my little brother alone Samson or you'll sleep by yourself tonight. And I'll tell my momma and my auntie that you're being mean."

She turned to him and said, "He just gets that way when I'm hugging on handsome men."

David's eyes were wide as he stared at Mariana's husband. He was huge—even bigger than Mackenzie. He watched as his dark blue eyes went from arctic to balmy in a split second before holding out his hand to him.

"Welcome to the family, David," he said.

David tentatively placed his hand in the one in front of him, surprised that the big man didn't break his knuckles or anything. Samson had a firm handshake but it was just that. Not the show of dominance that he was accustomed to.

His eyes went back to look at Mariana's, who merely grinned at him before speaking.

"I know that he's huge and he may seem scary but he's such a big softie—"

"*Somente Mina*," Samson protested with a cough.

Mariana continued as if he hadn't made a sound.

"He really is," she said. "Samson, go away. You're scaring my little brother and I have important stuff to tell him."

David wasn't that scared of Samson, but he did relax when he removed himself from the room.

"Okay, little David. We have to discuss important stuff."

"Okay."

"Listen up. This look is called '*the eyes*.' You do it like this. You look up from under your eyelashes. Okay try it," she said.

He tried it and it must've worked because she added to it. "Good job, now if you're really wanting to have your way, do '*the eyes*' and add '*the lip*.' You just stick out your bottom lip a tiny bit. No momma can resist that. And if none of that works, employ '*the voice*' by sounding five years old and telling her that you love her and that you're hungry. No Southern woman can ignore that. Okay. Now try it," she said.

He tried it for a few minutes. Mariana wouldn't let him use a mirror saying that he wouldn't have a

mirror during the times he'd need to use it. Finally, he got it down pat. He knew because she hugged him so hard that he thought his ribs might be broken.

"Good job," she said. "But remember that I'm still the baby...even though you are so adorable."

* «*» *

Carolina quickly made up David's sandwich and poured him a travel mug of milk. Her baby was looking hungry again and she just couldn't have that. That done, she grabbed up that odious bag of laundry and headed outside. Her baby had already said that he had no special sentiment for the clothes, ergo they were about to have an accident. She had to work with the quickness lest one of the people with a y-chromosome come up with the idea that those clothes were okay for her baby to wear, which was crap of the highest order. David would never again put those clothes on his back.

It was hot and that was saying something being that she was cold-natured and all. This would so not be necessary if she'd been home where she had a flamethrower. More people needed flamethrowers. She couldn't believe that Tom didn't know where she could procure one. Dammit, now she was going to have to go old school. Already aware of where the power tools—and thus, the gasoline—were kept, all

she needed was a good old-fashioned steel trashcan and she could kick start match-and-gasoline day. She smiled thinking of her twin who'd taught her that day...and her crazy ass best friend, Von, who'd taught it to her. It had all started with an out-of-line boy and had ended with a controlled burn that had left the authorities puzzled. It was a damn good thing that they didn't have all of those forensics shows back then. With the way those two got suspended, it was hard to imagine them as the successful women they were. Georgia was about to get her doctorate and Von was a CEO of one of the wealthiest companies on the west coast.

Gathering everything that she needed, she dumped the clothes in the trash bin, grabbed the gasoline and dragged the trash can out to the middle of the work area. Singing as she worked, she wasn't aware that Mackenzie's entire work crew lay in wait, watching her...and listening to her amazing voice. She wasn't aware of anything until she heard Tom call her.

"Hello, Ms. Carolina," Tom drawled.

"Um, hi Tom," she returned.

"Can I help you?"

"No, I'm good. Thanks," she said.

"Now, Ms. Carolina, even though I know that you're going to be mad at me, I'm just going to have to confiscate this."

“Why?” she whined.

“Because if you ended up hurt, Mackenzie would beat my ass—pardon my language—right before he killed me,” he said.

“Right before he killed everyone, Tom,” Mackenzie corrected from behind her.

“I stand corrected,” Tom said.

Carolina narrowed her eyes and glared at Tom. “You narked, didn’t you?”

“Yep,” Tom said unrepentant.

“It doesn’t bother you to be a tattler?” she huffed.

“You know that I think an awful lot of you, but um, yeah Mackenzie hits harder than you,” he said.

“How do you know, Tom?” she asked, miffed that Tom had prohibited her from going on her little clothes killing spree.

“Just a really good guess, Ms. Carolina.”

“You guys all make me sick!” she spat.

She was about to finish her wild out when she felt Mackenzie encircle her with his strength.

“Sweetness,” he drawled.

“What?”

“You want to tell me what you’re trying to do?”

“Fine. I’m trying to burn David’s clothes.”

“Why didn’t you simply ask me?” he drawled.

“Because you might go all male on me and say that these clothes were fine for my baby.”

“No, Sweetness. Though I might tease you mightily, I wouldn’t subject that boy to any further mistreatment.”

Carolina softened seeing the truth in his eyes. Sighing, she leaned against his hard chest needing his strength. “Okay, fine. I’ll give you that, but you’d probably be all *‘fire isn’t a toy. You might hurt yourself. You might burn down the state of Colorado, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.’*”

“Yes, I would say that, Sweetness, but I’d still help you burn those clothes. It’s dangerous to set fires in the dry season, Sweetness, but both Samson and I have fireplaces.”

“Yeah, but then we’d have to wait.”

“Yes, we would have to wait but sometimes we must wait for that which we desire most,” he breathed into her ear as he gently ground his erection into her.

Oh, damn. Mackenzie had the ability to turn her on so good. After their activities in the media room, the last thing that she needed was a reminder of how good Mackenzie smelled, how good he felt, or how big and hard his dick was. She had a baby to see about. “Mackenzie, we can’t.”

“I know, Sweetness. Right now, we’ll see to our son. Then after he’s settled, we’ll see to us.”

“How did he get to be *‘our’* son?” she asked.

“The same way that you became *my* woman. God gave him to us.”

“You cannot use that!” she said.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because,” she threw back.

“Yeah, but you know what. You must know it instinctively because all day you’ve been referring to him as ours and just a little while ago you damn near took David’s head off when he referred to POS as his father.”

“That’s because that sorry, shit-for-brains, used ass wipe masquerading as a human being would have to go through a few more evolutions just to come up to the level of panty waste!” she said.

“Wow. That was lovely. You should write greeting cards, but you know what. You plainly stated—well actually you yelled—for all and sundry to hear that *I* was his father.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. And I’m not letting you take it back.”

“That baby needs a father who’s going to be there forever...not some man who’s just going to hang around until he gets into my pants,” she said.

She gasped feeling Mackenzie lift her into his strong arms. “First, the only man who will be getting into your pants is me. This belongs to me,” he said as he fitted her atop his erection. “Second, I’m going to

be here forever. Third, whatever is yours is mine. You claimed that boy, so he's *ours*."

"Yeah, but will that be enough for you—a black woman and her teenage son?"

"What do you mean by that, Carolina?" he growled.

Carolina knew that Mackenzie was serious, not simply because he growled, but because he'd used her actual name. "I mean that I'm thirty-eight years old, Mackenzie. That isn't necessarily middle age, but dammit, it isn't prime fertility age. You get with me and what if I can't have any babies?"

"But we already have a son together, Sweetness."

"You say that now."

"And I'll keep saying it, Sweetness. Now come on, let's go find our son something to wear."

"Okay," she whispered right before taking his mouth. Maybe Mackenzie meant it maybe he didn't, but regardless of what happened or didn't happen between them, she knew that Mackenzie would protect her baby.

* « * » *

Carolina wasn't surprised when Mackenzie carried her all the way back to the house. He did that sort of thing on the regular. Stopping by the kitchen

to wash her hands, she ambled to her bedroom. She wasn't surprised to see her oldest baby in conference with her youngest baby and Samson standing sentry nearby.

"Are you corrupting my baby?" she asked her oldest baby.

"Noooo," Mariana drawled trying her best to look innocent.

"Mmm hmm, what were you discussing then?" she asked.

"Um, quantum physics," Mariana said.

"Really, what theory in particular were you discussing, David?" Carolina asked.

"Um," he began.

"You don't have to answer that. I know that your sister is in here teaching you all kinds of bad habits."

"Noooo," he said sounding just like Mariana.

"Oh my goodness. She did the eyes on you, didn't she? You fell for that?"

"But, she's pretty and nice and she's my big sister," David said.

"Well, that is true," she said as she hugged both of her babies.

David liked the women in this family. They were fun and nice...and they smelled good. Smiling, he watched as his Momma sat next to him. She smoothed a gentle hand over his head before kissing his forehead. He blushed when he realized that he was leaning into his Momma's hand. Looking up at her through his eyelashes (like Mariana had taught him) he noticed that she was smiling at him. Momma always looked so beautiful when she was looking at him. He liked that. He also liked the way that she always looked him in the eye.

"I fixed you a sandwich and a travel mug full of milk. That way you can eat in the truck as we go into town."

David stiffened. They were going into town. *Oh well, the dream wasn't going to last forever, right?*

"Okay," was all that he said.

He felt his Momma put a finger under his chin and lift his face so that she could look directly into his eyes as she spoke.

"You are staying with us, baby. No one, and I mean no one, is taking you. I thought we sorted that out with you already. You are **mine** and I'm not letting you leave me. I don't care where you came from but you are staying right here with me. Do you understand?" his Momma asked.

Her eyes were steady as she looked at him. He swallowed the lump in his throat and blinked back tears before asking the question that plagued him.

“What if he comes—” he began, but stopped when his Momma promptly placed a finger across his lips stopping the rest of the question.

“Oh, I hope that sorry POS does come. In fact, I relish the chance to beat the shit out of him. He will eventually come; that is what the letter is for. Your Aunt Virginia is a kick-ass attorney, therefore the letter is politely phrased, but make no mistake about it, that letter is nothing short of a summons...a demand for him to present himself. And when he does present himself, he has one chance to do the decent thing and legally relinquish his rights to you. Should he choose not to do that, this family will use every available resource to take that son-of-a-bitch down.”

“What if he’s not scared of the men here?”

“Well then he’s fucking stupid, but it’s not simply the men that he should be worried about,” his Momma said.

“Who else is here?”

“I’m here—your Momma—and anyone trying to take you from me should be scared. And I’ve called for reinforcements.”

“You have lots of brothers?”

“Even worse. I’ve got my twin sister and don’t nobody do back-the-fuck up like her. So it’s in his best interest to do the right thing,” his Momma said.

“But he doesn’t have to do the decent thing. He never has,” David admitted.

“And because he hasn’t, that is why we have taken you as ours. He gave up his rights to you when he decided to mistreat you.”

“But he’s going to want me back. He’s going to see that you want me and he’s going to see this big house and the big trucks and he will want lots of money.”

“Well, you’re worth a lot of money and if money is the one thing that will make him do the right thing then he can have all that I have, but he’s not getting you.”

“What you give him will never be enough, Momma. And then you won’t have any money and you will be hungry. I don’t want you to be hungry. I can stay here until he comes and then I can just go back with him.”

He stopped talking when he heard his Momma laugh. It wasn’t her usual laugh. It was a scary laugh and it caused all of the hairs on the back of his neck to stand up. Shivering, he knew that he never wanted to be the recipient of that laugh—ever.

“David, baby, sweetheart, my darling angel, you belong to me. We’re not even discussing this any-

more. You're mine. Should you try to do something as foolish as going off with that POS...you know what, I'm not even going to talk about that. Don't you want to stay here with me? Don't you love me?"

"Yes, Momma, I love you but," he said, distressed that he'd upset his Momma.

"But nothing. I don't want to talk about this. You're mine and you're not going anywhere. You're mine. And you don't have to worry about him taking you in the interim. That POS has made many enemies. First, and foremost, he has made an enemy of me, which means that he has made an enemy of my entire family and all of my friends. He's a low-life, scum-sucking, bottom-dwelling, waste of valuable oxygen, but he's smart enough to know that if he wants to die a hideous, hideous death, then the fastest way to achieve that is to come here."

"You don't understand how strong he is. Momma he's strong and I don't just think that he's strong because I'm skinny. I've seen him...do things. It wouldn't bother him to hit a woman."

His Momma was about to answer but Mackenzie snarled before barking out. A little bit scared because Mackenzie wore the same look his fa—POS—wore when he started breaking things and people, he was surprised to hear the strong man's voice shake.

“David, I’m not surprised that a man who’d beat a child would beat a woman.”

“That motherfucker is not a man; he’s a POS!” his Momma interjected.

“I’m not surprised that he’d hit a woman but I guarantee you that should he think to hit any of our women, he’d be bothered,” Mackenzie promised.

“He’d be bothered greatly,” Samson said from the doorway.

“Oh, actually he’d be bothered to death,” Mosé promised from behind him.

“Yeah, what they said, little brother,” Mariana said.

He noticed that his Aunt Virginia and his Momma simply nodded their heads in agreement.

“I appreciate what you are doing for me, but he has people who help him,” he tried to make them understand.

“He might have people, little David. And they might be wealthy, influential, and popular people, but you know what people he doesn’t have? He doesn’t have Jesus, so I’m going to see your POS’s people and raise you one God, and I’m going to go ahead and mark that down as a win for us,” his Aunt Virginia said.

“Preach, sister!” his Momma said with her fist in the air.

“Tell it!” Mariana yelled.

“And before all is said and done you’re going to tell us all of those people who helped him, so they can get theirs,” his Momma said.

“It’s not that many people,” he began.

“Oh yes, it is. Everyone—and I do mean everyone—who knew what was going on and didn’t do anything to help you has something to answer for,” his Aunt Virginia said.

“Now do you understand what I mean when I said that this family sticks together?” his Momma asked.

“Yes, Momma.”

“Good,” she said as she hugged him again and kissed him some more. She finally let him go and he couldn’t stop the stupid grin that settled on his face. He was part of a family. And they knew how his father—oops POS—was and they didn’t care.

“Welcome to the family again, little David,” his sister smiled and hugged him. “You’re so handsome I could just squeeze you all day.”

“Thank you,” he said shyly as he hugged her back.

“Little David, are you ready to go into town now?” his Momma asked.

“Yes, Momma,” he answered feeling more secure.

“Good. And by the way, you’re on restriction for even intimating that you’d go back to that thing. You’re mine.”

“Ha, ha. You got in trouble,” Mariana sing-songed.

“But,” he began.

“Don’t back talk your Momma,” Mackenzie warned.

“How long am I on restriction for?” he asked, never having been placed on restriction. He’d heard of such a thing but he’d only ever gotten beaten.

“Until you’re thirty-five,” his Momma answered.

“Okay,” he said smiling inside because everyone said Momma was my Momma.

“Come on, baby, move your hips. We’ve got shopping to do,” his Momma said from the doorway. “Mariana stop being selfish and let me get a few hugs from my baby. And get your pregnant self over here and give me a hug while you’re at it.”

He watched Mariana go to his Momma and get a long hug and a couple of kisses. When his Momma was done, she held out her arms to him and he rushed into them. She kissed him and hugged him and took his hand.

“While we’re in town, you don’t worry about anybody messing with you. I’ll be watching out for you. Not even your shadow will be as close. Even if

that POS is near, he won't be getting within touching distance without me being right there with you. Do you believe me?" she asked.

He smiled hearing his Momma's word. This was the woman who'd fed him like it was Christmas, Thanksgiving and some other food celebration combined and not once did she ask for anything in return. *Trust her? Believe her? He was in love with her!* "Always, Momma. Always."

Chapter 10^{3/7}

Shopping Spree

Walking outside, Carolina was surprised to see Tom, the narc, waiting on the porch. She was even more surprised to see the three strapping men with him. It was obvious that they were all related. In spite of being a narc, Tom made some beautiful children...not that anyone could mistake the eye candy as anything but prime specimens of manhood. Since she wasn't speaking to Tom—or the entire work crew—she ignored them. Though her Southern manners prickled, she ignored it and steadfastly kept her silence, sure that they were there to talk with Mackenzie anyway. How wrong she was.

“Ms. Carolina, I know that you're mad at us and I respect that, but well, you're just going to have to stay mad about that because even if Mackenzie wasn't here, none of us would let you do anything to put yourself in danger,” Tom began.

“Still not talking to you, Tom...or should I say ‘narc’?”

“Tom will be just fine, Ms. Carolina. Let me ask you something. Would you be mad if we all saw this fellow you got a death grip on,” he began.

“He is not simply a generic ‘fellow’. This is my son, David!” she interrupted forcefully.

“Ma’am, I think all of the western U.S. now knows that David is your son. We all heard you screaming it—from way out here. Anyway, how would you feel about us if we saw him doing something dangerous and didn’t stop him? I’ve a feeling that you’d be right pissed off, excuse the language.”

Sighing, Carolina knew that he was right. “Okay, fine. I admit that you are right. I’m still mad though.”

“Well, that’s fair enough. Long as there aren’t any hard feelings between us, Ms. Carolina. You know the crew has taken a liking to you. We couldn’t stand it if you got hurt.”

“You just want me to make you more sweet potato pie, don’t you?” she asked.

“Well now that you ask, yeah, we’d love that, but that ain’t what makes us care about you. We like you, and that’s just how it is.”

“Why?” she asked as she eyed him with suspicion.

“Well, what’s not to like? You’re smart, a good cook,” he began.

“You might want to be amending that to ‘great’ cook,” she interrupted.

“My apologies for the oversight. You’re a great cook. You’re good-looking,” he finished.

“And she also happens to be mine,” Mackenzie said from beside her as he placed his big arms around her.

“Mackenzie, get off of me!” she spat. “Don’t interrupt Tom when he’s praising me. Go ahead, Tom.”

“Like I said, we like you...but not too much,” he said while throwing a look at Mackenzie. “Mackenzie explained what’s going on and we want you to know that we will be extra vigilant. Being that I’m the foreman and am needed here while Mackenzie goes with you, I called my sons. I want them to go with you—just in case.”

“Are you serious?” she asked, shocked that the crew had rallied around her.

“Yes, ma’am. They’re all home from school so they can be spared. These here are my twins—Ty and Method,” he said while pointing at the two biggest men.

Hottie Number One and Hottie Number Two were about 6’5” tall and had the bodies to match that height—not that she was paying it any mind.

“This one is my youngest boy, Hemi...and yes, he’s named after the engine. That’s his momma’s, whose name is Shelby, doing but it seems to fit being that she’s named after a driver and a car.”

Hell yeah it fit, she thought as she looked at the young man who stood even in height with her baby but carried about a hundred extra pounds of muscle.

Carolina was overwhelmed. She was still a tiny bit mad, but still, this was a beautiful gesture. “Thank you, Tom. I would hug you, but as you can see I have my arms full of my baby,” she said as she stopped to kiss the top of her baby’s head. “But when I get back, I’m cooking you all something special.”

“You know that we like your cooking, but it ain’t necessary, Ms. Carolina.”

“Tom, don’t make me mad twice in a day. I’ll be cooking you something and I suggest that you like it.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said as he tipped his hat.

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Carolina’s *momma eyes* were on guard from the moment that Mackenzie had turned her truck off of Samson’s land and onto the main highway. They’d decided to take her truck because it had more interior space and she planned on filling it up with stuff for her baby. The boy was in need of some decent attire...and some fun stuff. She bet that he’d never been spoiled, which was a damn shame. Children should always be spoiled with not just material things, but with love, affection and time. She planned on doubling up on all of that because David needed it. That sorry POS had deprived that beautiful baby of so many things. He needed his ass

whipped in the worst way for hurting that baby. Feeling Mackenzie take her hand in his, she closed her eyes and breathed in.

Taking a peak in the mirror to insure that her baby was okay, she turned to Mackenzie. "Thank you," she said.

"Anytime, Sweetness. Now why don't you do like our son and get a little shut eye."

"Because I need to," she began.

"You need to be well-rested, Sweetness. We can handle the drive. Our son is well-protected," he pointed indicating their convoy. She doubted the president had better security. Tom's boys filled the lead truck and Samson and Mariana occupied the truck behind them. And her baby, who'd finished off his snack in record time, was fast asleep in the middle of the back seat where it was safest for him.

They were heading to Denver because being a bigger city, boasting a population around two million, it offered a lot more choices in the way of shopping. After about two seconds of haggling, they decided to go to Cherry Creek North first because the swanky area offered everything one would need to feel pampered and her baby needed that. Also, Samson had an in with many of the merchants there so David would have privacy, which he needed. They'd get him into some decent clothes, and then they'd make their way to Northfield Stapleton. Though the

sixteen-block area of Cherry Creek North offered over three-hundred stores, she chose to trek to Northfield Stapleton because a) it had a Bass Pro Shops, and though David didn't need a boat because she and Georgia already had one, he'd definitely need some fishing gear; b) it had a Cold Stone Creamery, and how could you go wrong with that; c) it had a big ass theater and little David needed to have some fun; d) it had a Lane Bryant and she could always use a few bras; e) it had a Target, and that quite simply was her store.

Entering the high-end men's clothier, she smiled noting the way the men automatically surrounded her and her baby. Even though she had kick-ass security, she took note of everybody that was in the store. She knew that both Samson and Mackenzie were there but she needed Samson to keep his ever-seeing eyes on Mariana. Mackenzie never took his eyes off of her and Tom's boys were big men, but they were babies and would spend time brawling with a threat rather than going for the killing blow should something jump off, so that left it up to her to insure her baby boy's safety at all times.

Taking his hand, they were directed to a private room and shown a catalog. Cool, she thought. She was about to ask David what he favored when she realized that he wore the deer-in-headlights expression. She bet that this was his first time that he was

actually welcomed into a store and treated like he was somebody. Crying for him, she vowed that before it was said and done, her baby would not only know his way around a store, he'd be so good at shopping he could have a show. Not a prolific spender, she also wasn't a miser. She was a firm believer in pampering yourself and it was clear that her baby had no idea how to go about that. That was why he had her. The tailor took his measurements and outfitted him in a splendid outfit of loose-fit jeans, a celery-green polo that made the green in his eyes pop, and good sturdy walking shoes.

While he changed into his new gear, she and Mackenzie selected several more outfits and placed an order for some heavier clothing being that fall was right around the corner. Glancing at her watch, she noted that it'd only taken forty minutes. Smiling, when her baby walked out of the changing area, she couldn't resist hugging him to her. Placing her arm around him, she walked to the counter to pay for David's purchases. It had cost a pretty penny, but her baby was worth every one of them and then some. She was in the process of handing her card to the clerk, when Mackenzie's words almost got his ass kicked.

"I wouldn't advise taking money from my woman," he informed the clerk as he opened his wallet and handed the clerk his platinum card.

“Mackenzie, what is wrong with you. I can pay for this just fine,” she snapped.

“That’s nice, but you won’t be paying for it.”

“He’s my son.”

“He’s *our* son,” he corrected.

“I don’t have to have anything,” David whispered.

“Yes, you do, baby. Now hush so I can cuss Mackenzie out real quick.”

“Don’t back talk your momma,” Mackenzie admonished. “If your momma says you need it; then you need it. Understood?”

“Yes,” David answered.

“Mackenzie,” she started only to be shut up in the most pleasant way. That bastard kissed her. Right there in the middle of the store. And it wasn’t a light peck, oh no. That fine motherfucker kissed her like kissing was going extinct. When he finished, she couldn’t remember exactly why she was supposed to be mad at him, but she made up a new reason to be angry.

“Yes, Sweetness?” he drawled when he finally relinquished her lips.

“You cannot kiss me like that in front of my baby.”

“*Our* baby,” he corrected while he signed the receipt.

Making a sound of disgust, she grabbed David's hand and walked out of the store totally missing the grins on everyone's faces.

«»*

Settling herself into the truck, she waited while Mackenzie stored David's bags. Instead of using the time to cuss Mackenzie out some more, she occupied herself with looking at her baby. He was looking better by the minute.

"You know you are handsome, right?" she asked.

"Um," he said, looking down.

She knew that he was blushing and she smiled.

"I'm going to have to beat the girls off of you with a stick."

"No you won't. Girls don't like me," he whispered.

"What makes you say that?" she asked needing her baby to tell her how he felt instead of simply presuming that she knew.

"They like guys like Mackenzie and Samson, and those other guys," he admitted.

"And what makes you think that you're not like those guys?"

"They're big and strong," he started.

“Yes, they are. And they’re older. They’ve had time to grow into their bodies and they’ve had the benefit of good nutrition, sufficient rest and proper care. You will grow into your height soon enough,” she promised.

When he remained quiet, she asked. “Do you think that I’m lying when I say that you look handsome?”

“No, but you’re supposed to say that. You’re my Momma.”

“Damn skippy, I’m your momma, and it’s about time that you recognized that. Know this: I will never lie to you. If I say that you’re handsome, then you are. Don’t argue with me about this.”

“Okay, Momma.”

“Sometimes people don’t see well. They only see with their eyes instead of their hearts. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I think so.”

“Do you think Mariana is pretty?” she asked.

“Yes, but don’t tell her husband. He’s funny about her.”

“He’s supposed to be funny about her. He loves her. You’ll be just as funny about your wife. And by the way, when you get a wife, I expect some grand-kids—but not until after, note the key word in this sentence is ‘after’—you have a wife.”

“Okay,” he smiled.

"Do you know that Mariana, for a long time, didn't think that she was pretty?"

"Why?"

"Because that's what guys led her to believe. Samson's had to spend a lot of time and words trying to convince her otherwise."

"Those boys were stupid," David declared.

"Yes, they were, but in a way I'm glad that they were stupid because now she has the man that she's supposed to be with."

"Now do you understand what I'm saying?" she asked.

"Yes, Momma."

"Good. Then believe me when I say that you're handsome. Now, do you want a hair cut or do you want to keep your hair long?"

"I want to keep it long...if that's okay," he said.

"Honey, it's your hair. Of course you may keep it long. And if you want, I'll braid it for you."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Can you braid it for me now?"

"Yes," she said as she dug around in her console for the emergency hair kit that she kept there along with other necessities. Climbing into the back-seat, she brushed David's hair before deciding on putting it into cornrows. She'd have to use black rubber bands to close his braids but he'd still look

cute. She smiled noticing that he was just like Mariana when she did her hair. Little did she know that the reason that he wanted to keep his hair long was because he wanted her to wash it again. And little did he know that if he'd confided that to her, she'd have told him that she'd happily wash it anytime.

«»*

Assuring herself that David could wait for a little bit to eat, she waited until he fell asleep to text message her sister. '*SLUT!*' she text messaged. Smiling, she was pretty sure that her oldest sister was in her usual position when left alone with her handsome husband—on her back.

Virginia and Mosé had remained at the house claiming that they were busy making important calls. Carolina had no doubt that that was true, but she also knew that they were sure to use this time to get the lust out of their system. She hadn't missed the way that the older couple had looked when they'd responded to her angry yell. They looked exactly like they'd been *interrupted*. Smiling, she made a mental note to tease them about how hot they still were for each other.

Pausing in her reverie, she looked in the rear view mirror at her baby. Even though it had only

been a few minutes, she wanted to take a peek at him to make sure that he was all right. She wondered if the natural motion of the vehicle had lulled him to sleep or if he was just that exhausted. Noting that, she would be sure to pay attention to his body language when they got to the next mall.

«»*

She watched her baby look helplessly around the department store.

“Baby, go ahead and pick out something you like,” she encouraged. She gave him a little space and watched as he picked up a pitiful amount of stuff. Clucking her tongue, she was sure that he’d selected it without regard for anything but price noting that he’d selected the cheapest items in the store.

“Is this okay?” he asked as he held up the meager contents.

Eyeing the single packet of boxer shorts and the two t-shirts she frowned. “What have you got there, Baby?”

“I only need these,” he whispered.

She heard the uncertainty in his voice...and she hated it.

“David, honey. You need more than that,” she said gently.

“But you already spent a lot of money and I don’t want you to have to do stuff to pay Mackenzie back. I can wear what I have for a while,” he said.

Putting a finger under his chin, she gently lifted it before speaking. “Baby, a) Mackenzie is a bit of an asshole at times—don’t use that language by the way—but he’s a good man, else Samson wouldn’t let him anywhere near your sister; b) I have a job and I’m careful with my money so even if an alien inhabited his body and he suddenly requested the money, I could pay him with no problem; c) You need more stuff than this; d) You’re going to get more stuff than this; and, e) Stop acting like you’re leaving me. I’ve already put you on restriction until you’re thirty-five so you’re going to need clothes. Do we understand each other?”

“Yes, Momma.”

“Good,” she said as she hugged him. “Seeing that you’re a novice shopper, we’re going to need help. We need to catch a movie and eat and check out Bass Pro Shops so let’s grab your sister.”

Looking around the store for Mariana, she spotted her oldest baby in a corner. Standing with her husband, the two looked like they were about to embark on a heavy necking session. *Oh goodness*. At the rate those two were going, she’d be perpetually pregnant. She wouldn’t be surprised if Mariana was pregnant the day after delivery.

“Baby Girl, I need you,” she called. She laughed at the ensuing events. Mariana turned her head and Samson took that as a cue to bury his face there. Mariana playfully smacked his arm and with a mighty sigh and a leer at his wife Samson, finally released her.

Mariana laughed and bounded over whilst Samson joined Mackenzie in the section that should've been labeled: *Where-Men-Sit-When-Their-Women-Shop*.

“Yes, Auntie?” Mariana asked as she ruffled David's hair and kissed his cheek.

“Baby, we need to find more clothes for David,” Carolina said with authority in every word.

Mariana smiled at David before looking at what he held in his arms or rather the lack thereof.

“Is that what you picked out Little Brother?” Mariana asked in disbelief.

“I can put the t-shirts back,” he began.

“See why I need you?” Carolina asked.

“Yep,” Mariana said before breaking out into a grin.

“Little Brother, we're about to school you on the fine art of shopping...in a hurry.”

“Don’t give me excuses just make it happen!” were Mackenzie’s final words. That command was delivered in typical Mackenzie fashion—fast, slightly furious and *not-taking-no-for-an-answer*. Snapping his cell phone shut, he shoved the phone into his jeans pocket before walking back to the sitting area. Throwing back his head, he blew out his frustration, growling at nothing in particular. It was at that moment that Samson joined him. They stood in silence for a few moments and watched their women shop with the boy that Carolina and Mariana had decided was theirs.

“Everything okay?” Samson asked his friend quietly as their eyes remained on their women.

“David’s father used to work for me. I fired him a few months before I left for Utah,” Mackenzie spoke softly yet his body hummed with restrained anger.

“Don’t blame yourself, Mackenzie,” Samson spoke knowingly.

There was a silent moment between the two men before Mackenzie shook his head as he emitted a laugh that was in no way humorous.

“Kind of hard not to, Samson. I knew that he had a kid and I should’ve checked on him—” he began but stopped when Samson clapped a hand on his shoulder.

Mackenzie stopped speaking and inhaled deeply, slowly releasing the pent-up emotions that warred within his head and heart.

“Mackenzie,” Samson said in a voice that effectively stopped Mackenzie’s self-deprecating words.

“You are a man of integrity. We would not be friends otherwise. In spite of all of your strengths, you are unable to predict the future or the actions of others—especially those who are already sick in the head. Everything that has occurred has led to this moment.”

“That boy didn’t need to be tortured, Samson. There were easier paths here,” Mackenzie growled, anger igniting in his eyes turning the green to a darker shade.

“Yes, and sometimes it is not the path that is destined for us. It doesn’t mean that we have to like it.”

“Good, because I don’t like it one damn bit. He’s a kid, Samson. He’s a kid and a grown man has abused him. It was all that I could do not to grab Carolina and my rifle and hunt down that bastard who hurt David. Did you see the fading bruises that cover his body? Did you see the anguish in Carolina’s eyes? I saw it...and I will never forget it.”

“I did see that, Mackenzie, but do you know what else I see?”

“An ass-whipping in POS’s future?” Mackenzie asked.

“But of course, but look at Carolina and David,” Samson urged.

Mackenzie swung angry eyes to his Carolina and their son. It was impossible to miss how happy she was as she shopped with her two children. He watched as she selected item after item from the racks of clothes and placed them in David’s and Mariana’s arms. Some of the tension left his body as he noted the softness that overcame Carolina. Silently, he contemplated the sight that his woman made as she shopped for the boy that she claimed was now *hers*.

“I see happiness in my woman’s face and I see softness in her person,” Mackenzie whispered.

Chuckling, Samson responded. “I too see that. I also see that little boy’s need to be loved and I see the answer in Carolina every time that she looks at him. They *need* each other. And then there’s the fact that my *Somente Mina* has always wanted a baby brother and now she has what she wants. Not only are Carolina and *Somente Mina* happy; for the first time, that boy is happy. How can that be a bad thing, my friend?”

Mackenzie understood where Samson was going with his comments. Releasing the remaining tension, he answered. “It isn’t.”

“Exactly. We’ve done all that we can do so instead of worrying about the what ifs, let’s just protect our family. No harm shall come to them.”

“Samson, if things don’t work out, I’m taking Carolina and David and I’m running,” Mackenzie admitted.

“And I will insure that where you run to it is safe and comfortable,” Samson promised.

“Samson,” Mackenzie began. “You don’t have to risk—” Mackenzie began.

“I could do no less, Mackenzie. I would never allow that child to return to his former existence, nor would I allow Carolina to lose her child or *Somente Mina* to lose her brother. And regardless of your stubbornness, I will not allow you to fight this battle alone,” he said with finality.

Mackenzie looked at the man that he called friend and now accepted that they’d passed friendship long ago. It was only in this moment that he realized it. Samson was in every way his brother. “Thank you, Samson,” he said as he held out his hand to Samson.

Mackenzie wasn’t really surprised when Samson ignored his hand and pulled him in for a hug. “No thanks are required. Now let me be the first to welcome you to the brotherhood.”

Pulling back, Mackenzie asked. “The brotherhood?”

“Well *Somente Mina* is pregnant and your woman has claimed David as her son, so it looks like we’re both soon-to-be fathers,” Samson answered.

Mackenzie didn’t miss the smug satisfaction that accompanied Samson’s announcement. Whereas the prospect of marriage and fatherhood would’ve filled him with dread in the past, Mackenzie realized that was not the case now. Right now all he felt was rightness. Feeling the warmth in his chest spread throughout his body, his eyes returned to Carolina and David—*his woman and his son*. That not only sounded right; it felt right.

«»*

Lying in the warmth and comfort of the big bed, David thought about the day that he’d had. He couldn’t have imagined a day like that in his wildest dreams. His Momma and sister had spent the whole afternoon and a good part of the evening shopping for him—*him*! And they didn’t just pick anything. They actually picked clothes that looked good and felt good and made him feel good about himself. He wasn’t vain, but he did like the way people looked at him like a regular person instead of looking through him or anywhere but at him. Sighing, he admitted that the way people had treated him had made him feel like he didn’t matter. But that didn’t happen

today. He smiled thinking about the snooty clerk that his Momma had dressed down. His Momma was fierce when it came to him. Not only did she tell the clerk off, she'd pulled out her phone and cancelled her line of credit with that store, and then his big sister, her husband, and Mackenzie had done the same thing.

His Momma and big sister sure knew how to shop. He'd read on the brochure that the mall had over a million square feet, yet his Momma and his sister had made short work of that. In less than two hours, they were loaded down with stuff for him. After storing their purchases in the trucks (who knew that they had valet parking at the mall), they all went out to eat. It was okay, but not as good as his Momma's cooking. Shopping had been fun, but it was also exhausting. It was a good thing that he'd had all of those naps in the truck else he would've slept through the movies that his Momma had taken him to see when they'd finished.

He'd never been to a movie before and when he admitted that, no one had teased him about it. Everyone went out of their way to make sure that he had a good experience and though they'd already had a long day, they took him to see *two* movies, and let him pick them. There was a brief moment of tension when they went to sit down. After a brief argument, he was seated between his Momma and Mariana

who were flanked by Mackenzie and Samson with Tom's sons taking up the rear position. His Momma liked action movies, and he'd discovered that so did he. Smiling, he thought of how much fun he'd had sharing popcorn with his big sister.

When they'd finally made it back home, his Momma was still wide awake although he was tired. She hadn't even paused to rest. Instead, she'd sent him to shower and fixed him a light snack complete with the ever-present glass of milk. She sat with him while he ate it and then she actually tucked him into bed singing all the while. He smiled, loving her more with every passing moment.

Chapter 10⁴/₇

Yeah, What She Said—He's Ours...and I Will Watch over Him

His body still humming with energy, Mackenzie decided that it was best to rid himself of his excess energy before going to bed. Being in such close proximity to Carolina for such a prolonged period had wreaked havoc on his body. He couldn't help thinking of those four hours in the movie theater. Watching a movie was one of the last things that he'd wanted to do with a stretch of time in a darkened room with the woman who starred in all of his fantasies. Even though watching a movie hadn't originally been on his agenda, he'd had a good time. Witnessing David's joy at such a simple pleasure had brought a smile to his face and he'd found himself watching David as much as he watched Carolina. As much as he hated sharing Carolina with anyone, especially when he didn't quite have her safely in his clutches, he didn't mind (so much) sharing her with David. That kid needed Carolina as much as he did.

Pausing at his woman's door—which she'd left ajar just in case David needed her—he softly pushed it open. As always, seeing her caused his heart to beat harder in his chest. Moments like these, when

she forgot to be hard, floored him. Carolina would hate to know it, but in spite of her brashness, he could still see the softness that she hid so well. That softness was evident when she looked at Mariana...and he saw that same softness when she looked at David. If the truth be known, he wanted her to look at him the same way. He wanted Carolina to look at him as if he was the center of her whole world. Whether she believed it or not, she was the center of his world. Who was he kidding? Carolina was his whole world.

His thoughts were interrupted by the soft moan that she emitted whilst turning. Damn, he wanted to be in that bed with her eliciting those sounds from her. He could smell her. Inhaling deeply, he reveled in her scent. Gritting his teeth, he swallowed a moan of pleasure and forced himself to close the door.

He wanted Carolina in the best way, but he knew that his woman was exhausted and he expected no less. Besides missing her afternoon nap, she'd been through an emotional upheaval today. Hell, they all had. Intending to get in some quality time with Samson's big screen, he was on the way to the media room when his ears picked up the sound of movement followed by a faint sound. Though he couldn't make out the sound, he knew immediately and without doubt that it was a sound of distress.

Without thinking he thrust open the door to David's bedroom. What he found made him stop in his tracks and attempt to rein in the need to beat whoever it had been that hurt the boy. David was in bed and though he was beneath the covers, he wasn't tucked up in the covers. He was huddled within the covers using them as a shield to ward off whatever enemy that attacked him even in his sleep.

David's lanky body was in battle mode; his body tense. Tears rolled down his face as he silently cried. Even in sleep, David didn't find respite. Instead he found a new type of fear. He suspected that he knew what that fear was. He feared not being able to protect himself from attack.

Mackenzie was livid. Witnessing David's silent tears broke his heart in places that he didn't even know that he had. Children and women were to be protected—always. No ifs ands or buts about it. No child deserved to be treated as David had been treated, especially not *his* child. Seeing the fading bruises that marred David's skin pissed Mackenzie off all over again.

Using the moonlight that poured through the window as his guide, Mackenzie moved forward. Taking silent steps he made his way to the bed. Making certain that he didn't startle the boy into wakefulness, he knelt beside the sleeping David and smoothed a hand over his forehead and whispered

promises that he intended to keep. Nothing will harm you with impunity, son. The boy didn't settle immediately but his body relaxed. A few minutes later David stopped breathing like he was running a marathon and the thrashing stopped and he finally fell into a restful sleep.

"When you are better, son, you will give me a listing of all who hurt you and I shall deal with them," Mackenzie whispered. He sat there for a few minutes watching the boy sleep. When he was sure that David was sufficiently settled, he rose from the bed intending to exit the room. With every step he took from David, he noticed that something in his chest tightened. He was at the door when he realized that he couldn't leave that room with a clear conscience. Closing the door, he walked back to the boy. Silently cussing, knowing that his back was going to have something to say about this, he sat on the floor next to David.

Leaning his back against the wall and resting his arms on his bent knees he watched David sleep. Mackenzie was surprised to feel the wetness on his own face. Something in his chest squeezed like a vice grip. After a moment he realized that his heart was hurting for the boy that just earlier that day he'd believed was a danger to his woman. He now knew that David wasn't a threat to anyone but himself. The real threat to his woman was the motherfucker who

might try and take David away from them. That shit wasn't going to happen. He'd meant it earlier when he'd confided in Samson that he'd take David and Carolina and run. He would allow nothing to harm this boy whose life had been nothing but torment. David needed to be healed—he would be healed—and he and Carolina were going to be the ones to do that. Though he wasn't able to turn back the clock and stop the pain inside of the boy, he'd make damn sure that David wouldn't be haunted by his past—even in his sleep. Taking another glance at David before closing his eyes, he growled. *Mine*.

«»*

David had been in the throes of a nightmare...kind of. He didn't really sleep deeply—he was too scared for that. Sleep brought a whole host of dangers. At least when he was awake he could see the danger coming and prepare for it. Spending most of his time fending for himself or protecting himself from his fa—oops, POS—he slept lightly. When he closed his eyes, he didn't really sleep, he merely snatched moments where he stilled his body. The few times that he'd succumbed to a restful sleep, he'd almost pulled a muscle when he woke up suddenly. He couldn't explain it but it was like there was a voice that warned him of danger. It was a rare occa-

sion when he could sleep in the presence of others or didn't wake when someone neared him. That was why he was surprised when he woke up and found Mackenzie sitting next to him.

At first, he was worried to find Mackenzie there. After watching him for a moment, he realized that the big man was watching over him. For the first time since he could remember, he wasn't afraid when in the presence of a large, white male. True, he could've called his Momma but he didn't want to worry her. Though she was a strong woman and could probably handle herself against men way bigger than him, he wanted to protect her...even from his own fears. Mackenzie was a big man, a strong man, and he had every confidence that he could handle anything that came his way. Carefully placing the comforter over Mackenzie so that he wouldn't get cold, he lay back down and for the first time went to sleep knowing that he was safe.

«»*

For the first time since she had been watching over the boy named David, his guardian, Ashling, sighed with relief. It had taken every skill she had to keep him alive, to keep that tiny spark of hope in his heart...to give him up. Finally, after so much time, she had guided him to safety, to love. She now knew

that the young boy was going to be just fine. David had an awesome destiny. And it was now set in motion.

Chapter 10⁵/₇

Settling In

Virginia remained glued to the phone in her son-in-law's office. Her fingers flying over the keyboard at mad intervals, her voice was separated by three distinct tones—angry, demanding and mother-fucker please. Virginia only paused when she saw Mosé walk into the office with a tray bearing food and iced tea. Seeing that there was two of everything, she smiled knowing that he intended to dine with her. As always, she was overwhelmed by her husband's thoughtfulness.

Placing the tray on the mahogany desk that was decorated with her copious notes, Mosé took the phone out of her hand, hung it up, then kissed her protest away. And damn if he wasn't thorough about the kissing. Only when he'd kissed her good and proper did he set her food in front of her before taking his own seat. Being married for the better part of thirty years, he had to know that she was totally pissed at him for his presumptuousness, then again, knowing him as she did, she knew that he didn't give a damn. Mosé was right particular about her. Sighing, she bowed her head as he said a quick but thankful prayer.

She bit into the food knowing that she couldn't move him once he set his course.

"Oh, Mosé, this is amazing...as usual," Virginia sighed happily as she ate the food prepared by her husband and her little sister.

"Thank you," Mosé said with a small smile as he ate.

"I should be mad with you. How do you know that I wasn't in the middle of an important call that could bring us closer to keeping Little David safe?" Virginia said as she raised a single brow.

Mosé gave her the same cocky/sexy smile that had attracted her way back in the day. Thirty years ago he'd been a big, shy Samoan boy walking the halls of their predominantly African-American high school. Today, he was a big, confident Samoan man walking the halls of her heart. She sighed, contemplating the battles that he'd fought for her. He'd fought to get her attention; once he got it, he'd fought to keep her; and when she—they—became pregnant; he'd fought his parents, her parents, and even her own defiance to keep her. A quiet man, the warrior in him was always there watching and back then the warrior had come out and kicked ass when anyone dared say anything against her. His physical battles had been few—not because no one slandered her, but because no one had wanted to risk his wrath. Oh, how she loved this man.

“I can read your expression, *Alofa*. I would’ve known if it was indeed an important call, however, you need to eat and rest. You have worked tirelessly and as much as little Caro wants the baby giant, as much as we all want him, I will not allow you to accomplish this at the expense of your health.”

“But Mosé,” she began.

“*Alofa*, I will not be moved on this. I will not allow you to risk your health. Now stop fretting. I know that you want to do everything the right way but you know that regardless of what laws we have to circumvent or which people we have to beat hell out of, that none of us will allow anyone to take the baby giant from Carolina.”

As always, Mosé’s deep voice was quiet, yet it was also firm. When he made a statement, he made it come true regardless of what he had to do. She’d been a witness to that countless times. Sitting back, she took a look at her husband. He was a beautiful man—too beautiful for her she often thought. Like many Samoan men, he had a strong sense of family and tradition. He may have gotten a crash course on how **not** to get the woman of your dreams by getting her pregnant at sixteen, but everyone agreed that no other man suited Virginia better. Mosé was to her, and she was to Mosé what biscuits were to gravy. They completed each other’s souls.

"You don't know everything," Virginia pouted knowing that it would get a reaction out of her husband.

Mosé laughed softly and leaned over to kiss away her pout. Settling back in his own seat he spoke. "Don't say anything to *pepe* when she uses that pout on you, *Alofa*, as she has learned everything that she knows from you."

Virginia laughed at that. "And Carolina. Don't forget her being that she spoiled her more."

She smiled witnessing her husband's look of disbelief, which was followed by his hearty laughter. With a shake of his head he commented.

"You two are as bad as each other, *Alofa*. Now eat before Samson and Mackenzie return. The baby giant is fine for now. In fact, when I left him, he was being pampered by Caro."

«»*

David found himself seated between Mackenzie and Samson at the huge dining room table. His mouth watered at the smell of the dishes that were being passed between them. Not only had his Momma cooked but also his Uncle Mosé. His Momma had kept his plate heaped with so much food that he couldn't remember what the dish looked like being that it was perpetually covered with food.

She acted like she was feeding a small village, and though he was just one boy he was being good and eating everything. Every few moments his Momma would smile at him encouragingly as he ate. He was full but he still had three quarters of his plate to go and he knew he was going to finish it for his Momma had deemed it so.

David found himself having to pay attention because it was rare that he was called by his given name. *Little David, Baby Boy, and Baby Giant* were just some of the nicknames that the family called him. David found himself smiling inwardly whenever he was addressed thusly. The women mostly called him derivatives of ‘baby’ while the men called him more manly things. Though he liked them all, he especially liked it when his Momma called him because regardless of how she called him, she said it like she loved him. He smiled thinking of the warmth that accompanied his name when it spilled from her lips. Taking a peek at Mackenzie, he smiled recalling his tendency to address him as ‘son.’ He liked that—a whole lot. And he liked Mackenzie too. The man was gruff and ate like he was facing a winter of hibernation but he felt safe around him.

Not having been in the company of many adults that spoke *with* him rather than *at* him was a new experience for him. He was especially surprised at the way the males spoke to him as males usually

yelled, directed, and threatened. Mackenzie, Samson, and Mosé all spoke to him. He'd felt his Momma kick Mackenzie a few times under the table and he'd had to bow his head to stop from laughing out loud. His Momma had a thing about how he was treated and she didn't care why someone wasn't treating him properly. It was simply enough that they weren't treating him in the manner that she deemed appropriate. It wasn't that Mackenzie was being mean to him; the man was simply busy shoveling his food in his mouth. Mackenzie liked to eat and David couldn't blame him. Still, it was funny to witness the comical look on his face when his Momma kicked the man who was usually mid-chew or actually mid-gulp. David couldn't help smiling. He was on the verge of giddiness being that for once he was eating real food, having real company and actually being *included*.

"You need some help finishing there, son?" Mackenzie asked him.

"Ah, if you want you can have it—" he answered. He was about to relinquish his knife and fork when Mackenzie nudged his big shoulder into his.

"Good Lord above, son, the way your momma is staring daggers at me, it would be detrimental to my health if I even thought about taking food from your plate," Mackenzie said with a grin.

David blinked. Oh, right! He was being teased by Mackenzie. He tried to grin back at the big man but it looked more like a grimace.

“Don’t listen to him. He’s just jealous because *you* got more than he did,” Samson said quietly from his other side.

David turned his attention to the owner of the house and nodded. Samson was so big. He didn’t have time to dwell on his size because Mariana provided a distraction.

“What’s for dessert, Daddy and Auntie?” she asked while practically jumping up and down in her seat as she waited for someone to answer her question. His Momma stroked the back of her hand down Mariana’s cheek before looking at him across the table.

“Lemon pound cake with vanilla ice cream for us and for you chocoholics, there is chocolate cake with chocolate ice cream. How does that sound?” his Momma asked as she looked at him.

He knew that his eyes reflected his happiness, but he didn’t care. He was happy. “Wow,” was all that he could say.

His Momma preened happily and winked at him before going to get the dessert. Though she made his and Mariana’s plates, she made everyone else serve themselves. Wow, he and Mariana were so

spoiled. He liked being spoiled. Pausing in the enjoyment of his dessert he thanked God.

* «*» *

Carolina went on full momma alert when David stood. She was about to ask him if he wanted anything else when she saw what he was about. Instead of running off like she feared he might try, he began to collect the dishes from each person. Carolina watched as Samson, Mackenzie, and Mosé followed David's example letting the boy lead the way into the kitchen.

"He's such a cutie, Auntie. I just want to squeeze him," Mariana sighed happily as they all relaxed in the media room.

"He is a cutie and you have to share him with us," Virginia said. "Or I'm telling."

"Like I have a choice about sharing my baby. You all spoil him terribly. That boy is going to be as rotten as Mariana," Carolina joked.

"Well then, that means that we did our job properly. Right, Mariana?" Virginia asked.

"Yep. I love having a baby brother," Mariana sighed.

"Hey, your momma and daddy are still freaks. And since Virginia is slightly younger than dirt she

can still squeeze out one more baby,” Carolina began.

“I’m going to be sick, Auntie. Stop it,” Mariana pouted as she covered her ears.

“Okay, fine. You got the little brother that you’ve been wishing for and the little kid has come out of all of the men. Samson, Mackenzie and Mosé all act like little kids. Just look at this room,” Virginia said.

Carolina simply smiled and looked around the room that had quickly become Gaming Central. Though Mackenzie and Samson occasionally played pool, she’d never known them to play video games until last week. Now there were not only one, but three brand new gaming consoles littering the room along with a stack of games. The men thought that they were being slick. Mackenzie had purchased an X-Box 360; Samson the PS 3; and Mosé the Nintendo Wii. And all of them claimed that the stuff was for David but every-time Carolina had come to give David snacks during the past two days she’d found the men huddled around the big screen with David sitting in the center instructing the trio of big men on how to play. Watching the men spend time with David had brought her close to tears. She knew that they were busy. Whenever Mosé had a spare minute he preferred to be all up under Virginia; Samson preferred to spend the afternoons napping with

Mariana and Mackenzie had a business to run, yet they had all shuffled around their schedules so that they could spend time with David.

Carolina found herself liking Mackenzie even more. Though an asshole a disproportionate amount of the time, he was careful around David. She knew that he got up early and stayed late to insure that the work on Samson and Mariana's guest home was being properly seen to. He'd done that for the past week or so before Tom had told him in no uncertain terms to get the hell back in that house and see to his boy. Making a mental note to bake the men something special, she turned her attention back to Mariana who had somehow managed to stretch herself across both her and Virginia's laps. She was so spoiled.

"He's so sweet and he blushes!" Mariana enthused.

"He has nightmares though. I need the paperwork done as soon as possible. Though he doesn't admit it, I know that he's scared that we're going to let him go back to that POS!"

"Well, he can just get that thought out of his head!" Virginia said. "That baby is ours."

Rubbing her palm over the slight bump of her stomach, Mariana smiled. "It's going to work out Momma and Auntie. No one is going to take my brother away from us!"

“Thank you,” Carolina smiled at her sister and her baby girl. Leaning over she managed to grab Virginia’s hand and wrap Mariana in a hug. She loved this family.

“I love y’all,” Carolina whispered.

“And *we* love you too,” both women responded.

“Um, Momma?” Carolina turned at the tentative sound of Little David’s voice in the doorway to the media room. He held a tray with cups.

“Come on in, baby,” she said and then watched as David moved into the room and handed the women glasses. She and Virginia thanked him but Mariana blew him a kiss that made him blush. Patting the cushion on the other side of her she instructed David to sit next to her so that she could hold both of her babies.

* «*» *

As was the norm, the family settled down to spend quality time together after dinner. Carolina put on a film that she deemed suitable for her babies to watch—well more so David than Mariana—as they all waited for the men to file in. When they finally arrived, there was a bit of jostling as the men went straight for their women. Samson hefted Mariana from her perch and went to a corner section where he settled her on his lap. Virginia, slut that she was,

didn't even wait for Mosé to come over; she jumped him as soon as he entered the room. Carolina stretched out since only she and her baby now occupied their section of the opulent sectional, but of course, Mackenzie couldn't leave her alone and thus took up residence on her other side. He made himself comfortable and put his arm around her. Carolina merely rolled her eyes and drew her baby into her arms. David readily curled up next to her (or as best a lanky six foot four boy could curl). He was a beautiful child and oddly enough now that he was clean he had that baby smell that she loved so much. In spite of Mackenzie being all up on her, she reveled at having another baby in her arms.

Though David had been wide awake for the first movie, he'd long succumbed to sleep before the start of the second. Carolina smiled noting that most of the room had succumbed to sleep. Currently, she and Mackenzie were the only ones even remotely awake. And she only knew that he was awake because he kept touching her. Bastard! Still, she couldn't help leaning into his strength.

Sometime during the second movie, Samson and Mosé both picked up their women and headed off to bed leaving her to deal with Mackenzie and his roving hands. And damn, those hands felt good kneading the muscles of her shoulders. She didn't care how alone they were or how dark the media

room, or how delicious the memories were of the last time that they were in this room, her baby was here as a shield. True, he was fast asleep, but he was still present and she knew that Mackenzie wouldn't do anything to embarrass her. Trusting Mackenzie to behave, she tightened her arms around her baby and snuggled into Mackenzie's strength. There was still another movie loaded and since she was comfortable she intended to watch it.

They were just getting to the chase scene when Carolina felt David stirring in his slumber. Smoothing his wheat-colored hair back from his forehead, she started rocking him. Her attempts to soothe David didn't work and her baby began to moan as if in pain although he was still asleep. As soon as the moaning started Carolina sat up and eased David more fully into her arms. Her instincts proved to be right on for no sooner had she done that when David began to thrash against her.

Carolina recognized what was happening to her baby. He was fighting off a dream attacker. Silently screaming her frustration, she held him in her arms and rocked him as he tried to fight off the demons in his sleep. She didn't realize that tears were coursing down her cheeks as she whispered promises to her baby.

"Oh, baby, it's okay. Momma's got you now," Carolina paused as another sob welled in her throat.

She fought it yet her voice came out strangled as she continued to hold her David tightly to her chest while trying to calm him.

“Calm down, baby. I’ve got you. I’m never going to let you go,” she whispered fervently as she finally gave into her sobs.

Despite all that she said and how tightly she held him, David didn’t cease thrashing. Carolina didn’t know what else to do to help him. Feeling useless, she held on. It wasn’t until she heard Mackenzie’s authoritative voice that she even remembered his presence.

“Carolina, move Woman and give him to me,” he said while grabbing David’s hands.

“Don’t hurt him, Mackenzie.”

“I’m not going to hurt this child, Sweetness, but neither am I going to allow him to accidentally blacken your eye. He may be thin, but he’s still a male. Now move over and let me have him.”

Moving out from under him, she watched as Mackenzie sat back on the couch and held David in his arms. He was still thrashing, but not as much.

“Talk to him, Carolina,” Mackenzie said. “Your voice will soothe him. Go ahead.”

Sitting on the other side, she smoothed her hand over her baby’s head and having run out of words, she began to sing. In her sorrow, she lost track of how long they sat there—Mackenzie holding

David and her singing, but she didn't care how long it took. She'd sit there all night if she had to. Tears clouding her vision, she continued to sing although every note broke her heart. Finally, she felt David settle. Regaining a little of her composure, Carolina opened her eyes and looked at her baby. Though clouded with a mixture of pain and confusion, he reached up and wiped her tears from her cheeks.

"Don't cry, Momma. I promise I'll be good," he whispered before promptly falling into a deep sleep.

Carolina tried to get it together but she couldn't stop the flow of tears that silently tracked down her face.

"Sweetness, you have to stop. You cannot do this to yourself...or to us," Mackenzie whispered.

"I need to hold him, Mackenzie," she admitted.

"And I need to hold you both. Come here," he said as he opened his arms.

«»*

Mackenzie had never felt so impotent in his life. His child was hurting, as was his woman, and all he could do was sit there and hold them and pray. Not much of a praying man, he prayed then. He prayed that he could soothe his woman and child and he prayed that he soon found the motherfucker who'd done this to his boy. And he prayed that he'd

have the strength not to kill him although he deserved so much more than death for hurting this child...*his* child.

God, he felt guilty. Perhaps if he hadn't fired his fa—the sperm donor that had contributed to David's being—than maybe, maybe David wouldn't have been so abused. Perhaps if he... hell, he didn't know. He had an endless list of 'perhaps' and that was all. He didn't realize that he was so tense until Carolina spoke.

"Mackenzie? What is it?" she asked.

Looking into her tear-streaked face, he felt fresh rage bubble to the surface. Doing his best to tamp it down he answered.

"Sweetness, I..." he began. Blowing out a breath, he continued. "I fired his father. I knew that he had a family and I didn't check. Perhaps if I," he began but was cut off by Carolina pressing her fingers against his lips.

"No, Mackenzie. I will not allow you to do this. You're a good man. I've seen your work crew and they happen to be the most spoiled crew that I've ever encountered. You don't just play overseer to them even though you rightfully could being that you pay them an exorbitant wage, provide them with benefits and make sure that they get plenty of time to spend with their families. You actually work with them. I've seen you defer to the judgment of the

men, so don't. Just don't. If you fired that POS, then there was more than just cause."

"But I should've checked, Sweetness."

"You should've checked that he wasn't a psychopath? You're not God, Mackenzie. You cannot know all things."

"Why are you willing to forgive me?" he asked with disgust.

"Why aren't you willing to forgive yourself?"

"Because. Just because."

"Because what?"

"Because I contributed to David's state. Carolina, that man who masquerades as his father, he's an evil son of a bitch. He initiates brawls just because. Carolina, it took four men—four big, strong men—to pull that motherfucker off of the last guy that pissed him off. I think about him hurting David and I want to vomit."

"And you should want to vomit. If you didn't, I'd have concerns."

"I'm not going to let anyone else hurt this child, Carolina. Regardless of my past mistakes, I won't make this one again. No one will hurt David and live."

"No one would be stupid enough to try seeing you as you are in this moment," Carolina said as she kissed his jaw before snuggling back into his arms.

«»*

And that was how they fell asleep—as a family. Carolina held David and Mackenzie held them both. And they all enjoyed a peaceful rest.

«»*

David knew that he'd had a nightmare but he couldn't remember much else. He was fighting, running, fighting. He'd always wanted to just give up but every time he stopped fighting something compelled him to...fight, run...survive. His dreams were always the same menagerie of pain and struggle, but this time...this time, he heard his Momma calling to him. This time, he felt someone else's strength helping him, not hurting him. The feel of Mackenzie's arms and the sound of his Momma's tears had woken him. It had broken his heart and made him happy all at once to know that someone cared. And it had made him...angry. In his life he'd been many things—frightened, hungry, sad, tormented, shamed—but he'd never been angry...until he'd witnessed his Momma's tears. He didn't like seeing his Momma cry; he didn't like that at all. Touching her face, he tried to tell her that it'd be okay. And it would, because he just felt it somewhere deep inside himself.

Content for the moment, he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Chapter 10⁶/₇

Male Bonding

Carolina kept David close to her after the events in the media room. She had to. Her momma sensibilities demanded David's presence—not that he seemed to mind. She'd invented all kinds of reasons why she needed him close until finally she just put her foot down.

"I need you with me because I said so," she said as she hugged him tightly.

"Momma, I can't breathe," he complained.

Loosening her hold just a tad, she kissed his forehead and responded. "You don't need to breathe. Hug me and hush."

She felt him smile and smiled in return. Knowing that she couldn't keep him locked up in her kitchen for perpetuity she handed him an article to read.

"How come you keep giving me stuff to read, Momma?" he asked.

"Because I want to see where you are academically so that I can design a course of work for you," she said.

"But, I'm not very smart. I don't read very well," he admitted with his head down.

“You are smart. Don’t say that again. It takes intelligence to survive. And you may not read very well now, but you will read just fine by the time that you graduate,” she said fervently. She wanted to go to that school and raise all kinds of hell, but that would have to wait until she had David settled. Speaking of which, she needed to go into town to mail off her resignation. David needed to be seen to and until such time she had plenty of savings thanks to sound investments and careful spending habits.

“I don’t like school, Momma,” she heard David say.

“And who said that you’re going to school?”

“How am I going to learn anything if I don’t go to school?” he asked.

“Sweetheart, I know that you think that I’m just a good cook and a pretty face,” she began.

David interrupted her. “You’re a great cook and you’re beautiful, Momma!”

“Thank you, baby,” she said as she hugged him. *She already knew that she could cook but her baby thought that she was beautiful. No fucking way.* Not able to keep the big ass grin off of her face, she continued. “I have a couple of degrees as does your sister, both of your aunts, and your grandparents. And your grandmomma is a retired principle, so between us, I’m sure that we can teach you a thing or two. We’re going to home school you. I’m a resident

of the state of North Carolina, which means that you'll be a resident of the state of North Carolina where I have all of the credentials that I need in order to home school you."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Now get outside and get some fresh air. I'll bring you out a snack in a little bit."

"But I'm not hungry," he protested.

"Yes, you are, baby. Now scoot and read that article. We will discuss it later and if I suspect that you didn't read it, I will watch you read it as I eat your dessert. Understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Yes, Momma," she corrected.

"Yes, Momma," he said as he hugged her and ambled outside to the front porch.

"Don't go too far, okay? I want to be able to see you."

"Okay, Momma," he said.

Seeing for herself that he was settled, she set about making him some lunch. Being that she'd already decided on her menu, it didn't take her any-time to make up the thick Colby beef hamburgers. Dishing up some coleslaw and baked beans, she put them on a separate plate being that the other plate was full bearing three hamburgers. Taking them out to him, she set them on the table.

“You okay, baby?” she asked as she kissed the top of his head.

“Yes, Momma,” he smiled.

“Okay then. I’ve already made up extra in case you need more or if anyone else gets hungry. I’m going to go shower and finish reading my book. If you need me, you come get me straight away.”

«»*

Mackenzie watched Carolina bring David some food and figured that it was about time for him to eat lunch too. He knew that she’d made plenty for not only David, but for pretty much the western U.S. Telling his crew to break for lunch, he washed up in the onsite trailer before heading to the porch. Taking a seat next to David, he noticed that he already appeared healthier. He also noticed that the tyke had three burgers on his plate.

Eyeing his plate he asked, “Why do you have three burgers?”

“Because Momma says that I look hungry,” David said around a mouth full of burger.

“Son, you could be five hundred pounds and eight feet tall and look hungry to your Momma. Give me one of those burgers.”

“No. Momma says that I’m not allowed to move until I’ve eaten everything.”

“If you know what’s best for you you’ll give me one of those burgers,” he teased.

“No. You’re not allowed,” David smiled as he made what Mackenzie considered to be a production out of enjoying that meal. Wrestling one away, he leaned over and whispered to David.

“Give me ten minutes to get to my room and shower and then go tell your Momma that I took one of your burgers, okay?”

“Okay, but you’re going to be in trouble,” David said whilst attacking his plate.

“That’s what I’m counting on,” he said as he ambled into the house.

“You need to bring me out another burger,” David mumbled around his food.

“Fine. Now practice looking hungry,” he said before running to his room.

He didn’t normally shower before lunch then again he didn’t normally plan on being all up on his woman. Hurrying through his shower, he laughed when he heard David walk into the kitchen. He didn’t call his momma but he didn’t need to. Mommas had that momma hearing and Carolina would’ve had her ear tuned to the sound of the baby giant wandering into her kitchen. He bet that she thought that their boy sounded hungry.

Carolina was in the midst of reading when she heard her baby wander into the kitchen. Putting her book aside, she hurried to the kitchen to see what her baby needed. He was probably still hungry but knowing him he wouldn't ask for anything.

"Baby, are you okay? What's wrong?" she asked upon entering the kitchen.

"Nothing, Momma. I'm fine."

"Really? Why do you look hungry? Did you eat all of your food?" she asked suspiciously.

"Um, everything except what Mackenzie took," he began.

"That mother—" Carolina began and stopped. Taking David's plates, she piled them high. "Eat every bit. You need the vegetables and proteins. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Are you going to tell off Mackenzie?" he asked.

"Yep, but don't you worry about him bothering you," she said as she stalked to his room.

"Momma, he doesn't bother me," David began. Breaking out into a smile, he took his plates outside and began eating.

Mackenzie had just slipped into his Georgia Tech basketball shorts when he heard his woman yell his name.

“Mackenzie Duncan Roberts!”

Knowing that she was respectful of his privacy, he took his time. He applied deodorant and towel-dried his hair a bit more before opening his door.

“Yes, Sweetness,” he asked being sure to flex all of his muscles as he pulled his shirt over his head. Watching Carolina bite her lower lip and shudder was worth the cussing out that he was about to receive. *Would it be wrong to thank God for that?*

“Mackenzie Roberts, you should be ashamed of yourself. How can you take my baby’s food? He’s a growing boy!”

“I was hungry.”

“And you couldn’t go into town for lunch like your men?”

“I don’t want to. I want to eat what you cook,” he said.

“I am not cooking for you!”

“Well then, I’ll be snatching little David’s food and that would be a shame being that he’s a growing boy and all,” he drawled. *He was so getting told off by God for this.*

“Ooh, you make me so sick,” she said.

“What’s it going to be, Sweetness? Do you cook for me or do you risk little David being hungry?”

“Fine, you idiot,” she said as she stomped off.

“I want lunch today,” he called after her.

He smiled watching her flip him the bird.

“Finish getting dressed. I am not spending lunch looking at feet,” she huffed.

* «*» *

Mackenzie sat next to David. As soon as Carolina turned her back he held out his fist to David for the fist knock.

Careful as he touched his large fist to David’s much smaller and fragile fist, he smiled at him. “Good job, son.”

Before David could answer Carolina came outside with his food. Though she’d probably rather brain him with that plate than hand it to him, she did so. Surprisingly, she sat down with them. Not so surprisingly she kissed and hugged David first.

“I want a kiss too,” Mackenzie said.

“Mackenzie, you are so pushing your luck,” she said.

“If David gets a kiss then I should get a kiss too,” he reasoned.

“David’s a baby.”

“Um, I’m not a baby, Momma. I’m almost thirteen,” David interjected.

"You're my baby, honey. I don't care if you're almost thirteen hundred years old," Carolina said.

"Don't contradict your Momma, David," Mackenzie said.

"Okay," David said as he returned to his food.

"My kiss?" Mackenzie prompted.

"I am a mother. You cannot just expect me to kiss you, Mackenzie," Carolina huffed.

"You could always hug him, Momma. Your hugs are nice," David said.

"Yeah, what he said," Mackenzie said.

"Fine," Carolina said reaching over to hug him.

It wasn't what he wanted, so he reached out and grabbed Carolina around her waist and placed her across his thighs. He waited for her to catch her breath before making another move.

"Mackenzie! Do you know how much I weigh?" she asked.

"I'd say about one hundred ninety pounds," he said as he adjusted her on his lap.

"You can't just go around picking me up like that. You didn't even stretch. You could've gotten hurt. I weigh a lot."

"You're just right, Sweetness," he said as he gently hugged her. Taking his time, he softly kissed her lips before quickly pulling back. He didn't want to pull back but he had to; he already had a hard dick and having her on his lap didn't help. If he went any

further, he'd have to fuck her and he doubted that she'd appreciate him fucking her on the porch in front of their son and anyone else who wandered by. Pulling back, he allowed her to regain her seat before he attacked his meal.

Finishing his meal, Mackenzie sighed. Damn, his woman could cook. He took a look at her noting that she'd finally put her book down and was simply leaning back enjoying the sunshine. She liked being outdoors although she didn't appreciate being cold. Taking a look at his son, he smiled noting that he was stretched out on the lounge sound asleep. David was looking better with every hour. And who wouldn't look better with Carolina spoiling them. He knew that Carolina was still worried but he didn't think that David needed to be cooped up in the house.

"Sweetness, let's take these dishes in and I'll help you right the kitchen," he said in a bid to talk privately with her.

"You know that my kitchen is always to rights. I have a thing about cleanliness," she said.

"Our son was a mess when he got here and you had no problem with that," he remarked.

"His clothes and body may have been dirty but his soul was, and is, clean and that's what matters. The kitchen is a soul of a house, it needs to be just as clean," she remarked.

"As always, you humble me, Sweetness."

"And I'm also smarter than you. Don't forget that," she threw back with a toss of her locs.

"Oh, yeah, how can I forget that?" he smiled.

"You won't because I'll keep reminding you," she said as she loaded the last plate into the dishwasher.

"What's up, Mackenzie?" she asked.

"I was thinking that maybe David could come out to the site and hang with us for a few hours each day?"

"I think it would be good for him to be around men, but..." she began. "I know that you run a tight ship and I don't want either you or the men getting short-tempered with him."

"Carolina, I won't let anyone mistreat him. It'll just be good for him to feel like he's helping. He'll be right next to me at all times."

"I don't want him lifting anything heavier than a pencil. David's getting stronger but he's still underweight and weak," Carolina said while biting her lip.

"I'm not going to let him do any work. Plus, he's a kid so he cannot work even if he wanted to."

"Ask David to see if he wants to go. And if he does I want to talk to your men," she said.

“Let’s do it now then. I’ll go change into my work clothes and by the time we talk to David the guys should be back.”

“Okay.”

“Good, glad we’ve got that settled. Now come here,” Mackenzie demanded.

“No,” Carolina said.

“Then I’ll come to you,” he said as he stalked Carolina. He smiled noting that she still didn’t back up from him. When he was upon her, he caged her in with his arms and bumped his erection into her before taking her lips in a proper kiss.

“Mackenzie,” she moaned.

“Yes, Sweetness. Say my name just like that,” he said as he drove both his tongue and his hips deeper into her person. Damn she felt like...life, he mused. Drawing back, he gave her light nips before withdrawing completely.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes, Sweetness.”

«»*

Carolina and Mackenzie had hardly gotten it out of their mouths when David enthusiastically said yes to Mackenzie’s proposition. After reiterating to her baby that he was not to be doing anything more strenuous than watching Mackenzie and seeing if he thought he might like that field, she let him run to

his room to change into proper clothes. Meanwhile she addressed his crew.

“My baby is famished and weak from hunger,” she began.

Ignoring the massive rolling of eyes from the guys, she stopped mid-sentence and gave them the ‘mean mommy/you so do not want to test me’ look. Noticing the guys settling down, she finished instructing them on her expectations...and then regaled them with the consequences of pissing her off. After giving her speech, she felt good. But she felt even better when Mackenzie confided that Samson was joining them so that he could see the progress. With the two of them watching out, she felt doubly confident that her baby would remain safe.

«»*

David couldn’t believe that Mackenzie was willing to take him to the job site. Granted, it was just across the way, but he’d always enjoyed construction. Maybe Mackenzie would find something for him to do so that he could earn some money. He wanted to buy his Momma something nice. She deserved it. He smiled recalling what she’d said to Mackenzie when they’d thought that he’d been sleeping. She’d said that his soul was clean. His Momma was the best. He had to find a way to take care of her

in case something happened. No way was he ever going to let her do some of the jobs that he'd done. The jobs themselves weren't all that bad, but they took their toll after twelve hours. Plus, the men were kind of rough and nothing rough should ever approach his Momma.

Mackenzie seemed like a nice man. Being observant, he couldn't help but notice the way that he treated his crew and he liked that. He also seemed to be a good man but he couldn't be too careful about any man trying to be with his Momma. He would have to check him out more thoroughly.

He smiled thinking about his Momma. She was amazing. Whenever they went out, she was all protective of him, which made it hard for him to be protective of her, but since Mackenzie or one of the men always accompanied them he didn't worry too much—but he still worried. He didn't want anything to happen to his Momma being that he'd just found her. Whenever he was with her he felt proud because she let everybody know that he was her baby. Even though he was busy grinning his behind off when she claimed him like that, he noticed the looks that people gave them. At first, he thought it was because he was scruffy, but then he realized that it was because his Momma was black and he was white.

After he'd gotten all cleaned up, people had assumed that she was a domestic and after he'd found

out what that meant he'd gotten mad. His Momma wasn't his maid; she was *his* Momma. Instead of getting mad like he'd done, she'd merely smiled politely at those people and hugged him tighter. When he asked her why she didn't get mad she explained that nothing those people said changed the fact of who she was. She was many things but first and foremost, she was a Christian and she was his Momma. He'd stopped still and hugged her as hard as he could. Of all the things she had—and she had a lot of things—she didn't name those things...she'd named him though.

David walked between Mackenzie and Samson admiring the work that the guys did. He might not be very good at reading but he readily recognized top notch construction and he could easily read blueprints. Mackenzie was a brilliant architect and his men were all masters at their craft. No wonder Samson hired Mackenzie and no wonder Mackenzie treated his crew so well. After walking around for a bit and checking out everything, he was finally alone with the two men.

Clearing his throat, David looked at Mackenzie. "Mackenzie?"

"Yes, son?" Mackenzie answered.

"I know that you like my Momma."

"I haven't made a secret of it," he answered.

“No, I know that you *really* like her. I saw,” David said.

“What are you getting at, son?” Mackenzie asked.

“I know that you like my Momma and I understand that but I’m not going to let you use me to, you know,” he said.

“What are you talking about?”

“Earlier you kissed her and I saw that,” he said as he pointed in the direction of his crotch.

David was embarrassed to be talking about another man’s parts. It was clear that Mackenzie was confused. Samson didn’t help matters by bursting into laughter but he helped by explaining what he meant to Mackenzie.

“I believe that the baby giant is trying to indicate that he noticed the constant erection that you have when in the presence of Carolina.”

“Yeah,” David confirmed.

“You think that I’m just being nice to you so that I can sleep with Carolina?” Mackenzie asked.

“I’m not sure but I’m not going to let you take advantage of her. I’ll run away first,” he said stubbornly.

David didn’t know what to expect, but it wasn’t Mackenzie reaching out to hug him. “Yep, you’re going to make a fine Roberts man,” he said as he

clapped his hand on his back and walked him to the house.

"I love Carolina. Yes, I want to make love to her, but I also want her to be my wife. Do you know why I was home the day that I caught you trying to break in?"

"Because you live there?" David guessed.

"Yeah, but that's not the reason. I have a room here since I'm overseeing the work on Samson's guest quarters. I was going home to ready my house for my woman. That's why I was so angry when I caught you. At first, I thought that you were a grown man who posed a danger to the woman I planned on bringing home. Then I was just put out that I had to wait longer than I wanted to for Carolina. But waiting isn't always a bad thing. Carolina got a son and I get you both," Mackenzie said.

David wanted to believe the man. "But you don't have to have me. I could go someplace else. I," he began.

"You are not going anywhere and I don't want to hear that nonsense from you again. You are our child," Mackenzie snapped.

"Young David, listen to Mackenzie. He speaks the truth. You are a member of this family now," Samson said.

"Yes, but Mackenzie doesn't have to like me," David reasoned.

“Love, David. We all love you. And you’re not going anywhere and I’m telling your momma,” Mackenzie said.

“No!” David said quickly. “She’ll cry. I don’t like it when she does that.”

“Neither do any of us. Now no more talk—*ever*—about you trying to leave this family,” Mackenzie said.

“Okay,” David said.

“I mean it. If you run, we’ll follow. Besides, you know how crazy those women in our family are. Do you want them going to prison?” Mackenzie asked.

“No,” David answered.

“Neither do we, being that we’re kind of partial to them and all. Now in two days time, we’re going to go to my home and do what I was trying to do last week. Okay?” Mackenzie asked.

“Okay,” David agreed.

“You have a fine son there, Mackenzie,” Samson remarked.

“Indeed I do,” Mackenzie answered. Now let’s head back before his momma comes out here after him.

“Good luck convincing her that you’re going to take him to your house,” Samson said.

“I don’t need luck, I just need a distraction,” he said.

David felt good walking between the two big men. He liked them both. And now that he knew that Mackenzie wasn't just messing with his Momma he was going to help him win her over.

"Maybe you and Mariana could watch a movie with me tonight so um, Mackenzie can try and convince my Momma that she shouldn't kill him just yet," David suggested to Samson.

"Sounds like a plan, little David," Samson agreed.

"Tell you what. Can y'all get Carolina to bed early tonight so I can get her up early in the morning? I'd like to show her how beautiful Colorado can be," Mackenzie remarked.

Huddling, they talked in hushed tones planning a special day for Carolina.

Chapter 10⁷/₇ → Chapter 11

The Ooh That Holds Us Together

Stopping in the media room to take a peek in at David and Mariana who were busy snoring over a tin of cookies, she couldn't help but smile at the sight of her two spoiled babies...and the man who spoiled her oldest baby who was sprawled in a chair and snoring the loudest of all. Mariana had completely taken over David, relishing her role as big sister, and David had taken to her like a duck takes to water. David had come back all excited about being out with the men and then Mariana had asked him to watch a movie with her and play some videogames, which is how he'd spent the rest of his night...and the wee hours of the morning. That boy got up at the crack before the crack of dawn. Barely five a.m., he'd already been up for two hours playing and she knew that Mariana had a day of more gaming and junk food-eating planned, so his day was set. As was hers it seemed. Mosé was in charge of the menu for the next few days, which was all right with her since he threw down in the kitchen. Having already indulged in a bubble bath while David was downstairs knocking homeruns out of the virtual park, she was good to go.

Today was turning out to be Reading Day. Ah, how she liked the sound of that. She had a pile of books that had her name all over them. Okay, so they didn't have her name on them, rather names like Dr. Bradshaw—one of the leading counselors in the nation who focused on adolescent issues; Dr. Donna—CEO of one of the most sought after concierge services in the Atlanta Metro area; and, Dréa Riley—one of the hottest new erotic authors on the scene.

Thinking of the reading she had ahead of her, she headed for Mackenzie's room to return the Colorado history book that she'd borrowed knowing that if she didn't it would probably end up in her extensive collection of reading materials. Had she been thinking about less academic subjects, she might've changed out of the light sweat pants and the Morehouse College t-shirt that she was wearing. Then again, probably not; she favored sweats. True, the outside wasn't much to look at, but as usual she wore some smoking ass lingerie underneath. She felt naughty knowing that only she knew what was underneath the plain sweats that she favored.

Planning on merely setting the book outside of his door, she was surprised when he answered as she hadn't heard him moving about. Usually, he was already out downing black coffee and checking weather and such so that he could arrange his day.

She'd figured that he was outside seeing to things, but damn had she been wrong. Mackenzie was not only present, but present and showing lots of flesh. Was the man ever fully dressed when inside of his own home she wondered as she imagined tracing the contours of his hot ass body with her tongue? She was so caught up in her fantasy that she didn't hear Mackenzie speak. *Hell, who could hear when she was experiencing such visual overload?* The man was too fucking fine for his own good...and hers.

Apparently, he was speaking once more, but again, she couldn't be bothered when she could just watch those pussy-eating lips of his move like they were preparing to feast on her. Before she could form a thought that was related to something other than fucking Mackenzie into a coma, she found herself in his arms.

They started out kissing and before long Mackenzie had her flat on her back with her legs wrapped around him, his head buried in her girls, and his finger shoved up her pussy. Carolina couldn't control the scream that followed the quickest orgasm that she'd ever had. Raking her nails across his back, shuddering from pleasure, and gasping for breath, she finally found the words to tell him to stop.

"Mackenzie, stop. Mackenzie, we have to s-s-top," she breathed even as she arched further into him.

With difficulty, she saw Mackenzie pull back. "Carolina, I didn't mean for it to go this far."

"Neither did I. In spite of what just happened, I'm not a tease, Mackenzie."

"I know, Sweetness, but you have to stop touching me."

"It's just that there's no way that we can have decision-making sex. We have to get all of the details out of the way now."

"What details?" he asked.

"Mackenzie, we were seconds away from..."

"From some cataclysmic love-making," he supplied.

"Yes, Mackenzie. And we were both too far gone to consider the ramifications. What about STDs?"

"I have condoms."

"Yeah, but the condoms aren't within reach. And even if they were, condoms don't protect against the HIV/AIDS virus, which disproportionately affects Black Americans. Blacks are only about thirteen percent of the population but account for nearly fifty percent of new HIV/AIDS diagnoses. And black women in particular are most at risk accounting for almost seventy percent of new AIDS cases," she rattled off the statistics sounding like a billboard for the Centers for Disease Control.* Carolina felt Mackenzie tense and realized that she'd probably

made him mad but she'd rather face Mackenzie's anger than be a new case of infection.

"Get up," Mackenzie said as he got to his feet and began putting on his clothes.

"I'm sorry that you're angry, Mackenzie. It wasn't fair that I got off and you didn't. If you want me to, I'll," she began but was cut off by an angry Mackenzie physically lifting her from the bed.

"Sweetness, when I come, it will be in you. Don't ever insinuate that I'm the kind of man that would be that fucking selfish as to keep a tally of orgasms. You're right about decisions needing to be made before we make love. Now put yourself together and let's go."

"Where...where are we going?"

"The one good thing about living near a college town is that they usually have a clinic that offers a rapid HIV test. And while we're there, we can get tested for all other STDs."

Smoothing down her t-shirt, Carolina spoke. "I've already been tested for everything when I had my physical and since I haven't done anything to warrant re-testing. All that I need to do is make a call to my ob/gyn to get copies of my results."

"I don't need them. The one thing that you don't know how to do is lie, but you need mine so let's go," Mackenzie said.

“Disease isn’t the only consequence of unprotected sex, Mackenzie. What about pregnancy? That can happen even though I’m old and everything.”

“Ah, Sweetness, I don’t consider pregnancy a consequence.”

“That’s because you’re not a woman. What happens if I get pregnant?” she asked.

“If you get pregnant, than our son David will simply have a sibling, and I’ll have another beautiful child with the woman who is going to be my wife. Now let’s go, Sweetness.”

“But it’s not even six a.m.,” she complained.

“Good, then we won’t have to wait in line,” he said.

«»*

Changing into jeans and throwing on her tennis shoes, Carolina scribbled a quick note, grabbed a light jacket and her purse and walked out to Mackenzie’s truck.

“I can drive, you know,” she offered since she was the one requiring proof.

“Ah, no. I want to live, thanks,” Mackenzie said.

“Mackenzie, there’s nothing wrong with my driving.”

“Oh, that’s what you call it?” he chuckled.

“Yes, I do.”

“That’s what you need to say when the pastor asks if you take me as your husband, Sweetness. And though you have my heart, if we’re to have a peaceful marriage, the keys to my truck will need to remain out of your hands.”

“Fine, be that way,” she huffed. “And I’m not marrying you.”

“Living a life of sin is not the example that I want to set for our son, and I love you, thus I’m marrying you, Sweetness.”

“Whatever, Mackenzie,” she snapped as she fastened her seatbelt.

“Do me a favor and reach into the center console and pull out that packet, Sweetness, and read what the first page says, please,” he requested.

Doing as he asked, Carolina opened Mackenzie’s console and quickly located a sheaf of papers. Waiting while he turned onto the main road, she paused before opening the packet and reading aloud.

“Well, Sweetness?” he questioned.

“I was just giving you time to turn without interruption, Mackenzie.”

“I assure you that I can handle turning onto the street...and feisty women,” he bragged.

“Well, then why don’t you go handle those feisty women now, then?” she asked with an annoyance that she couldn’t hide.

“Because only one feisty woman calls to me. Now read, please.”

Sighing, she read. “Mackenzie Duncan Roberts has tested negative for the HIV/AIDS virus and all other STDs.” She stumbled over the last word. Oh, damn. This man had planned ahead. She wasn’t simply a quick fuck or amusement for him. “Mackenzie,” she sighed.

“Yes, Sweetness?” he responded without taking his eyes off of the road.

“Where are we going?”

“To Boulder. Now sit back and enjoy the ride. We’ll be there shortly.”

“You are so bossy,” she said as she turned up the heat and reclined her seat.

“I learned all that I know from you,” he returned.

«»*

Mackenzie had been thinking nonstop about Carolina. That was a first for him. Though he treated women with respect, never had he been interested in anything beyond the bedroom. As such, he’d had his fair share of women. Hell, who was he kidding, he’d had more than his fair share although admittedly, the bulk of his conquests had been in his early twenties.

He'd dated all kinds of women: tall, petite, red-heads, blondes, Ph. D. candidates, and women who were the paradigm for blond jokes. They'd all had one thing in common. They'd been beautiful...and white. Not biracial, not Native American, not anything but Anglo. It's not that he didn't find ethnic women beautiful; it was just that, well, he wasn't going to go there when before Carolina all he'd wanted from a woman was a physical relationship.

With Carolina, it was different. It's not that he didn't see her color; he did. But it was hard to focus on her color when he saw so much more. He saw her strength, her intelligence, her sass. There was something about a woman who had sass and though it was a major turn on, he'd spent his adulthood shying away from women like that. Just as all of his previous women had been white, they'd all also been submissive to his desires. Not so the Southern women or African-American women that he'd met...and Carolina was both. He had no doubt that Carolina would laugh in his face if he ever even intimated that she should be submissive to him...and he wouldn't have it any other way.

Even though this was the first time that he had to work to get a woman's attention, Carolina was worth it. And besides, she wasn't just a woman...she was *his* woman. Mackenzie knew that she was struggling with his whiteness, but he wasn't struggling

with her blackness or any other of their myriad differences. He was struggling with his own impatience to make her his wife. This courting business was hard stuff, but then again, anything worth having came with hard work. Carolina was worth all of the effort that he had.

Mackenzie knew that he was missing a panoramic view but he couldn't be bothered to pull his eyes off of his woman. She was beautiful—even more so than his beloved Rocky Mountains. He thought that she'd enjoy the balloon ride, but he had no idea that she'd enjoy it this much. She'd been excited since they watched the inflation of the balloon. Because he hadn't wanted to share Carolina, he'd scheduled a private flying and damn it if it hadn't been worth every penny. Sven—the owner of the ballooning company—who was a transplant from Sweden and a good friend of his, had personally piloted the balloon.

As he suspected Sven and Carolina got along like the proverbial house on fire. Her wit and genuine interest for what he did and who he was as a person had lured Sven, and her reverence for the view had hooked Sven just as it did him. Mackenzie hadn't spoken during the ascent; he merely handed her his digital camera and watched her. After a while, she'd stashed his camera in her pocket and snuggled into him simply enjoying the view.

Knowing that Carolina didn't indulge in liquor, he'd brought along some of her iced tea so that they could enjoy a toast. She'd thrown her arms around him and hugged him like she did David. He'd remember that moment forever. By the time they watched the balloon deflate, she and Sven were practically best friends, but for once his jealousy didn't rear its ugly head. After all, she hadn't let go of his hand or stopped touching him. Yeah, that was good because he liked Sven and really didn't want to take time to kill him.

«»*

Carolina couldn't believe Mackenzie. Taking her on the balloon ride was the coolest fucking thing ever. She thought for sure that he'd take her to one of the many hotels and fuck her, but he didn't. He simply held her hand as she recounted the experience and took her home. Kissing her deeply when he parked the truck, he walked her inside. Walking with her to check in on their son, he told her to get a nap.

She was stunned. "Thank you, Mackenzie," was all that she could say. And because she was tired, she went into her room and took the nap that he suggested. Sighing, she went to sleep with aerial visions of Colorado on her mind and Mackenzie's name on her lips.

«»*

Carolina spent the next two days regaling everyone with tales of her adventure. Apparently, she was the only one who thought that hot air ballooning rocked so hard. Fine. She didn't care; she'd had a great fucking time.

That afternoon, she waited for David to come in from his half day with the men. Already accustomed to having her baby to herself, she'd found that she'd missed spending time with her baby-baby. She'd missed David. And it was apparent that David was tired.

"Baby, you look tired," she said as she handed him a plate.

"I am," he said as he began to inhale his food.

"Are they working you too hard because I can go out there and kick their asses," she started.

"No, Momma. I just didn't sleep that much yesterday."

"Baby, do you need to close your eyes for a bit?" she asked worried that he might be having nightmares again.

"No, Momma. I'm fine," he answered.

She wanted to believe that but she wasn't going to put her need to believe that all was well above her

son's health. "Baby, if you're having nightmares, I can sleep in your room with you," she offered.

"It's okay, Momma," he began.

"Baby, it's not okay if you're having nightmares," she started. "I can leave my door open and," she started.

"Momma," he said as he grabbed her hand in his skinny hands. "Momma, please calm down. I just stayed up late playing games with Mariana."

"But how are you sleeping, honey?" she asked.

"Fine, Momma. Mackenzie sleeps on the floor of my room every night just in case I have nightmares," he admitted.

"What?" she asked with surprise.

"He came in the first night I was here. I was having a nightmare and he came in and slept on the floor. Every morning I wake up, he's there."

"For real?"

"Yes."

"Come with me," her Momma said.

Going into the kitchen, she opened the fridge and pulled out the rich chocolate mousse cake that she'd made that morning. Cutting a slice, she put it in a bowl and covered it. Grabbing a fork, she thrust it into David's hand. "Let's go, baby," she said.

Stalking out to the worksite, she made quick work of the distance.

“Mackenzie Duncan Roberts, show yourself!” she demanded.

Tapping her foot, she hugged her baby while she waited. She didn’t wait long. Not thirty seconds later the bastard came sauntering out.

“Yes, Sweetness,” he answered.

“Come closer,” she demanded.

“Sweetness, I’m dirty. I’ve been sweating all day and,” he began.

“I need you to taste this dessert that I made,” she interrupted. “It’s chocolate,” she threw out knowing that he couldn’t resist that.

“Okay,” he caved just like she knew that he would, being the hardcore chocoholic that he was.

Taking the bowl from David, she cut a piece. Holding the fork out to him, she waited until he bent forward to take the bite before snatching back the fork and inserting it into her own mouth. Making a production of savoring that bite, she handed the fork back to David and spoke to Mackenzie.

“Taste it from my mouth, Mackenzie,” she said before jumping into his arms and laying a kiss on him that she was pretty sure that her baby shouldn’t be seeing.

Pulling back, she winked at the stunned Mackenzie before grabbing her baby’s hand and sashaying all the way back to the house.

Mackenzie was elbow-deep in work when he heard his woman bellow his name. Setting aside the saw and pushing his goggles atop his head, he ambled outside. He was hot and sweaty, but he couldn't resist seeing Carolina. Even if he could've resisted he was sure that Carolina wouldn't allow for him to ignore her. She'd simply make her way onto the site and smoke him out. Her presence and voice smoked him out just as well, or even better, than actual fire.

Crossing the yard to her, he smiled at the sight of his woman and his son. That had such a nice ring to it and he never tired of hearing it. Every time that he heard it, it brought a smile to his heart. His mind was so firmly on his family that he'd missed the fact that David held a bowl until his Carolina told him that she needed him to taste something for her. He didn't mind tasting but right now he was rank and didn't want to be all up on his woman when he was this dirty. Opening his mouth to begin his protest, he was quickly shut down when Carolina mentioned that it was chocolate. *How could he resist that?*

When Carolina thrust the fork at him he opened his mouth anticipating yet another culinary orgasm. What he got was the surprise of his life. His woman took the fork and wrapped her succulent lips around the chocolate confession. He was about to

protest when she purred out her dick-hardening command.

"Taste it from my mouth," she'd purred right before jumping into his arms and kissing him so passionately that he began shivering despite the heat index of plus one hundred Fahrenheit. Before he could respond and haul her up against him and have her, she pulled back, shot him a 'come hither' look and walked her fine ass to the house leaving him with the taste of chocolate in his mouth, a rock hard dick, and a renewed determination to finish this project way before deadline so that he could concentrate on getting his own house in order for his family.

«»*

As usual, the whole family could be found lounging in the media room after dinner. And as usual, little David was the center of attention. The women all fawned over him. Mackenzie could no longer be jealous as it was evident that the boy was in serious need of some fawning. David was blossoming and although he was still too thin, at least he had some color now and his eyes glittered with happiness instead of fear.

Pulling Carolina deeper into his embrace, Mackenzie watched as Mariana and David took turns challenging each other on the racing game. It didn't

escape his attention that although David was obviously having fun playing video games with his big sister, that he had an equal amount of fun playing with Mariana's spoiled puppy. The boy was gentle with the puppy and it was obvious that he'd never had a pet, even before he admitted as much to Mariana. His admission had prompted Mariana to share her puppy with him. Smiling, he made a mental note to get Mariana something special. She really was a first class woman and judging by the way that she treated his son; she was going to be a fabulous mother.

Chapter 12

Ninjas in the Woods

Georgia had already scoped out the property of Samson Madeira on her first visit, so she didn't have to waste time doing it again. She simply did it again to see if there was evidence of anyone sneaking about. Her sisters, niece, and now her brand new nephew were inside, which warranted the surveillance. Her baby sister was frightened and she just couldn't have that. Anything that caused her baby sister to cry, or threatened her family, was going to meet a quick and unpleasant end...and that was just how that always was and was going to continue to be.

Parking her truck, she ambled up to the door, knocked twice and walked in without waiting for an invitation. Her family was inside and that was simply all the invitation that she needed. Stepping inside, she paused for a moment taking in the smells of food. Obviously, Carolina and Mosé were taking turns showing out in the kitchen. Her mouth watered at the prospect of lunch. She was about to raid the fridge when she glimpsed Virginia.

"Hey, crazy little girl," Virginia said as she made her way to her.

"Hey, creepy old lady," Georgia returned.

“You’re so lucky that you’re my sister or I’d kick your ass for that remark,” Virginia said.

“Ooh, all five feet of you?” Georgia threw back.

“Damn straight, little girl. Don’t forget that a whole lot of crazy can fit into small packages,” she sassed.

Smiling, Georgia hugged her some more before answering. “Ah, spoken by the lady who probably ate her twin.”

“I did not!”

“Really, then how come you’re a single birth in a family of multiples? Do you want to explain that?”

“Yeah, like the lady who failed dissection would understand the intricacies of biology,” Virginia threw back laughing at the memories of the ‘unfortunate dissection incident’ that was a favorite family tale.

“Trust you to bring that up,” Georgia huffed.

“Honey, I’m never going to let that go. None of us are. That is part of the family lore.”

“Fine, joke on me all you want if it will make you feel better,” Georgia smiled.

“Oh, trust me. It does,” Virginia laughed.

“How’s Carolina?”

“Scared,” Virginia answered.

“Now you know that we cannot have that. We cannot have that at all,” Georgia remarked in her about-to-go-on-a-spree tone.

"No, we cannot. We worked out an alternative—you know just in case the legal system fails us," Virginia began to divulge the contents of their nefarious plot but Georgia stopped her.

Patting the top of her head, Georgia hugged her older sister. "You know, I love y'all. We're all experts at something. You're the lawyer; Carolina's the hell-to-the-no chick; and, I'm the ninja. So though I appreciate your efforts, leave the planning of sieges and such to me. That's my area of expertise, okay?"

"Though I called in reinforcements, I am so glad that you're here, little sister," Virginia said sincerely.

"I'm glad to be here. Now where's my nephew?"

"By the sound of it he's just waking up from his nap. He should be coming to the kitchen in a few minutes. If you're going to be here, then I'm going to go ahead and do my lawyer thing."

"I'll be here," Georgia said knowing that Virginia was using all of her skills to insure that they got to keep David without having to resort to some kind of spree.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. Now go do your thing."

"David's going to be hungry so make sure that you feed him before you grill him, and go easy on him, Georgia. He's been through a lot."

"Noted, now go."

«»*

Georgia was in the kitchen gathering up food when she spotted David coming around the corner. He was a cutie...and way too damn skinny. Someone was going to get their ass kicked. She knew good and damn well that no one in her family would allow that baby to eat less than six times a day being so skinny, which meant that he must've been damn near emaciated when he first came to Carolina.

“Hello, Little David. I’m your Aunt Georgia. You look hungry, but first give me a hug,” Georgia demanded as she gathered up the fragile boy and hugged him soundly.

Not giving him a chance to answer, she ushered him to a chair. “Sit down, Sweetheart. You look hungry. I’m not as good a cook as your Momma—few people are—but I know how to throw a mean sandwich together. Now this is what we’re going to do. I want some real food but I’m not really trying to make it. So while I make this sandwich you make some noise. Your Momma will get here real quick...and that’s what we want because while a sandwich is a good appetizer, it isn’t real food. Okay?” she asked as she gently hugged him a second time.

“Um, okay,” he answered.

«»*

David walked into the kitchen for lunch. While he expected one of the women to be camped out in there, he didn't expect the woman he found. It was clear, however, that she expected him. As soon as he walked into the kitchen, she rushed over to him and hugged him tightly before kissing his cheek. Normally, he would've been scared but he knew that no one got in this place unless they were supposed to be here. And also the lady looked just like his Momma, but she was...different. For some reason she was dressed like a ninja, which was weird, but she had food. And even though she said that a sandwich wasn't real food, the sandwich that she was making looked delicious. When she set the sandwich in front of him, his eyes practically glazed over. Picking it up, he bit into it and just sighed. He was so caught up in that sandwich that he didn't hear his Momma come into the kitchen.

«»*

Carolina emerged from the shower completely refreshed. She'd had a good workout and followed it up with a relaxing bubble bath and a good book. She hadn't meant to stay so long in the bath but the book that she'd been reading was so good that she'd gotten

caught up. That was why David managed to wake up from his nap before she was finished. She wasn't too worried knowing that Virginia was in the house and would take care of her baby until she made an appearance.

Her momma ears easily picked up the sounds of her baby eating. Smiling, she rounded the corner and locked in on her baby...and her sister. Throwing a smile to her twin, she stopped to hug her baby before going to her sister's arms. That was her intent...before she saw the sandwich that David was eating. Snatching the sandwich out of his hand, she quickly commandeered Georgia's sandwich as well.

"David, spit that out," she ordered.

Turning to Georgia, she put her hands on her hips before laying into her. "I know that you did not try and feed this to my baby!"

"We were hungry," Georgia whined.

"Yeah, fine, but do you want to be dead? This is a recipe for a fucking cardiac arrest. I cannot believe that you gave him this!" she said while eyeing the sandwich that consisted of enough ham, bacon, and mayonnaise to make ten sandwiches.

"It was in the fridge," Georgia began.

"You know what, you are in so much trouble," Carolina said. She was getting ready to launch into a good soapbox speech when Virginia and Mariana sashayed in.

"Hi, Auntie Georgia!" Mariana exclaimed as she went into her aunt's arms for her customary hug.

"Hi, Mommy-to-be," Georgia responded as she hugged her niece.

"You've only been here like three minutes and you've already started trouble?" Virginia asked Georgia.

"No, I'm just trying to feed my nephew and myself and she's being all mean," Georgia said while pointing at Carolina.

"Virginia, I know that you're not going to fall for that. You know that she's the troublemaker of the two of us. I'm a good girl."

"Both of y'all need to stop. You're both shit-starters," Virginia said before turning to David. "Don't say that word either, baby giant."

"Look what she was feeding my baby!" Carolina exclaimed pointing to the copious pile of ham and bacon that had been the filler to their sandwiches.

"Well at least I didn't put it between two pork chops," Georgia began.

"Only because there weren't any pork chops in the fridge, otherwise you would've," Carolina threw out.

"And that's a bad thing, why?" Georgia asked.

"Because your affinity with chasing pork with more pork will fucking kill you," she said as she reached into the drawer for the blood pressure cuff

and launched into a speech about the consequences of high blood pressure and how it negatively impacted the black community. Winding down, she put the cuff away and set a bowl in front of David that held two bananas, an apple, and a pear. Pausing to kiss the top of his head, she set another in front of Georgia and Mariana before scowling at Georgia.

“Eat every bit of it,” she ordered.

“But,” David began.

“Are you allergic to any of that fruit?” Carolina asked David with concern. She was giving him new food each day trying to ascertain if he had any food allergies. Besides not feeding him on a regular basis, POS also neglected to take David to the doctor for regular checkups, which meant that he had no medical history. She felt herself getting angry all over again. Hearing David speak pulled her out of her anger.

“I’m not allergic to any food,” David answered.

“Then you will eat it. And furthermore, I am bumping up your servings of fruits and vegetables from eight a day to twelve. Black people don’t eat enough fruits and vegetables,” she began.

“I’m pretty sure that ham is a vegetable,” Georgia mumbled around her apple.

“And I’m pretty sure that you’re full of pork by-products,” Carolina threw back. “And by the way, no more pork for any of you for the rest of the week.”

"But, I didn't do anything," Mariana protested but quickly stopped when her momma gave her a look. "Fine, gosh," she pouted as she ate her fruit.

"But, I'm not black," David began looking longingly at the pile of ham that Carolina had snatched from him.

Before she could correct him, both Georgia and Virginia did it for her.

"Don't talk back to your, momma," they said simultaneously.

"Yeah, what they said. I'm black, therefore you're black. Now any more backtalk and I won't make that pineapple upside down cake that you want."

She smiled watching both David's and Georgia's eyes glaze over. Yep, he was so one of them.

"Be sure to eat every last bit of that fruit, or there will be no dessert for the next week and nothing but vegetarian fare for you two for the next month. Do I make myself clear?" she asked.

"Yes, Momma," David said.

"You are so bossy," Georgia pouted.

"Yeah, and if I wasn't, you wouldn't still be alive."

"Would too," Georgia threw out.

"I'm going to have to disagree with that. It took all of our combined efforts to keep you from accidentally killing yourself," Virginia interjected.

“See?” Carolina said.

Turning to look at David over her shoulder, Carolina shook her head. “I cannot believe that you took food from someone dressed like a ninja.”

“But she looks just like you...except not as pretty,” he said all wide eyes and sincerity.

That took the wind out of her sails and she smiled at her baby. “Come here and hug me,” she ordered. Getting in a good hug, she kissed him and set about making them all a plate. They sat down and enjoyed a proper lunch of chicken, greens, stuffing, yams, and corn on the cob.

«»*

Georgia enjoyed the meal and the company. Then again, she always did. She counted her blessings to be a part of such a family. While the rest of them lounged on the back deck, she decided to go out to find the man named Mackenzie. She’d only heard the man’s name like a million fucking times over lunch. And of course every time his name came up her baby sister got all hot and bothered, not that she was aware that everyone knew that Mackenzie moved her thusly. She laughed her ass off about the fact that Carolina actually thought that she was hiding her feelings about that man. Spotting said man,

she went up to him and introduced herself...Southern ninja style.

“Hey motherfucker, what have you done to my little sister?” Georgia asked Mackenzie while using a move that that rogue group of ninjas had taught her to take the big man down.

“Ain’t nothing little about your sister, ma’am,” Mackenzie replied. “And I admit that I like that.”

Noting his surprise, she rested her knee on his sternum, and smiled recalling how her daddy procured—and she still didn’t want to know how—a group of ninjas to train her in the ancient ways because apparently her fifth-degree black belt wasn’t shit. When she’d attempted to protest, her daddy gave her that daddy-look and told her, in no uncertain terms, that if she insisted on trekking to untamed places, she was damn well going to avail herself of every bit of training that he deemed necessary, and if she had a problem with that, he’d tell her momma. She so didn’t want that, so she’d submitted herself to their tutelage and learned that indeed, her fifth degree black belt wasn’t shit.

Mackenzie gasped, but she didn’t fear that she was truly hurting him knowing that she was applying just enough pressure to let him know that should she choose to, she could hurt him. But she didn’t really want to hurt him, having the feeling that this man really loved Carolina. Besides, this Mackenzie was a

good, sturdy man. He was what they often referred to as ‘corn-fed’ but Mr. Roberts had surpassed the ‘corn-fed’ description about four inches and a hundred pounds ago. This was a big ‘tractor-fed’ man.

“Are you going to answer my question today?” she asked.

“And you would be?” he asked.

“I’d be Carolina’s sister.”

“Hmm, related to Carolina. That explains the penchant for violence,” he said while folding his arms under his head.

“No, that’s merely the Southern. The intelligence is the common denominator. I’m Georgia Gilchrist-Williams, Mr. Roberts,” she began but the bastard cut her off.

“Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia. Do you have another sister named Florida or perhaps a brother named Tennessee?” Mackenzie asked.

“Look Irish, I just need you to answer my question.” She’d pegged him with the misnomer simply to needle him. Having already having memorized the dossier that Virginia had read her, she knew good and damn well that Mr. Mackenzie Roberts was Scots stock.

“And I just need for you to get your knee out of my sternum.”

"I bet you do. And I also bet that when you woke up this morning you didn't think that you'd have Carolina's twin sister kicking your ass."

She waited to see what he'd do. Most guys would've struggled—to no avail—but this one wasn't most guys. She knew that he would be a difficult man to put down. Had he so chosen, he could've easily put her off of him, but instead, he sat there looking like the smug bastard that her baby sister called him.

"Twin sister, you say?"

"Have a problem seeing?" she asked.

"I don't have a problem seeing. I can tell that you're sisters, but I wouldn't peg you as twins being that you're not as pretty as Carolina," Mackenzie answered.

"You know you're the second male who has told me that today. Being that Carolina and I are identical twins, I'm hard-pressed to understand this."

"Yeah, but barring the fact that you're holding a knife to my throat, you're a lot nicer than your sister," Mackenzie offered.

"Ah, besides being relatively intelligent, you also have a good sense of humor. I like that, but before you go getting all cocky, know that there are more of us," she said.

"Hopefully the initial meeting with the rest of the family won't be so...memorable, although if I

have to lose a little bit of my dignity to keep Carolina, so be it.”

“Why haven’t you knocked me off of you? I know that you can easily remove my person.”

“Because a) that ain’t no way to treat a woman, and b) you’re going to be my sister-in-law and I’d rather have you on my side. Plus, it’s always nice to know that I’ll have someone I can call on to have my back should I find myself in a bar fight.”

“While I don’t mind having your back in a fight, I would mind—I’d very much mind—having to come drag your sorry ass out of a bar.”

“Noted, but know that the only place I want to frequent is the arms of your sister.”

“That’s a good answer.”

“Being accustomed to women throwing themselves at me, I cannot say that I’m surprised to find you sprawled atop me, digging your knee into my massive chest, but I’m going to have to ask you to remove yourself. I don’t think that my woman would like another woman handling what she considers hers.”

“The only man that Carolina considers hers is David who has already been handled and fed and is safely ensconced on the deck enjoying some kind of scrumptious dessert,” she said as she got off of him.

“I can’t believe that you just got here and have already fed that brat,” Mackenzie complained.

Holding out a hand to him to help him up, she laughed. "He looked hungry and please do not refer to my nephew as a brat."

Waving off her offer of help, Mackenzie gracefully gained his feet before answering. "Oh, let me correct that—I meant, spoiled brat."

"You sound jealous."

"I am jealous. He's stealing Carolina from me."

Georgia smiled. Yep, this man would be a good husband to her feisty ass sister.

"From what I hear you don't quite have Carolina yet."

"Oh, I have Carolina. She might not want to admit it, but like everyone else, she knows that to be a categorical fact."

"Well you'd better move your ass. I expect a ring on her finger with the quickness or we're going to have a misunderstanding, one that ends with you being kicked off of the side of a mountain."

"Ah, I see that kicking people off of things runs in the family," Samson Madeira laughed as he walked up to them. Shaking his head at Mackenzie, he held out his arms to Georgia who jumped into them. She liked Samson something fierce...and not just because he'd gifted her with a compound bow and arrow for her birthday.

Chapter *I'm Almost* **13**

But I'm Still My Momma's Baby...and My Dad's

After talking it over with Carolina, Mackenzie decided that he'd take David to get a puppy. Samson had some cousins who owned a canine sanctuary, and they'd called ahead and made an appointment. Getting David a good dog would be good for everyone. It would be good for David because he needed something to care for and it would be good for both Carolina and himself because they would have that added bit of security for their son. David had been sleeping easier, but he still had nightmares. Mackenzie hated that, and though his back cussed him out and called him all kinds of sorry motherfuckers for subjecting it to the hard ass floor of David's bedroom, both his heart and his woman praised him for it.

Mackenzie looked over at his son and noted how different he was from the first time that he sat in the passenger seat of his truck. It wasn't just that he wasn't rank, frightened, hungry, or exhausted; it was the fact that now David looked like any other twelve year old boy...well any other twelve year old boy that was 6'4" tall. Though he was still quite thin,

with the way his Momma—and every woman in that house—fed him, by the time he was eighteen, David was going to be huge. He'd bet that David still had a good four or five inches of height left to fill in and though he was bony, he had a good-sized frame. Yep, his son was going to rival Samson for size.

He continued the short drive, content simply to have his son with him. They didn't have much conversation but that was fine. The cab of the truck was filled with the sounds of Anita Baker and both he and David sat back and enjoyed the beautiful weather and the good music. It wasn't until he turned off of the road that David spoke.

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"What is this place?" David asked as Mackenzie stopped the truck in front of an intricate wrought-iron entrance gate and spoke into the box.

"You'll see," Mackenzie said as he stopped the truck.

David didn't know what to make of it. He was going to ask more questions but Mackenzie was already driving through the gates. Looking around, he couldn't help but notice the huge log cabin that looked a lot like Samson's house. Nestled in the woods were several smaller versions of the house. He didn't know what this place was but it was beautiful.

There were lots of trees and wildflowers dotted the area. This area was well-maintained but it had a wild look about it.

Driving in the opposite direction of the beautiful homes, David noticed that there were a lot of dogs running about the property. They drove for a little bit and stopped at what was obviously some kennels. Reading the sign, he went all wide-eyed. *Wild Dogs* was one of the best places to get dogs. They must be getting a new dog to protect Mariana. Samson was funny about her and he couldn't blame him. Maybe he could get a job and get his Momma one of these dogs. You know, to look after her when she was by herself in the house. Though he liked being out with the men he didn't like the thought of his Momma being alone in the house.

He was going to ask Mackenzie about getting his Momma a dog but the man had already exited the truck and was looking at him through the open window. As always, he looked intimidating, but since he had a grin on his face, David didn't worry too much. Besides after all of the begging that Mackenzie had had to go through in order to get his Momma to let him take him out, he was sure that he wasn't about to do something nefarious. He smiled having an opportunity to use the new word that his Momma had taught him. His Momma had already taught him a lot of things. And she gave him stuff to read all of

the time. Every time that she gave him something to eat—which was a lot—she gave him something to read, not that he was complaining. She didn't give him baby books nor did she give him stuff that made him feel frustrated. Instead she gave him short articles to read about stuff he was interested in like video games and baseball. His Momma was really smart...and beautiful.

Unfolding his long body from the truck, he looked around at the place called *Wild Dogs*. The best dogs came from this place and he saw many of them running free around the property. Although there appeared to be many types of dogs, he noticed that a disproportionate number of those dogs could be described as huge. Disproportionate was another word his Momma had taught him. He was proud when he'd recognized the word that she'd used when she was telling off Mackenzie. She'd told Mackenzie that if anything untoward happened to her baby that Mackenzie was going to be the victim of a disproportionate number of bad things, and his Aunts Georgia and Virginia had nodded their heads while they gave Mackenzie the don't-mess-with-our-baby look. It was funny how no one had wanted him around and now every woman that he came across claimed him as her baby. He smiled thinking of his two aunts and his big sister. They were all pretty and smart and

funny, but they weren't his Momma. No one was more beautiful than his Momma.

Mackenzie was standing by the front of the truck as a big man with long black hair walked towards them and held out his hand to Mackenzie.

"Mr. Roberts?" The big man greeted him.

He watched as Mackenzie shook the man's hand. The two men stood around the same height but where Mackenzie was fair the other man was dark apart from his eyes which were almost the same color as Mackenzie's.

"I'm Josiah Mann. We spoke on the phone."

Nodding, Mackenzie returned the introduction.

"I'm Mackenzie and this is my son, David," Mackenzie said proudly as he reached out and hugged David to him.

David looked at Mackenzie. True, he'd been calling him son, but he thought it'd just been another word like boy or kid. He was always happy when he heard his Momma claim him as hers and he liked it when her family—oops *their* family—claimed him as nephew and brother, but he was stunned to hear Mackenzie claim him like a real son. It felt nice being part of a family. He didn't know why everyone just accepted that he belonged to his Momma and he didn't care. Maybe all Black people and Southern people were like that. That was nice and he wished

more people were like his family because then no one would be lonely.

David was surprised when Mr. Mann held his hand out to him as important people usually overlooked him. Taking his hand, he shook it. He noticed that Mr. Mann looked into his eyes as he shook his hand. David was unable to drop his hand or look away like he normally would. There was something about this man. He didn't know what it was but it was like Josiah could see inside of his head and knew that he was afraid of him. He couldn't explain how he felt. It wasn't really fear because Mackenzie was with him and he knew that Mackenzie wouldn't let anything happen to him. What he felt was a recognition of some type though he had no idea why he felt that. He hoped that he hadn't stolen from this man in the past. Nervously he pulled his hand out of Mr. Mann's grasp. Though it seemed as if they'd been shaking hands for a long time, he realized that his reaction to Mr. Mann had only taken a few seconds.

"I'll round up some of these guys. I'll be with you in a moment," Josiah Mann spoke directly to David before he strode off emitting a series of short, sharp whistles.

"Is this where you want me to work rather than on the site?" David asked Mackenzie.

Mackenzie turned to look at his son. *Did David just ask if he would be working here?* Mackenzie wondered silently. Seeing his son's expression, he realized that he indeed had asked such a ridiculous question. Slinging a protective arm around David's still too-thin shoulders, he answered as he maneuvered the boy towards the crowd of dogs docilely lining up in front of Josiah Mann. It was apparent that all of the dogs were waiting patiently for Josiah's next instruction.

"Son, number one, the only place that you will be working will be within your momma's, or my, eyesight. Number two, until your momma proclaims you fit to work anywhere—and she won't until you're at least sixteen—the most work that you'll be allowed to do is sit at the table and taste stuff while she cooks and that's a damn fine job if you ask me. Number three, when you are old enough and fit enough to work it will be for me being that you're my heir. Number four; don't make me tell your momma that you're doubting us again. The reason that we're here is that I heard you tell your big sister that you'd never had a pet of any kind. Well son, today is the day you will receive your very first pet. Your momma and I decided that it should be a dog since you seem to like dogs and your Momma hates cats. Now the dog that you choose will be *your* responsibility—not

mine, not your momma's but *yours* alone. Do you understand?"

* «*» *

Hearing Mackenzie tell him that the dog was his responsibility had overwhelmed him. David couldn't believe this. He was getting a pet. *Him*. They really were going to keep him...and they were getting him a dog. They were even letting him pick it out. He'd noticed that his Momma and Mackenzie were real careful about letting him decide his own stuff; they didn't just make decisions for him like everyone else. Even though they let him make some of his own decisions he knew that his Momma's word was law. She spoiled him but she didn't tolerate any mess or back talking. Not that he'd ever want to disappoint his Momma. He loved her.

David suddenly remembered Mackenzie's question and nodded without looking at the man who called him *son* for fear that Mackenzie would see the pitiful tears of happiness in his eyes. He felt Mackenzie put his other arm around his shoulders and give him a warm hug.

"I'll talk to Josiah while you take a look at which dog you want, all right?" Mackenzie asked.

David nodded. He still didn't trust his voice yet and he didn't want to look weak in front of

Mackenzie. Mackenzie didn't move away straight away. Instead he put a finger under his chin and made him look him in the eye. The softness in Mackenzie's face was evident even through his veil of tears.

"Why are you crying?" Mackenzie asked.

"I don't deserve all of this," David answered brokenly.

Mackenzie's face tightened in anger for a fleeting moment. In fact, it was so quick that David believed that he'd merely imagined the look for Mackenzie looked at him with a look that bespoke compassion and sincerity.

"Son, you're going to have to get used to this. Between your momma and I we're going to give *you* everything you need and a lot of things that you want—whether you think that you need or deserve them. You are *our* son and if we want to spoil you we **will**."

"But I don't have anything that I can give you," he whispered as he stared at Mackenzie.

"Yes, you do. Just be our son—ours. We love you and if you can love us back then that will be the icing on the cake. Do you think that you can do that?" Mackenzie asked.

David's tears fell unchecked down his cheeks. He no longer cared that Mackenzie or anyone stopping by could see them. In that moment the only

person he saw was Mackenzie. Stepping the whole three inches that separated he and Mackenzie, he cried harder when Mackenzie wrapped him up in those strong arms and held him protectively within the circle of his embrace. It felt good to be this close to a big, white male and not be scared...and it felt right that it was Mackenzie.

“Thank you...*Dad*,” David tried out the title. It didn’t hurt coming out of his mouth and he felt the moment that the title registered in Mackenzie’s mind for his hug got a little tighter. They hugged for a long time before Mackenzie stepped away. He noticed that Mackenzie was also crying. And he also noticed that Mackenzie didn’t seem to care about anyone witnessing his tears. Not even bothering to wipe them away, he looked up at the sky and whispered something before throwing an arm around him and walking the few feet to where Josiah Mann stood.

«»*

Mackenzie could barely keep the grin off of his face as he joined Josiah Mann. *David had called him DAD!* Before meeting Carolina he’d never felt the urge to settle down and before meeting this child never had he ever thought that a one-syllable word would fill him with such elation. In that moment he was both thankful and puzzled. He was thankful for

the many gifts that God had seen fit to bless him with—and he wasn't talking about the education or the money. Those things were nice but he'd worked his ass off for those. He was talking about Carolina and his son. Though he'd have to work his ass off to see to their care, he knew that nothing he could've done would've brought such wondrous gifts to him. He had a smoking hot, intelligent-beyond-words, passionate woman who he loved like no other and now he had a *son*. He felt...he couldn't find the words but he knew it was better than fucking amazing!

His puzzlement was still evident in his joy. How could any man that was blessed with children not do all within his power to see to their care? He'd always lacked respect for males who didn't take care of their children, even going so far as to refuse to do business with them, but now that he had a child of his own, he truly was puzzled about that shabby behavior. The POS that had originally been blessed with David was a damn fool for letting this precious child go. As was every man who'd come across Carolina and not moved the universe in order to have her. Shaking his head, Mackenzie realized that he wasn't perfect. Sometimes he was an ass; sometimes he was a fool, but now he was a father and a soon-to-be husband and he wouldn't do anything to jeopardize either of those titles.

"Fine son that you've got there," Josiah said as Mackenzie joined him.

"That he is. So tell me about these dogs. Everyone knows that you have the best guard dogs around, but are they safe to be around kids?"

Josiah nodded. "We only breed the best dogs here. Period. They are treated well—the best food, the best conditions, the best training, the best everything."

"Well, they do indeed look like a fine lot of dogs," Mackenzie said as he looked over the German Shepherds. All of them were heavy with muscle and stood fairly high.

Turning to David, he asked. "Do you see one that you like, son?"

"Um, they're all very nice," he said.

"But what, son?"

"What about those dogs over there?" He pointed to the few dogs in the kennel.

"Can we look at those dogs, Josiah, or are they already promised?"

"Those dogs aren't guard dogs. They're strays that we re-train. We don't even know the pedigree of most of them," he admitted.

"I don't care if they have a pedigree," David said as he walked to the fence and held out his hand to the straggliest-looking dog that Mackenzie had ever seen. Having strange blue eyes, the dog was

naught but a bag of skin and bones and beyond that, the dog had the worst fur he'd ever seen. Someone needed to cut that down and start it over. It looked like a hard breath would blow the dog away, but if that was the dog that his son wanted; that was the dog that he'd get...as long as it wasn't dangerous.

"Are they safe for kids?" Mackenzie asked.

"They've been re-trained. Not all of them came from good homes and even most animal organizations are reluctant to take them. We tend to take in the animals *no one* wants. It's not their fault that they've been treated like shit. We never put them down so you don't have to worry about that if you don't take one of those dogs," Josiah said. It was clear that he was passionate about dogs. Nodding in solidarity, Mackenzie asked. "Regardless of how they look, are they healthy?"

"Yes. They've been given their shots and checked for injury. They might look bad, but they're clean and healthy," Josiah confirmed.

The two men lapsed into silence as David continued to pet the scraggly dog. The dog was shy but after a few minutes of petting, he finally tentatively licked David's hand.

"He rarely lets anyone touch him. In fact, the only person that he willingly goes to is my daughter," Josiah said quietly.

David looked up at his father. He gave a small smile but didn't comment.

"Well I guess that the decision has been made," Mackenzie said with a grin. Pulling out his wallet, he looked at Josiah who was shaking his head.

"Your money's no good here. No way would I charge you for giving one of those dogs a happy home," Josiah said softly.

Mackenzie nodded and put his wallet away.

"How's your daughter going to feel about us taking her dog?" David asked suddenly.

"David, my daughter has at least fifteen dogs that she calls *hers* and though I know that she'll miss him, she would be happier knowing that he has you to call friend," Josiah answered.

"I don't want her to be upset—" David began.

Josiah smiled at David. "It's fine David. Krystal will truly be happy that Bones has you looking after him."

David nodded and went back to playing with his new dog.

"Ah, there is one thing..." Josiah started to say right before another dog came bounding up to the scraggly dog.

Mackenzie watched as the small dog skidded to a halt behind the scraggly dog.

"They were found together," Josiah said.

Mackenzie watched as the scraggly dog immediately took up a defensive position of the smaller dog.

“He seems real protective of that dog,” Mackenzie commented.

“He is. When he first got here, even though he was starving, he pushed his bowl of food over to the little dog and growled at it until it ate. As you can see, the dog is looking pretty good, but it’s going to be huge. Look at the size of its paws,” Josiah said.

“It’s a fine-looking dog, how come no one has taken her?” Mackenzie asked.

“Any number of reasons. Most people come here wanting a pedigreed dog. Even those who might be persuaded to take a mutt generally want purse-sized puppies. That is not a purse puppy. She’s going to be even bigger than the shepherds. Plus, she’s usually not friendly when we show her. She’s always near Bones and no one before your son has even looked twice at that dog.”

“He’s beautiful,” David said, clearly offended on behalf of the dog he’d taken a shine to.

“You may need to take your dog while I distract his friend,” Josiah explained.

David turned to Mackenzie. It was clear that he was about to protest but before the first syllable left his mouth Mackenzie was already speaking.

"We'll take both of them, if you don't mind," Mackenzie spoke before David even asked. He noticed that David's eyes literally sparkled at the prospect and that was worth any expense the two dogs would warrant.

"Are you sure?" Josiah asked.

"I'm sure. Look at how happy my son is," Mackenzie answered.

Josiah grinned at Mackenzie. Reaching over the fence he scooped up both dogs and handed them to David. "Come in and you can sign the papers for them."

"Not a problem. Son, I'm going to sign for these two. Go ahead and load them into the truck," Mackenzie instructed.

"Do you want me to put them in the bed or," David began.

"No, son. Put them in the backseat. That way you can hold them while I drive."

"But they're going to mess it up," David protested. "We can sit in the back."

"And have your momma kill me for exposing her baby to danger. No. Put them in the back seat. We can always clean out the truck. That's why I have a truck and not a Bentley. Okay?"

"Okay, Dad," David said.

“Now thank Mr. Mann and move your hind parts. We still have stuff to do today,” Mackenzie said.

“Thank you Mr. Mann,” David said happily as both dogs licked his face.

“Thank you, David and Mackenzie,” Josiah said.

«»*

Mackenzie had signed the papers then called Carolina to let her know that he was taking David into Boulder to get some stuff for the dogs. He smiled knowing that Carolina was not happy about having her baby away from her for so long. After spending the bulk of the call reassuring her that *their* baby was indeed fine, he knew that he'd better bring his A-game tonight if he wanted a hope in all of the things that started with the letter 'h' of getting Carolina to allow him to take David to his house tomorrow. With all the goings on, he still hadn't made his house ready for his woman. Now that he had their son settled, he needed to concentrate on his woman...all five foot eleven and one hundred ninety pounds of her. He had to stop thinking about her as his dick was already hard and his son had already noticed his constant state of arousal when in the presence of his momma. He didn't want to have to

explain why he was aroused being that only them and two dogs were in the truck.

Turning to his son, he asked. "Son, I want you to come to my house. Are you up for that?"

"Can I bring T-Rex and Raptor?" he asked.

Mackenzie shook his head at the names. David had promptly rechristened the dogs saying that they needed names that befitted their station.

"Absolutely."

"Okay," David agreed before going back to petting his dogs.

"You're going to have to help me convince your momma to let you go. She's right put out about not seeing you today," Mackenzie said.

"She loves me," David preened happily.

"We all love you," Mackenzie corrected.

«»*

Carolina waited impatiently for her baby to return. She'd made him his favorite—then again, it seemed that all food was his favorite. She'd flipped through various cookbooks looking for something chocolate to make her baby and thus had whipped up some iced mint chocolate coolers, which would go splendidly with the chocolate mousse tarts that she'd made.

Sitting on the porch awaiting David's return, she smiled when she saw how happy he looked as he exited the truck with the two scruffiest dogs that she'd ever seen. Yet, David held onto them like they were newborn babies.

"See, Momma. This is T-Rex," he said while holding a dog up that had fur that looked like it was in need of both a hair relaxer *and* a weave and was so skinny that she could see all of its ribs.

"And this is Raptor," he said proudly pointing at the puppy who had paws the size of a half-grown polar bear.

Her baby couldn't have found two more pitiful-looking dogs if he'd tried, but she didn't care. David was smiling and his eyes gleamed with happiness. For that smile, he could've dragged home a dragon, and she wouldn't have cared.

"They look hungry, baby," she said. "Let's get them something to eat and then put them into the bath, okay?"

She was on her way to the kitchen when she felt David tug her arm. Stopping to look at her child, she noted the look of concern on his face.

"What's wrong, baby?" she asked.

He'd pulled her close and looked down at her with those big eyes. "I called Mackenzie 'dad' today and he hugged me really tight. Is that okay, Momma?" he whispered.

Looking over at Mackenzie who'd not only brought her son to her but had allowed the dogs in the cab of his pristine truck and had done so many other things for her son, she smiled. Running the back of her hand over her baby's cheek, she gathered him in her arms. "Of course, baby. Mackenzie *is* your father."

"Thanks, Momma. I was worried that," he began.

Interrupting him she said, "Only worry if he puts my baby in danger. Now scoot so we can see to these dogs. I've made your favorite food."

Watching his smile stretch even wider, she hugged him once more before going in to gather some food for the dogs. They fed those dogs some cut up bits of steak and then gave the relatively clean dogs a good scrubbing. If they were going anywhere near the inside of the house they were going to be squeaky clean. And they were going in the house. Perhaps if they slept with David he wouldn't have nightmares.

By the time that they'd finished all of them looked like they'd been through the wash, but all of them were happy. Everyone had pitched in to get those dogs in shape enough to pass her stringent requirements for cleanliness. Afterwards, they all sat on the back deck, indulging in the iced mint chocolate coolers that she'd made earlier.

David was right where he should be—in the protective center of her crazy ass family. Of course, as usual Mackenzie took it upon himself to move as close as humanly possible to her. Bastard—fine ass, gentle, great-to-her-son-who’s-now-calling-him-dad, intelligent, make-her-come-on-command bastard.

He was just trying to get on her good side. Dammit. That was a lie; he was already on her good side for so many reasons. After they’d gone upstairs to shower, he’d waylaid her in the hallway. Backing her into the wall, he’d gently taken her generous hips in his big, capable hands and taken his time exploring her mouth. Taking her hand, he’d led her to the deck where he’d asked her permission to take their son to his house.

“Why?” she’d asked. “You’ve already had him most of the morning.”

“I know, Sweetness, but I’d like to take him to my house so that he can pick out the things that he wants for his bedroom.”

How could she say no to that? She couldn’t. As she watched her family, she smiled thinking of how hodge-podge they were. And yes, dammit, Mackenzie was also her family as were those two dogs—one with freakishly large paws and the other with fur that looked like the mess from the lint trap on the dryer. Looking at her son bottle-feeding Raptor, she snuck a peek at Mackenzie who was busy

hand-feeding T-Rex some of the best steak that money could buy. Quickly coming to a decision, she caught her sisters' eyes before excusing herself and going to the kitchen. No sooner had she sat at the table than the rest of the women filed in and took a seat. Looking them in the eye, she made her announcement.

"I love Mackenzie...and I want to bring him to his knees. I want him to see me and completely lose his fucking mind...and then fuck me into the ground."

"Woo hoo!" Mariana cheered.

"About damn time," Virginia said. "It's been painful watching you put that man through his paces."

"I wonder what Mackenzie will get me as a birthday gift being that I was nice enough not to slit his throat in his sleep?" Georgia asked.

«»*

David lay in bed with T-Rex and Raptor snuggled up close to him. He could barely close his eyes he was so excited. Today had been so great. Blinking back tears, he kept replaying those moments at Wild Dogs that had led him to calling Mackenzie 'dad.'

He thanked God again. Before he had nothing and now he not only had a Momma and dad—he had

a whole family who accepted him and included him. And now he even had two pets. Peeking over at T-Rex and Raptor he smiled noting how they slept so close to him. Whenever they were together they were like each other's shadows but whenever they were out with him they took up positions on either side of him, which was comical being that they were so small and skinny. David smiled knowing that the dogs and he shared a lot of commonalities. Like them, he too was skinny, frightened, hungry and a mess when he'd first arrived. And like him, his dad had dragged them home in his truck and his Momma had taken one look at them, declared that they were hungry, fed them, bathed them and made them feel wanted. Both he and his dogs were still skinny, but he was happy...and from the contented snores of his dogs, so were they.

«»*

Mackenzie walked out of his room intent on taking the dogs to the bathroom, but someone had already beaten him to it as David's shower was on and his bed empty. Heading to the kitchen, he spotted the dogs lounging obediently in front of the door—far away from Carolina's precious kitchen. Shaking his head at the dogs, he walked into the kitchen. Carolina paused and handed him a cup of

coffee before she turned her back on him and finished doing whatever it was that she was doing. Placing the coffee mug down, he smiled to himself. Surely, she didn't think that he was going to allow her to dismiss him. Softly calling her name, he waited until she turned around before picking her up and taking her lips in a passionate kiss.

Pulling back, he nodded at the dazed look in her eyes. "Good morning, Sweetness."

"Good morning, Mackenzie. Get your hands off of me and go get my son. He needs to eat a good breakfast before you take him out."

"Our son, Sweetness. Are you going to feed me too?" he drawled.

"Do you want to eat breakfast off of my cleavage or are you content to have it in a plate like everyone else?" she asked.

His dick got even harder at her mention of cleavage. Looking at her chest, he growled noting how big she was up top. "This time tomorrow, however, might be a whole 'nother story."

Laughing as she flipped him off, he went to retrieve their son.

«»*

Knocking on his door, Mackenzie waited for David to invite him to enter before walking in. He

leaned against the door frame noting with pride how diligent his son was. Unlike many kids, David made his bed before leaving his room—in part because his momma had told him to and in part because he didn't want to make extra work for his momma.

“How'd you sleep last night, son?” he asked.

“I slept well,” David admitted as he placed the last pillow on the bed.

“You appeared to be doing so when I came in,” Mackenzie commented.

“You came in last night?” David asked.

“Yeah. I had to make sure that you were okay.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“No problem. Your momma wants you to come eat, so are you ready?”

“Yep.”

“Let's go then,” Mackenzie said as he made his way to the kitchen with his son in tow.

They were just outside the kitchen door when they both stopped in their tracks. Carolina was singing again. Damn, why did she do this to him? Now she was in there whipping up food that made him purr and singing songs that made his dick hard. Currently, she was singing Anita Baker's, *‘Do You Believe Me?’* Did he believe her? Hell yeah. His son's voice pulled him from his fantasies.

“She's singing that to me,” David sighed.

"No, she's not. She's singing that to me," Mackenzie returned in a whisper.

"No, it's to me. She always sings to me," David countered.

"She might sing to you, but this is a man-woman song and she's definitely singing it to me," Mackenzie said.

"Momma!" David said as he entered the kitchen.

"Yes, Baby?" His Momma asked as she hugged and kissed him before indicating a chair he should use to sit himself down.

"Who are you singing that song for? Me or Dad?" he asked.

"What song, baby?" she asked.

"You were singing some Anita Baker, Sweetness," Mackenzie said as he pulled out his seat.

"Oh, I hadn't realized," she said before ignoring them both and setting a stack of pancakes between them.

They ate until they were stuffed. Taking the cooler, Mackenzie groaned when he realized how heavy it was.

"Sweetness, we're coming back today," he said.

"Yes, but you are going to need snacks, lunch and some more snacks. Plus there are bottles for Raptor and food for T-Rex. That cooler should be empty by the time you guys return. I don't want my

baby being hungry,” she said as she kissed them both and sent them on their way.

«»*

Carolina had risen early so that she could see to the preparation of her baby’s and Mackenzie’s, no her man she amended, food. Damn, that sounded nice. It’d been so long since she’d had a man and now she had the best one although her Momma, Virginia, and Mariana might disagree. Now that she had them out of bed and at the table, they seemed like they wanted to linger. She wasn’t trying to rush them, but Mackenzie needed to eat and get the fuck out—her baby could take his time. She had important work to do today. All of the women were going into Denver to go to the spa and to find the perfect outfit. Though Boulder was closer, being smaller it offered fewer choices for the plus-sized woman, and they needed as many options as possible.

«»*

After being pampered at one of the best day spas in the Western part of the country, they shopped all of the upscale areas for the perfect outfit. She’d found the lingerie—a daring bra and panty set in candy apple red with black lace overlay. She al-

ready owned the perfect footwear—the boots that she'd spied in the window display in Boulder. Now she needed the perfect outfit to go with that.

They found the outfit to go with those boots in shop number seven. It was an accident. They'd gotten distracted in the local bookstore where they'd lingered for damn near an hour and walked out with five hundred dollars worth of books—apiece, when they'd passed this funky little shop that catered exclusively to the full-figured woman. They might've passed it by but then they'd seen the display and stopped in their tracks.

“That is the outfit!” They'd all whispered in awe. Standing in the window was a mannequin rocking an iridescent deep red strapless corset that laced up the back with a silk skirt in a slightly deeper shade of red that featured delicate embroidery and a sheer black overlay that stopped about five inches above the knee. The ensemble was completed by a sheer black trench style overcoat with an intricate display of lacework and beading decorating the arms and the edges. This outfit screamed ‘fuck me!’ in decibels that could shatter eardrums. And she needed it. She'd have to forgo the bra, but as long as she didn't have to forgo her boots, it was all good. Going inside, she went right up to the clerk and asked if they had that outfit in a size eighteen. Hear-

ing a yes, she plunked down her credit card, for once not giving a damn about the cost.

Walking out of the store with *'the'* outfit and damn near a closet full of *'fuck me'* outfits, she felt powerful. All she needed was to get her locs tended to. Luckily, Mariana had a beauty salon at the house and she had a cosmetics bag full of hair products from Carol's Daughter. Oh, yeah, with her brown sugar-colored lip gloss, deep red nail polish that matched her outfit, and her coconut-scented bath products, Mackenzie had no choice but to go down. And when he went down, he'd appreciate that not only had she had the bushes trimmed; what was remaining of her bush was done up in a fancy letter *'m.'*

«»*

Mackenzie thanked his lucky stars that as a contractor and business owner, he had access to an impressive database. Once they'd gotten to his home he'd shown David their home and allowed him to pick his room. As he suspected, David fell in love with one of the loft bedrooms, which was fine by him. It was big enough for him and the dogs and gave him a bit of privacy.

After settling the dogs in front of the fireplace (of course they'd immediately gotten up and re-

settled themselves where they could see their charge), he and David went to the dining room and looked through multiple furniture sites and interior decorating sites before deciding on a bedroom suit for him and a new master bedroom suit for Carolina. Both David and he agreed that Carolina would like the custom-built king-sized canopied bed that boasted intricate woodwork. It was a bedroom suit designed for a princess, as David stated, and Carolina was definitely that. Making their selection, he paid for rush delivery on everything before turning his attention to the next item on his list.

Going online he and David perused the list of websites with which Virginia had supplied them. They spent about an hour ordering an array of products from Carolina's favorite stores. There were hair care products from Carol's Daughter; coconut body washes and body butters from The Body Shop; antibacterial soaps from Bath and Body Works; lotions and exfoliating salt scrubs from Victoria's Secret; and, deodorant and oral care products from Tom's of Maine.

That seen to, they awaited the arrival of Old Man James—the best damn woodworker this side of the Mississippi River. Ornery as all get out, Old Man James—who really wasn't all that old—was magic with wood. And right now he needed magic. He wanted bookcases—and lots of them—for Carolina.

He figured that his game room would make a perfect library for Carolina. Covering a good bit of the main floor, it had a fireplace, plenty of windows and a good deal of wall space for shelves. Being that Carolina was an avid reader, he was sure that he'd need more bookcases than he'd estimated and that was why he'd called in Old Man James. He had an eye for these things. Walking around his place, James had agreed that the best place for the library was on the main floor and after an hour of measuring and cussing he told him to have the room cleared and in a week's time he and his sons would be there to set up.

Having sent James on his ornery way with a written estimate and a fifty-percent deposit, he and David waited for the interior decorator with which he'd made an appointment. One of Boulder's most exclusive interior decorators, he was admittedly, a brilliant man. The designer had looked at the bedroom set that he'd ordered and gave him a look.

"You're trying to win over the woman of your heart, yes?"

"Yes," he had exclaimed.

"Tell me what you want for the bedroom," the designer prompted.

"I want her to walk in and never want to leave our bed," he answered without shame or censor.

He must've said something that the designer liked for the designer nodded his head. "For you, I

will pull out all stops. Your princess will enter your castle and know that it is all for her.”

“Thank you,” Mackenzie had said. Sitting back, he was quiet while the designer looked about his home taking notes and measurements.

He left after only an hour and a half, which left him and David plenty of time to see to the house. Not that it was dirty, but for Carolina it had to be immaculate. Rolling up their sleeves they set to work and when night finally fell, both the house and surrounding acreage was in top notch condition—not that it was ever in any other condition, but it had to be extra top notch for his woman. They’d need to go back in a few days to accept the scheduled deliveries and let the interior designer work his magic, but all of the heavy work was done. When Carolina entered their home he hoped that she liked it because the next time that she stepped back in it, she would be Mrs. Mackenzie Duncan Roberts. Looking around at their home, he engaged the high-tech security system and walked out. Climbing into the truck, he and David looked at each other and knocked fists. Carolina was theirs.

PART WE
THE CALM BEFORE THE
STORMS

Chapter 14

Damnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn

Her hair looked fucking great and that wasn't bragging; that was the certified, documented truth. The natural products her girlfriend concocted were the straight out bomb-diggity. The herbal shampoo and black vanilla conditioner had her locs looking and feeling fresher than ever. Re-rolling her new growth and sitting under the dryer for fifty minutes with half inch hair rods had her locs looking fly. Normally wearing her locks in a pony tail, she braided the front part of her hair back about three inches and allowed the remainder of her roller set locs to fall free. They fell three inches past her shoulders. Spraying her locs with a bit of oil before giving them a good toss, she looked in the mirror and winked at herself knowing that she was one fly-looking chick. Now all she had to do was get dressed and once she did that, Mr. Mackenzie D. Roberts washers for the taking.

«»*

Two days before, he and David had helped install all of the bookcases that his carpenter friend

had custom-made. Mackenzie estimated that there was room for several thousand volumes of books throughout their home. His game room was now a library, but he couldn't even be bothered to care. Carolina would adore this place with its oversized chairs and cozy ambiance. It was a good thing that he had a tri-level house with good-sized rooms.

Just yesterday, Mackenzie and David sat in the living room admiring the work that the interior decorator had done. The man was a fucking genius; there was simply no other way to put it. He hadn't added that much—just a few accessories including throw pillows, floor-sized vases, a throw here and there, and vases of tulips on the dining room and end tables. As requested, he left David's room alone, leaving that for the three of them to do together although they did set up his furniture and select a beautiful off-white bedding ensemble that would soon be relegated to one of the guest rooms when David decided upon the theme of his room.

Yeah, the designer was better-than-good but his true brilliance was most evident in the master suite. The furniture was of the finest quality, but what brought it out was the bedroom ensemble. Raw silks done in deep red hues with cognac-colored accents gave the room a harem-look. And directly across from the bed was an erotic picture featuring a white male and a black woman.

Mackenzie had expected a good job as the designer's reputation had proceeded him. He didn't expect a job worthy of royalty, especially when he'd boldly told the designer that his soon-to-be-wife was black. He didn't tell the designer to shock him; he'd told him so that he could select items that would incorporate African-American tastes. His tastes didn't matter—he simply wanted Carolina in his home. As far as he was concerned he was designing his home, no his life, around her.

The designer didn't allow his admission to prejudice him. He merely rose to the challenge and worked magic. When Mackenzie walked into that room, he thought sex, love, forever.

David had looked at it and then at him and said one thing. "So, I'm going to have a lot of siblings, huh?"

He and the designer had simply looked at each other and nodded. Soon he would bring his woman here. And soon after that he was marrying her.

«»*

David sat quietly between his sister and his Aunt Georgia and looked on as his Aunt Virginia helped his Momma dress for their evening out *on the town*. All of the women were going out to do something and they all looked pretty. It was the first time

that he'd seen his Aunt Georgia wearing something other than her 'kick-some-freaking-a-word' outfits. He didn't think that the men were going to let their women go out like that. They were showing a whole lot of leg and stuff. Though they all looked pretty, he was concerned about his Momma. All of the other women were married, except for his Aunt Georgia but she could probably kill a whole bunch of people without even breaking a sweat. Though he was missing his hang out time with the men, he was staying put to keep an eye on things. He had to make sure that his Momma wasn't showing stuff.

With wide eyes he watched as his Momma got ready. Covered in a smock, his Momma sat still as his Aunt Virginia removed the rollers from her hair before pulling it back and arranging the curls. Before being claimed by his Momma he really hadn't been around women that much and he'd never been around them when they did women stuff. Awed by them all, but especially his Momma, he sat quietly and watched. He'd never seen his Momma's hair completely down and he couldn't stop looking. Using a pencil, his Aunt Virginia did some stuff to his Momma's lips and when she was done, his Momma had what Aunt Georgia called 'kiss me' lips. His Momma was beautiful before but with her hair down and her lips colored, she was...stunning, just like Aunt Virginia said.

His Momma was the last one to get dressed because she had to have help getting into her outfit. David wasn't sure what that meant, but he was staying right there to see. Hearing the women talk, he surmised—another word his Momma taught him—that they'd selected clothes to make Mackenzie pay attention to his Momma. Maybe they didn't realize it, but his dad was totally mental about his Momma. He'd never had a girlfriend but he was pretty sure that if his Momma was showing as much skin as the other women, dad was going to lose his freaking mind—even more than he already had. David had no doubt that he'd already managed to do that when it came to his Momma but he remained quiet. That was until he saw the outfit that his Momma had chosen.

Scandalous was the only word that came to mind when his Momma stepped through the bathroom door and into her bedroom. He knew that his eyes were riveted on how beautiful his Momma was as she was oohed and ahed over by his aunts and his big sister. His Momma was just too beautiful and in that moment he knew that he had to let his dad know **exactly** what was going on.

“May I be excused, Momma?” he asked softly as he stood.

He was head and shoulders taller than all of the women in the room but when they all turned to look at him, he felt enveloped in love. Though all four

women loved him, it was his Momma's gaze that gave him pause. With a concerned look on her face she approached him and rested her hand on his cheek as she looked up into his eyes.

"What's wrong, baby?" His Momma asked him gently.

David couldn't help but smile whenever he looked at his Momma. He didn't know that all of the women were transfixed by his smile as it transformed his face making him look like the beautiful boy that he was. If he only knew that his Momma fell in love with him a little bit more every time that he smiled, he'd walk around with a smile permanently plastered onto his face.

"Nothing's wrong, Momma. I just want to go hang out with the guys for a little bit." He said the first thing that came into his head.

His Momma nodded and began to walk out with him, but he stopped her with a hand on her shoulder and a shake of his head.

"It's okay, Momma. I'm going to take T-Rex and Raptor with me. I promise to stay close to the house," he reassured his Momma.

"Then I'll go with you" Georgia said standing.

He shook his head again. "No...um...it's okay Auntie Georgia, I'm just going to hang out with the guys at the site."

“Ah, I believe that our baby giant is like most males. He’s bored with watching us get all girlied-up,” Virginia said.

“Okay, then go on, baby,” his Momma said. “You know that you’re not a prisoner here—I’m not going to let you leave me—but you are free to go hang out with the guys whenever you want to provided that you let one of know where you’re at,” his Momma said as she hugged him.

With a smile and a slight blush he said, “You’re all beautiful, but my Momma is the most beautiful,” he qualified as he walked out of the door after seeing the smiles and hearing the echo of sighs from the women.

“That boy has good taste,” he heard his Momma say.

He was halfway through the door when he paused and turned to face the woman whom he loved beyond all others—his Momma. “I love you, Momma.”

“I love you too, baby. Now go on and have some fun.”

«»*

Mackenzie was leaning against one of the high wooden fences that dotted Samson’s property. Another week or so and the guest quarters would be

complete—under budget and before time, which was a good thing being that autumn was fast approaching. Winding down a busy day, he was talking with Samson and Tom in the twilight as David approached. His attention shifted to his son—accompanied by his ever-present dogs—who determinedly made his way closer.

“Hey son, what’s going on?” Mackenzie asked.

“You need to stop Momma,” were the first words out of David’s mouth.

All three men frowned at his comment.

“Explain son,” Mackenzie demanded as he straightened his big body. He was no longer casual about anything.

“Momma’s going out with the ladies tonight,” he began.

“That’s okay. Sometimes ladies do that,” Mackenzie explained relaxing.

“No, she’s dressed to...attract *men*,” David explained.

Mackenzie’s expression turned thoughtful. “Oh, really? And what makes you say that?”

“Auntie Georgia and Auntie Virginia bought her clothes that...show her legs and her...” David gestured around his chest.

Tom and Samson hid grins behind their hands as Mackenzie growled low.

“What?” he said, his eyes seeming to lighten with every word that his son spoke.

David looked almost desperate as he continued to explain. “You can see her legs and her up here” he said once again gesturing to his chest, “and she’s wearing...” he paused to take a deep breath. “Boots.”

“What’s wrong with wearing boots?” Mackenzie asked. “Boots actually cover most of a woman’s leg.”

“Noooooo,” he whined. “They’re not just boots. They’re boots that Auntie Georgia calls...” David swallowed not wanting to say the word that he’d been warned *not* to repeat by his Momma, aunts and his big sister.

Mackenzie’s eyes narrowed as he looked at his son’s face.

“What does she call them, son?” Mackenzie asked, his body practically vibrating with agitation as he waited for his son to further explain himself.

His eyes narrowed even more as he watched David look around as if he was about to get jumped by those ninjas that his momma always talked about.

Moving forward a bit more, David’s eyes were wide as he spoke in a conspirator’s whisper. “Eff me boots.”

All three men took a moment before the meaning of his words hit home. Tom coughed behind his hand and picked up his tool belt off of the fence post.

“Well, that is most definitely my cue to leave. Have fun boss,” Tom said with a grin as he strolled off to round up the crew.

Mackenzie didn’t answer; he merely grunted something.

After slapping him on the back and winking at David, Samson also made a quick exit most likely going to search out his wife who David had indicated was also showing skin.

“Where’s your momma, son?” Mackenzie asked David. His voice was strained as if speaking physically hurt him.

He watched as his son frowned before speaking.

“What are you going to do?” David asked him with what he guessed was suspicion.

Forcing his body to relax somewhat, Mackenzie adopted his trademark *don’t-worry-it’s-all-good* smile for his son. He gently cupped a hand over one of David’s shoulders before speaking.

“Well son, you’re going to have to do without your momma for the evening—and so are your aunts and sister. *I’m* going to take her out to dinner and court her good and proper.”

“You’re not going to let some other man push up on her like Auntie Georgia said are you?” David asked.

Mackenzie's hand briefly tightened on David's shoulder before he loosened his hold and once again attempted to adopt a casualness that he didn't feel.

"No son, there will be no other motherf—man," he amended, "pushing up on your momma but me," he said. His eyes were practically blazing with barely restrained need.

He watched as David finally grinned.

"Good, she's ours you know. I know that she gives you a hard time but I also know that you really care about Momma and I think you should make sure that you let her know that we're keeping her when you take her out tonight."

A slow smile spread over his face as Mackenzie looked at his son. He appreciated the passion that his son had regarding him claiming his momma.

"I will do my best, son," he pledged.

"No. Your best isn't good enough. You **have** to let Momma know that she's ours, otherwise some other man will come and take her away from us!"

The blaze in Mackenzie's dark green eyes reignited as he growled.

"The hell any man would *dare*. I will kill him." Mackenzie stopped mid-tirade not wanting to scare his son with his temper. Looking at the smile that settled over David's face, he knew that he didn't have to worry on that score.

“Son, go and tell your momma to be ready for me in a half of an hour.”

«»*

Smiling, David went inside to deliver his dad’s message. He knew that Momma was going to do some cussing, but he also knew that his Momma would go out with his dad. And if she didn’t he’d do the eyes, the lip, and the voice. She belonged to them and he didn’t want any other man trying to touch his Momma.

«»*

Carolina was talking junk with her sisters and baby girl and spritzing a little coconut-scented perfume behind her ear when David stuck his head around the door and asked if it was okay to come in.

“Baby, you’re always welcome.”

“What if your door is closed?” he asked.

“Then like in Luke 11:9 and in Matthew 7:7, knock, and it shall be opened to you,” she said.

She watched as her baby tentatively crossed the room.

“Momma, can I hug you?” he asked.

“Baby, you never have to ask if you can hug me,” she said as she reached out and embraced him.

"But you're all dressed-up," he began.

"I'll never be too dressed-up to hug my baby," she gently admonished.

"What if I'm dirty?" he asked.

"That's why they make baths, honey. Dirt washes off, but hugs don't. Now hug me some more and hush," she demanded.

"We want hugs too," his aunts and big sister demanded.

Watching her family embrace her son, Carolina couldn't help but smile.

"Did you get tired of the men so soon?" Carolina asked David when Georgia finally let him go.

"No, they were coming in. Momma, Dad says that you should be ready to go in half an hour," he began.

"I'm ready to go now," she began confused by David's words.

"Yeah, but he wants you ready to go with him," David clarified.

"I'm not going with him; I'm going out with the girls."

"Um, I told him about your outfit and he got all crazy-looking and started growling at everyone," he said.

"What did you tell him about my outfit, baby?" she asked smiling her ass off on the inside.

“I told him that you were you know, showing skin and stuff,” David mumbled.

Carolina waited while all of the women stopped laughing their asses off before speaking. “What ‘stuff’, baby?”

“I told him that you were dressed to attract men,” David admitted.

“Oh,” Carolina started at a loss for words.

“I don’t want other men to be looking at you. I only want dad to be looking at you. You should go out with him, Momma,” David said.

Before Carolina could respond, she watched as her baby gave her the whole spoiled baby package. That was, he employed the lips, the eyes, and the voice. Dammit, he and his sister were going to be on so much restriction...later...after she’d fucked Mackenzie into a coma.

“Since you asked, I will, but I’m still going to cuss him out,” she said.

“That’s fine, Momma. Thank you,” her baby said. Turning, he addressed Mariana and Virginia who were still giggling. “I told Samson and Uncle Mosé that y’all were showing skin also,” he said before smiling and leaving the room.

“Oh, damn. Come on then, Little David,” Georgia said as she rose from her perch on the bed. “It’s looking like we need to go out lest you get a lesson in biology that you don’t need just yet. Tell you what.

Let me change into some jeans and I'll take you into Boulder to get some pizza and catch a movie," she said as she ushered her nephew out of the room.

Carolina couldn't help the smile that crossed her face. First, her baby had already mastered the art of correctly using the Southern term 'y'all,' and second, he'd masterminded some alone time for her and that fine ass Mackenzie. She had planned to feign illness and have Mackenzie come get her from the steakhouse where they had reservations in order to finagle some alone time with him but now it looked like she was going to have the entire evening with Mr. Roberts. Oh, yeah. Digging around in her drawer, she grabbed an extra pair of panties and tucked them into her purse along with a handful of condoms. Oh, yeah, tonight was going to be so very, very good she thought as she exited the room.

«»*

Mackenzie showered in seven minutes flat. He used another seven minutes to run a blow dryer over his hair. Normally he wouldn't have bothered with drying his shoulder-length locks but he didn't want his dress shirt to get wet and besides, he wanted his hair to be nice in case Carolina felt like running her hands through his mane. Dressing in charcoal-grey pin-striped pants, a crisp white dress shirt and a red

tie, he took a moment to look at himself in the mirror. He wasn't vain but he knew that he looked good. Fumbling with his tie, he straightened it just so. Not normally a tie man, he wore one tonight because he'd heard Carolina tell David that she preferred a man to wear a tie when dressing formally. If a tie was what she preferred, than a tie was what she'd get. He was standing beside his truck and awaiting the imminent arrival of his woman well before the allotted half hour that he'd given her.

He wasn't disappointed as Carolina stepped through the front doors of the house. No, he wasn't disappointed at all but he almost had a fucking heart attack. Shaking his head in disbelief, he quelled the urge to let loose a yell and drag his beautiful woman into the house and fuck her pregnant. His eyes drank in the image of the most beautiful woman that he'd ever seen as she sashayed her beautiful self to him. It took every one of his brain cells to keep from drooling on the spot as he took in what she wasn't wearing—that being a shirt that sufficiently covered those glorious breasts—and what she was wearing—that being those incredible boots. Damn, he was going to send that boot maker a thank you note and possibly a picture of the offspring that he planned on making tonight.

When their son had come out and informed him that Carolina was wearing an outfit that showed

her body, he didn't know exactly what to expect. Originally he'd thought that David had simply been overwhelmed seeing his momma outside of the role of parent, but then he'd seen her. David hadn't been wrong to be concerned about letting his momma out of the house without him dressed as she was. It wasn't that Carolina was dressed inappropriately—it was that she was just too damn fine to be wearing that outfit without him by her side to warn off other males.

Mackenzie stopped and offered up thanks to God. He then made a quick mental note to thank his woman's crazy ass sisters, her niece, and his son. He had no idea how Little David had achieved it but he wasn't going to question his good fortune as Carolina's exotic scent flooded his nostrils. Straightening his big body, he tried to contain his dick as it hardened painfully in his dress trousers and began to throb in time to the sound of Carolina's fuck-me boots as she approached him.

«»*

OH, FUCK, was the first thing that came through Carolina's mind as she caught sight of the fine ass motherfucker leaning against his truck as cool and casual as anything. *OH, YEAH!* her already creaming pussy sighed as her eyes flitted over

Mackenzie's big body cased in elegant dark trousers and a crisp white dress shirt—with a tie. How the man managed to look so fucking good in such a simple outfit Carolina would never know. He wore that outfit like he did everything else: so fucking good.

His hair gleamed wheaten gold and his masculine beauty was highlighted by the setting sun. His eyes were as bright. In fact, they seemed to glow. Fighting the urge to sigh, she watched him watch her noting that he watched her like a hungry wolf watched a juicy meal walk into its line of sight. She didn't know what he was thinking, but she did know that she couldn't help but feel like the sexiest woman alive as Mackenzie's eyes devoured her. Tossing her hair over one shoulder she smiled inside as she noted the change in Mackenzie.

Though Mackenzie spent an inordinate amount of time watching her, this time was different from all of the other times that he watched her. She couldn't explain how, she just *knew* that it was different. The sexual tension literally wafted off of Mackenzie in waves. Carolina had to hide her true emotions behind the air of *put-out-ness* at his highhanded way of expecting her to do as *he* ordered, but damn if she didn't want to throw that big motherfucker down and fuck his brains out!

«»*

Mackenzie opened the door for his woman as she finally made her way to him. Having her up close, he took the time to slowly peruse her starting from the tip of those fuck-me boots that he wanted to feel digging into his shoulders later that evening. Growling low under his breath, his eyes drifted up slowly as he took in the short and sexy skirt that hugged his woman's hips like he would be doing later. The blood red bustier held his woman's breasts lovingly and pushed them high up on her frame. Her breasts served as a temptation to any man who had eyes, who was over the age of consent and just short of being a corpse. Hell, Mackenzie was pretty positive that his woman could bring a man back from the brink of death with one flash of those soft and silky mounds. Shaking his head, his eyes focused in on her succulent lips. He could damn near taste the lip gloss that she was wearing. Those lips were tempting without the swipe of gloss, but now they looked as he imagined her pussy lips would when he was done feasting that evening—slick with his woman's sweet juices and parted before he thrust his—.

Mackenzie slammed on the brakes in his head not needing to finish that thought if he wanted to ever walk upright again. The way that his dick was twitching in his trousers warned him to think other

thoughts. Complying, he thought of Siberian winters, the Polar Ice Cap, and Glacier Bay in an attempt to calm his thundering heart and painfully throbbing dick that wanted to be buried deep inside of his sweet, tempting beautiful woman **NOW!** His thoughts were interrupted by his woman speaking.

“What the fuck do you want Mackenzie?” Carolina’s snapped question had Mackenzie grinning. Holding out a big hand to her he answered.

“You, but first, we’ll dine out then we’ll discuss all of the ways that I want you. Now you can get in the truck on your own accord or I can grab you up and put you in there myself.”

Mackenzie’s grin, though predatory, was full of humor as he watched the passion ignite in his woman’s eyes. He knew that he was in for a cussing and he’d gladly take it...while she was on her back screaming for him to fuck her harder, faster, longer. He was sure that she’d snuck in some kind of dig but he couldn’t even be bothered to care about the insults that she’d slung at him; he was only concerned that she was doing it whilst getting her fine ass up into his truck. Closing the door, he walked around to the driver’s side. Looking up, he found their entire family watching them and grinning in encouragement. While his son gave him a thumbs up sign and mouthed ‘she’s ours’, Georgia held two fingers to her eyes and then pointed them at him. He knew that

gesture for what it was. Georgia wasn't simply saying that she was watching him; she was warning him that she'd happily kill him if she found him lacking. Mackenzie put his hand over his heart, promising without words that he'd take care of Carolina. Throwing one more glance at his family, he bowed his head in thanks and gallantly climbed into his truck.

«»*

Carolina would've pulled out her own seat and sat down if Mackenzie hadn't stayed her movements by putting his big, rough-worked hands on her hips.

"Easy, Sweetness. Let me get this for you," he purred as he momentarily pushed his hard dick into her back before pulling out the chair.

By some miracle, she gracefully slipped into the seat which Mackenzie held out. It was a miracle because all she could focus on was how fine Mackenzie was; how big he was; how solid he was; how fucking good he smelled; how good his dick had felt pressed against her back. Finally peeling her eyes off of all of the fineness in front of her, she looked around the upscale restaurant instantly recognizing it for what it was: stage one in Mackenzie's conquest of her. Though she rarely dined out she instantly knew that this was a five-star restaurant. If she

hadn't been distracted by Mackenzie's closeness, she would've appreciated the ambiance. Decorated with Spanish tile, exotic flora, original artwork, and stained glass, the restaurant had a waiting list that rivaled the season ticket holder wait list for her favorite football team.

Just when she thought that she'd got her pussy under control, Mackenzie leaned down and nuzzled his nose into the crease of her neck. She couldn't stop the shiver of excitement that spiked through her body when he inhaled deeply before gently biting her earlobe. Her nipples tightened painfully at the small gesture from the big man but she held herself still so as not to allow Mackenzie the satisfaction of knowing the overwhelming effect that he had on her body.

With one last bite and a quick palm of her breast, the fine bastard moved around her and took his seat across from her. Though the lighting was dimmed to increase the romantic atmosphere, Mackenzie's handsomeness was obvious. He wasn't handsome by pretty boy standards; he was handsome in a rugged way. Everything about him screamed 'MAN,' and subsequently everything feminine in her screamed 'TAKE HIM.' Snared in his intense gaze, she could only watch in silence as he told her wordlessly how much he desired her. She held his gaze for as long as her panties could take the searing heat and promises that poured from those

emerald green orbs—which wasn't long. Feeling her panties fill with her cream, she dropped her eyes to the menu. Unfortunately, she couldn't read with eyes clouded over with want.

"Everything all right, Sweetness?" Mackenzie asked her casually as if she wasn't literally creaming all over her seat.

Squeezing her thighs together in an attempt to stop herself from jumping over the table and beating Mackenzie's fine ass to the floor, she took a deep breath. It didn't really help but it gave her enough to work with.

"I'm fine thank you," she answered using her haughtiest tone, which came out just a little too husky for her liking.

Making a growling noise that couldn't be mistaken for anything other than appreciation, Mackenzie answered.

"Yes you are, Sweetness, and thank you for dressing for our night out tonight."

Carolina tried her best not to react to the words that Mackenzie had purred. She also tried her best not to react when he took one of her hands in his and sensuously stroked his thumb across the back of her hand. *Wasn't there some kind of law about what he was doing?* Carolina felt instant heat from Mackenzie's touch. It radiated from her hand and spread throughout her sensitized body before set-

tling in the one place that didn't need any reminders of how incredibly fucking hot Mackenzie was...and how much she wanted, needed, desired, and craved this man.

Snatching her hand away she expected to see Mackenzie's frustrated glare. Instead, the big sexy motherfucker had the nerve to look *happy* about her reaction! She had a string of cusses on her lips but the fine bastard spoke before they spilled out.

"I apologize, Sweetness..." he drawled.

Damn right you should apologize! that one brain cell that wasn't focusing on Mackenzie shouted.

"...for failing to tell you straight away how beautiful you look, but you had me so stunned that I could barely form thought," Mackenzie complimented.

Carolina blinked then stared at him mutely. *Dammit!* She meant to be all confident and nonchalant about this man. Oh fuck it. *Who was she kidding?* She wanted Mackenzie like she wanted her next breath...maybe more than that. After all, she could hold her breath for a long time but she didn't know how much longer she could go without the fine motherfucker sitting across from her. *Dammit!* Her panties were useless. She could feel the cream pooling in her scant underwear.

“Ah...okay...um...I’m just going to...the...” Carolina tried to think of the word for that place one went to when they had to relieve themselves. Truth be told, she was struggling for any place that she could go and escape Mackenzie’s cream-inducing gaze, but her need was so great that she could barely think. It was a good thing that she didn’t have to rely on her own thinking to breathe otherwise she would’ve passed out before she even got in his truck.

She saw one of Mackenzie’s eyebrows rise as he waited for her comment. Dropping her menu on the table, she fumbled around in her brain looking for any word that would make sense. Ah yeah, that was it...the bathroom. Finally she stood.

“The bathroom. I’m going to the bathroom. I’ll be right back,” she said. She was still breathless but at least she’d remembered the name of the place. Hurrying away from the table, she missed the predatory gaze of the only man who’d blown the tight reign she’d had on her composure all to hell and back. Her composure was as far gone as her red and black lace panties.

Carolina stepped into the outer area of the restroom, which was blessedly empty. Shakily, she walked over to the wide mirror and looked at herself. Admittedly, she looked good. Actually, she looked damned good, but she also looked needy. Using one of the fine linen drying towels, she wet one and

dabbed at her feverish skin. Closing her eyes, she patted the cool towel against her throat. She was wondering if she should attempt to change her panties when she was sure that all she'd manage to do was set a new land-speed record for ruining two pairs of panties. Lost in thought, she didn't hear the door open. It was only when she felt big hands grip her hips that she emerged from her reverie. Eyes flying open, she was ready to do battle until she realized just whose body those beautiful hands were attached to—Mackenzie. Taking a shaky breath she dropped the towel and stared at the reflection of her and Mackenzie...and gasped as she felt a fresh load of cream fill her already soaked panties.

Pressing his big body into hers, neither said anything. Then, they didn't have to. Their eyes and body said it all. They were beautiful together. *How could she have wasted so much time worrying about the racial differences?* The picture of them together verified what her heart had long ago told her: this was her man...and she was his woman. Closing her eyes she said a prayer of thanks and then promptly lost herself in the feel of Mackenzie's strong arms. Feeling him grind his dick against her, she opened her eyes and looked again at their reflection. She couldn't help but notice the heat blazing from Mackenzie's dark green eyes...or how good his full lips looked. Pressing her ass closer into him she

smiled when she heard his sharp intake of breath. Feeling him stay her hips, she smiled. *Oh, yeah, motherfucker, I own you.* Two can play this game.

“Panties,” she heard him rumble.

Carolina blinked. *What?* Then she saw Mackenzie hold out one of his big hands in front of her. He didn’t mean...no...he couldn’t...no...*oh no he didn’t!* He did **not** expect her to take her panties off in the bathroom and give them to him!? *Could he?* He didn’t say anything else; he merely waited for her to obey his command. And that was exactly what that was. She was debating whether to cuss him out or rip her panties off and impale herself on his hard dick when she heard someone coming towards the door. Involuntarily, she pressed closer to Mackenzie when she heard the bathroom door open.

Mackenzie never took his eyes from hers when he yelled.

“Get out!” he ordered.

Whoever it was did as he bid and they were once again alone. Carolina’s breathing was choppy as Mackenzie took matters into his more-than-capable big, rough-worked hands. She could only stand stock still and watch as he gently kicked her legs further apart before bending and stripping her of her panties. She was sure that her breathing stopped as Mackenzie touched her intimately in his quest to get his treasure. Having secured it, she watched as

Mackenzie stuffed them in his pocket. He didn't need to sniff them for the room was immediately flooded with the scent of her arousal. The aroma of her essence slammed through both their senses, and before she could do more than gasp, Mackenzie strummed his thick fingers through the soft wet folds of her pussy. Leaning her head back against his wide hard chest, Mackenzie growled.

"Watch me," he demanded.

Carolina's eyes opened wide as she felt two of Mackenzie's thick fingers slip into her creaming pussy and slowly wiggle their way past her engorged clit and deep into her wet and aromatic center. Her eyes were bright from the sight of Mackenzie fingering her wetness and Mackenzie's eyes were even brighter as her eyes met his. Her gloss-slicked lips parted as Mackenzie's thumb massaged around her clit as his fingers delved deeper into her clutching, hot pussy. Before Carolina could orgasm Mackenzie pulled his fingers from her body. Shuddering from pleasure and frustration, she glared angrily at him in the mirror. And before she could cuss him out, she watched as he lifted her skirt, fell to his knees and proceeded to lap up her orgasm. Oh, damn, the man had a talented, talented tongue.

Biting her lip, Carolina watched as Mackenzie rose and licked her cream from his fingers. Mesmerized, her eyes ignited as she watched his long, tal-

ented tongue wrap around his thick fingers that were slick with her essence. Mackenzie moaned and his dick thumped against her back as he continued to clean his fingers. Mackenzie shoved his thumb into her mouth—the same thumb that had pleased her clit just moments ago. Carolina sucked the digit into her mouth and proceeded to show Mackenzie just how *good* she could suck.

«»*

Mackenzie had watched as Carolina wrestled with her desire. He knew that was what she was doing for he was doing the same thing. It took everything he had to remain seated when everything in him was beating at him to take her...hard, repeatedly, now.

He'd smiled when she'd stammered out that she needed to use the bathroom. She didn't need to use the restroom; she needed breathing room. And he needed her. When she rose from her seat and made her way to the facilities, he'd licked his lips. He'd meant to sit back and simply enjoy the view but then he'd smelled her arousal and everything within him went still...right before he went primal. His woman was a walking siren song and he was the sailor only too happy to walk into whatever danger separated her from him.

Rising, he followed her not caring where they were, simply needing to eliminate the separation. He had waited long enough for his woman. And make no mistake about it...Carolina Gilchrist-Williams—soon-to-be Carolina Gilchrist-Williams Roberts—was his.

When he'd followed her into the restroom, he'd only had one thing on his mind: Carolina. Witnessing her struggling through her want had only served to make him harder. Walking behind her, he'd pulled her into his arms. When she'd snuggled against him everything had stopped.

Looking at their reflection in the mirror, he'd been riveted. Hell, he was riveted to every part of her and as beautiful as she was, he was riveted to her mind and heart most of all. How could he not be in love with a woman who loved so hard, so deeply, so thoroughly and without reservation? How could he not be a slave to a woman whose mind knew no boundaries? He couldn't, and though Carolina was everything that he'd never had in a woman, he didn't bother fighting what he felt for her. Fighting it was useless and the only thing he'd had room in his heart to do was love this woman.

Perhaps if she hadn't ground her womanly curves into him he could've backed off. But she did grind those beautiful, voluptuous curves into him and he'd lost the little bit of control he'd been hang-

ing onto. Inhaling her aroma, he'd growled out a demand for her panties. When she'd simply stood there looking as if she were debating whether to comply or punch him, he'd taken matters in his own hands.

The scent of her arousal had flooded his nostrils. Commanding her to watch him, he'd sunk his fingers into her heat and stroked her to the brink of orgasm before going down on his knees and helping himself to some sweet, hot Carolina. Never in his thirty-seven years had he tasted anything sweeter. Before that moment he'd kissed her, touched her, and stroked her. He'd even tasted her essence, but tasting it from the source had blown him away...and pushed her over the edge with him.

Rising, he'd licked her essence from his fingers before inserting his thumb into her mouth. Watching her succulent lips close around the digit had caused his dick to start twitching. Carolina was always beautiful but in that moment she was indicative of every fantasy that he'd ever imagined.

Knowing that he had to stop before he took her in the bathroom, he pulled his thumb from her mouth and pulled her to him. Tucking her head against his chest, he knew that she could feel his need. Holding her tightly, he struggled to get his body under control, but then she breathed his name, pulled his head down and kissed him.

He couldn't speak. He couldn't breathe. He could barely think, but when she whispered her desires he complied.

"Take me home, Mackenzie."

Lifting her into his arms, he exited the bathroom. Breathing her name, he kissed her all the way back to their table. Handing the surprised waiter some hundred dollar bills, he strode to his truck with his future in his arms, unconcerned that they hadn't ordered and unaware that their hot interlude had taken place in the men's room.

Chapter 15

And Love Is the Greatest of These

Mackenzie didn't remember the drive home. He was simply ecstatic to arrive. Lifting his love into his arms he carried her over the threshold of their home. Setting her down on the spacious granite kitchen island, Mackenzie stepped between her thighs and settled his hands on her womanly hips. For endless moments they simply looked at each other. Words were not needed and neither of them was willing to shatter the silence when they could easily read not only their mutual desire, but their future in each other's eyes.

Closing his eyes Mackenzie leaned down and slowly inhaled her fragrance. Carolina smelled like summer—a heady mix of exotic flowers, fleshy fruits, coconut, and vanilla—when the land was ripe; she looked like the best of spring and fall when nature showed off its splendor. Most of all, Carolina felt like she was *his*. She was just as vital as his heart or the blood that coursed through him keeping him alive.

Leaning in, he sucked on her succulent bottom lip before gently settling his lips atop hers. He felt her mouth open under his. Accepting her invitation,

he took his time exploring her mouth. Savoring her sweetness he poured his wishes into their kiss.

Feeling her hands tunnel through his hair, he pulled her closer, detesting even the air that came between them. Groaning, he delved deeper leaving no part of her mouth untouched. He held nothing back—there was no need to for soon she would know all of his secrets. His need evident by the shaking of his hands, the staccato beat of his heart, the hardness of his body. She was his strength and his weakness...and all of the in-betweens.

Pulling back, he looked into her eyes and spoke the words in his heart. “Welcome home, Sweetness.”

* «*» *

Carolina didn't remember the drive home, but she'd never forget their arrival. Mackenzie carried her over the threshold as if she were his bride. Carrying her into the bangingest kitchen that she'd ever seen, he set her on the kitchen island and wordlessly bared his soul. Holding nothing back, he allowed his need to show in his eyes. In that moment, she'd realized that was how he'd always looked at her...and her soul gasped, and her lips parted so that she could accept his kiss.

Mackenzie's kiss was laced with forever and she swallowed them all accepting his entreaties for

what they were: honest. Gathering his dreams, she enfolded them in her love and tucked them into the safety of her heart. Savoring his kiss, she reveled in his strength, his honesty, and his passion knowing that it was his gift to her...and knowing that she'd never be the same...and not wanting to go back to what she was. Without him she was simply a double x; with him she was woman.

Pulling him closer, she breathed yeses into his mouth knowing that she could no longer fight his love...and not wanting to. Mackenzie was hers and she wasn't letting him go. He made her want to do more than fight the power and he made her feel things other than righteous indignation. Mackenzie made her consider all of the soft things within her...and he made her appreciate everything about herself. He made her possible for it was his rib from whence she came. With Mackenzie she didn't have to prove anything; she only had to let him love her.

Wrapping her boot-clad legs around his waist, she held him as tightly as she could, letting him know that she was exactly where she wanted to be, needed to be, was destined to be. Hearing him welcome her home, she let the tears flow unchecked down her face and poured her trust into her response.

Feeling Carolina wrap her legs around him—those long, kick-me-where-it-hurts legs clad in those make-me-a-baby boots—Mackenzie groaned and between kisses asked Carolina to name her wants.

“Command me, Sweetness. Tell me what it is that you desire.”

“You, Mackenzie. I want you.”

“Don’t you know that you’ve always had me? Always, Sweetness.”

“And now that you have me what are you going to do with me?” Carolina whispered.

“What I’ve done since the first moment that I laid eyes on you,” he drawled. “Love you.”

“Oh, Mackenzie,” she purred as she rubbed her luscious form against him.

Taking her hands in his, he grabbed two of the thick, downy throw pillows from the window seat and placed them behind her on the island. Retaining eye contact, he removed his handcrafted, black leather cowboy boots and socks before unbuttoning his shirt and tossing it in the direction of his footwear. Standing before his woman, he reached out and took her hand. Dropping a kiss in her palm he placed it above his heart.

“For you,” he said in a voice that literally shook with his emotion. “Always.”

He watched as Carolina's eyes went wide with wonder before sparking with her passion. His ego preened when he heard her soft gasp that crested with the acceleration of her pulse before turning into a sigh.

"Thank you, Mackenzie."

"You're welcome, Sweetness. Now lie back," he instructed as he gently settled her atop the pillows on the granite island. Pulling up one of the bar stools that surrounded the island, he gently pulled her down until her core was even with the ledge. Placing those scandalous boots over his shoulders, he said grace and began to eat. Determinedly, he bent his head and slowly inhaled her fragrance. She smelled like temptation. Parting her delicate folds with his thick fingers, he extended his tongue and gently lapped at the juices that his attentions brought forth. Using her moans of pleasure as his guide he feasted upon her. His tongue firm, he teased her clit. Gently biting down, he licked the delicate flesh that surrounded it eliciting a chorus of moans, sighs, and curses. He smiled as he ate, knowing that he was working her good when she shouted out her demands, stiffened and then screamed out her pleasure before collapsing in a heap atop the pillows. Lifting his head he watched the aftermath of her orgasm, reveling in her beauty, her openness and the sounds of her pleasure.

Never before had he considered being called a fine, pussy-eating bastard a compliment, but he knew that's exactly what that was. What his Carolina didn't know as she lay on the pillows shivering in the aftermath of her orgasm, was that he wasn't done by a long shot. He'd had months to construct and fine tune his fantasies about eating her on his kitchen island. Hell, if his kitchen hadn't had an island he would've remodeled it and had one installed. Who was he kidding? If need be, he would've had a whole new house built to accommodate this particular fantasy. He was simply glad that the island was large enough to accommodate his woman comfortably. Being eight feet long by five feet wide and under intricate lighting, he could feast on her in comfort and under awesome lighting. He could imagine, over the years, eating every kind of dessert off of her...starting with that damned sweet potato pie. Thinking about that pie pushed him closer to the edge.

Pushing his thoughts back, he closed his eyes and returned to his task. Lick, flick, nip, bite, suck, lick some more. He repeated this pattern countless times. He had but one goal in mind—to make Carolina as crazy for him as he was for her. Utilizing his length, he licked her pink sweetness with only one swipe of his tongue. Curling his tongue he quickly flicked it over her clit before gently nipping around

it. Holding her thighs more firmly, he gently bit down before sucking it deep into his mouth to take away the small sting that his gentle bite had caused. Returning to licking, he started the process again and again until she'd screamed herself hoarse from cussing him, instructing, him, begging him for his big dick.

"Mackenzie, you pussy-eating bastard, fuck me! Fuck me! Fuck me!" she screamed as she gripped the sides of his head between her powerful and well-developed thighs and dug those fuck-me boots into his back.

Her demands were music to his ears but he wanted to hear the rest of her song before he complied. Putting her thighs higher up on his shoulders, he went down harder. Pushing his face in as close as he could get it, he licked harder, sucked harder, faster, longer. Parting her wider with his thick fingers, he stroked into her as he drank from her. Using his other hand, he pressed on the soft flesh of her stomach and growled into her pussy pushing her closer to the edge and himself to the brink. Only when he was sure that he'd wear permanent scars on his back from her boots did he cease. Extricating his hair from her grip, he stood and looked at her. His face covered with her juices, he licked his fingers and his lips and spoke.

"My compliments to the Chef for that meal."

«»*

Hearing Mackenzie promise that he was going to love her as he had from the first moment he saw her caused Carolina's heart to double-time it. Taking a moment to catch her breath, she watched with interest as Mackenzie retrieved pillows from the window seat, and wondered what he was about. Tossing them behind her he undressed and she watched with eyes lit with desire, no longer caring about the pillows or even seeing the kitchen that elicited gasps of appreciation. Watching Mackenzie undress was a treat that she planned to savor. Though she'd seen him damn near naked, had felt his big dick against her on multiple occasions and had made out with him, this was different. This was different because nothing was going to stop this moment. And when Mackenzie had kissed her palm and placed it over his heart and made yet another pledge, she knew that she wanted this moment more than any other.

Thanking him, she allowed him to lay her back on the pillows. Shivering from need, shaking from anticipation, she gasped when he slid her down the island and began feasting on her. She'd had a sample of that tongue in the restaurant but that had been a teaser. Feeling the swipe of Mackenzie's long tongue

on her clit had caused her to damn near buck off of the island. Oh. Damn. Mackenzie ate pussy like nobody's business. Thrusting her hips closer to his face, she'd dug her boots into his back and flooded the kitchen with the sounds of her feel-goodness.

As if in a dream, she'd heard herself. Later, she'd wonder at the picture that she made, but right now she couldn't be bothered. She'd simply closed her eyes and moved her hips to the strokes of Mackenzie's talented tongue. Arching her back, she'd dug her boots into his back urging him on. Feeling her orgasm approach, she'd gripped the sides of the island for leverage. Though it was solid granite she worried about breaking it. Feeling him suck her clit into his mouth, she'd let her worries slip away. Mackenzie was eating her pussy so good that she'd buy him a new countertop if need be, but he couldn't stop licking her, sucking her, nipping her.

When her first orgasm crashed over her, she'd collapsed back onto the pillows, exhausted, sated, amazed. Silently chanting Mackenzie's name in her head, she'd tried to moan out her thanks but she didn't have the words. And even if she'd found them he didn't give her a chance. Mackenzie dove right back in and gave her pleasure atop pleasure. Moving her hips, she'd clapped her hands, her wooden bracelets clacking together providing bass to the song that she was singing to Mackenzie. She'd cussed

him good; she'd gripped him harder; she'd tore his back up with the heels of those fuck-me boots. Before it was over, she'd re-christened the boots the fuck-me-right-now-you-fine-pussy-eating-bastard boots. Still, Mackenzie did not cease. In fact, he'd only intensified his ministrations saturating her with pleasure. Head thrashing to the side, hands clapping, bracelets jiggling, heart thundering, thighs grabbing, boots digging, torso undulating, throat almost raw, she'd went primal and screamed in soprano and roared in bass.

She'd heard a song and danced to it. Shoulders moving like she was about to break down the Harlem Shake; hips pumping like she was about to take it back to the Motherland and do a tribal dance; boots gripping like she was about to start walking, she'd chanted along with the symphony of drums playing some tight rhythm and blues.

"Ah, ah, ah. Ah, ah, ah. Ah, ah, ah."

As Mackenzie licked, sucked, delved, pressed, and gave everything of himself, she'd gave him all of her in return. She'd screamed out her pleasure, she'd screamed out cusses, she'd screamed herself out. Feeling her orgasm all the way to her toes, she'd threw her hands up to the heavens as if in supplication right before breaking into a language that she'd only heard old women in church use in praise.

«»*

Rising from his seat he lifted Carolina and carried her to their bedroom. Sitting her on the bed, he bent over and kissed her before stepping away. Quickly undoing his belt he unzipped and allowed his dress pants to fall to the floor revealing what he wore underneath them—nothing.

Pulling her to him, he rested his hands on her hips and took her mouth in an unhurried kiss. Hearing her moan deep in her throat only served to kick his ardor up another notch. Though his blood was boiling for her he didn't want to rush this moment, knowing that they'd have only one first time.

Stepping back, he sat on the bed pulling her into his arms. Tunneling his fingers through her locs he marveled at the soft texture and the length. Gently, he turned her to him and simply caressed her soft skin, nuzzling the area between her ear and her collarbone. He touched her in between nips but he didn't undress her; he was saving that.

Feeling her attempts to touch him, he stayed her hands.

"Let me touch, too," she pouted.

Smiling, he stood up, knowing that he couldn't deny her. After all, he did belong to her.

"Let me undress you," he rasped as he slowly circled her. Pausing at her back he pulled her into his

embrace and nuzzled her neck. Slowly divesting her of the sheer, black lace thing, he kissed a path down the exposed skin.

“I can do this faster,” she whispered.

“I don’t want to do this faster; I want to unwrap you at my leisure being that you wrapped yourself up so nicely for me,” he said.

“Bastard,” she said without any real acrimony.

Chuckling, he did the same for the other side before throwing the garment in the direction of the chair. Slowly spinning her around, he took a deep breath noting the fact that she was laced into the corset. “Goodness,” he whispered.

“Am...am I,” she began. “Do you like what you see?” he heard her shyly ask.

Was she fucking kidding? Hell yeah he liked what he saw. Actually he fucking loved it. Being that she was almost six feet tall in her bare feet, with those boots on she was a good 6’2”. He had over six feet of beautiful standing before him. Her locs cascaded down her back and the blood red corset lovingly hugged her curves as they pushed up her generous breasts. The skirt showed just enough thigh to make him salivate at the possibilities and the boots...oh those fucking boots. “I *love* everything that I see,” he responded as he undid her skirt and allowed it to fall to the floor. Waiting for her to step out of it he tossed that somewhere.

He watched as she turned her back to him, presumably for him to unlace her. Swallowing his growl, he said no and herded her to the bed.

“Mackenzie?” she asked.

“Yes, Sweetness?” he answered.

“Aren’t you going to unlace me?”

“Yes, Sweetness,” he drawled...sometime during our lovemaking, I suspect that I will.

“Oh,” she breathed.

“So you like the corset?” she asked with a smile.

“Oh yeah, Sweetness, I like it so much that I’ll only allow you to wear it here in our room.”

“What about the boots?”

“Oh they’re staying on. Like the corset, they’re restricted to this room. Now get on your back,” he ordered.

«»*

Carolina watched Mackenzie watch her...and she smiled a woman’s smile. From the expression on his face and the undisguised want in his eyes, she knew that Mackenzie was appreciating all 5’11” and 190 pounds of her. She reveled in his desire and in his touch. Goodness, she thought as she allowed her head to fall back. Biting her lip she sighed, loving the way that he touched her. Mackenzie touched her like

she was his favorite everything and he didn't know where to begin.

When he started undressing her, her heart sped up anticipating having this man. Nothing she said or did led him to rush. Mackenzie took his time and made every second a treat. At first she worried that he wouldn't like what he saw, and when she'd voiced her fear it was the look in his eyes more so than his words that returned her confidence. Though his lips said that he loved what he saw, his eyes asked *'what the fuck is wrong with you? How could you ask such an asinine thing?'*

She couldn't stop the joy that settled over her face anymore than she could stop the passion that blossomed within her. Everything the man did turned her on because everything that he did was for her. When he finally led her back to the bed and laid her down, her need was literally pouring from her core.

«»*

Mackenzie looked down at his woman and knew that he'd waited the whole of his life for this woman, for this moment. Placing one hand on her hip he supported his great weight with his other arm and slowly eased inside of her. Though he'd brought her to pleasure many times he still went slow want-

ing, needing, to savor every second of coming home. Time seemed to stop; sound and his surroundings faded; and, his whole world became the woman under him. When finally he was fully within her, he could only stop and thank God for this gift. Closing his eyes he sent up his prayers before opening his eyes and looking at his destiny.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m the best that I’ve ever been,” she answered.

Smiling, he leaned down and kissed her before moving within her. Slowly he stroked in her, enjoying the sensation of her tight pussy and her uninhibited response to his lovemaking. His dick shouted its joy at finally being where it had longed to be. His heart sang songs of thanksgiving for the gift of Carolina’s trust. His mind made plans to keep her by whatever means necessary.

Every time he plunged into her he felt like he was home. She felt so good that he didn’t want to back out. He was almost content to stay still in her for the rest of their lives. Damn, she felt so good, so good, so good, he chanted.

Lifting her up a little, he slowly unlaced her corset needing to be skin-to-skin. When he finished the task he drew her into his arms and savored the feel of her softness against his hardness. Reaching down he drew a nipple into his mouth. Never ceasing

his unhurried strokes he placed one of her thighs on his shoulder and sped up his strokes, needing to release inside of her as much as he needed his next breath.

He heard himself growling as the pleasure was so great. Her moans only served to excite him. His name on her lips was a challenge to make love to her so good that she'd know that she'd never had better. Switching to her other nipple and placing her other leg up on his shoulder he kicked his body into over-drive and stroked harder, longer, deeper.

Using the sounds of her pleasure as a guide, he demanded all that she had. He gave her no quarter wanting her surrender, needing to hear his name screamed out in pleasure. Holding his weight up on both of his arms, he bottomed out with every stroke. She was working him, causing him to tap into strength that he didn't know that he possessed, but it was worth it. Every moan was like a spur in his side; her boots digging into his shoulders a testament to her own need.

He was getting close. Sweat poured off of his body. His heartbeat sounded like a herd of thundering horses. In those moments he felt more animal than man. He felt like a great warhorse charging into battle, fighting for the freedom of his people; he was a lion in his prime racing across the grassy plains of the Serengeti; he was the great bald eagle soaring

across the sky. And Carolina—Carolina was freedom, vast plains, cloudless blue skies, and his purpose in life.

Watching Carolina succumb to her pleasure and knowing that he was giving it to her broke him. Hearing the woman that he loved above all others scream out his name as she dug trenches in his heavily muscled arms with her nails triggered his own release. Pleasure shot up his back and spread throughout his body. In that moment he felt invincible. He knew that he would never have another woman. He couldn't have another woman because he belonged to Carolina. He was a slave to her happiness, her wishes, and her dreams. She had colonized his heart and now everything he was, everything he owned, belonged to her.

«»*

Carolina laid back and let Mackenzie love her. After being slowly worked up over the last two months, she was close to boiling. He'd worked her up so good and now he was finally giving her what her body, heart, and mind were demanding—he was giving her all of him. Feeling him enter her, she'd thrust her hips up and sighed out his name.

Oh, goodness, he felt so good sliding into her. It was as if her body had been nothing but an empty

vessel until now. In this moment Mackenzie was filling her not simply with his impressive dick, but with his love, passion, and promises. Filling her completely, instead of pounding into her, he'd stopped and asked how she was. Smiling, she'd meant it when she'd said that she'd never been better. She'd never been...until him.

When Mackenzie had started moving within her, it was as if she was riding a warm ocean wave. He'd rocked her with every slow thrust. When he'd pulled back her body followed, demanding his strength, his warmth, his love.

She could do nothing but moan when he'd unlaced her corset and held her within the circle of his love. When he'd placed her leg over his shoulder and began suckling her breasts she could only moan out her pleasure and sigh his name. Mackenzie was loving her so good, so good, so damn good.

Lost in the pleasure that Mackenzie was heaping upon her, it was all that she could do to keep pace with his demands. Seeing the unleashed passion in his eyes and the intensity on his face, she'd knew that he wasn't going to give her an inch...and she didn't want any leeway. Right now she wanted it hard, hard, harder. She'd wanted him to hold nothing back...and he didn't.

Once Mackenzie put both of her thighs over his heavily muscled shoulders, she'd known that he'd

surrendered the tight rein that he had on his body. He'd stroked into her with everything that he had. Relentlessly, he rode her allowing her to feel his need.

This is what she'd wanted, needed, craved. She'd wanted a man who held nothing back. Just as in everything he did, Mackenzie gave her honesty in his lovemaking—not simply showing her his impressive body, but showing her his soul. Mackenzie saw to her pleasure before taking his own. *How could she not love this man?*

Throwing back everything that he was giving her she'd sought purchase anywhere she could on his sweat-slicked body. Digging her nails into his massive arms she'd loved him with her body; she'd thanked him with her sighs; she'd praised him with her moans. She'd told him that she loved him when she'd screamed his name. And Mackenzie responded with a litany of I love yous.

Right now she was Mount Everest, Antarctica, the moon, Victoria Falls—all wild places, beautiful places, majestic places—and Mackenzie was the man exploring her, conquering her insecurities, staking his claim on her heart. Shuddering from pleasure so intense she was transported across time. Looking into his eyes she'd seen galaxies being formed; she'd seen the liberation of Latin America in the 1800s and finally South Africa in the late 1900s; she'd seen the

abolition of the peculiar institution that was American slavery and Reconstruction; she'd seen Rev. Dr. King deliver his '*I have a Dream*' speech at the Lincoln Memorial; she'd seen the Berlin Wall falling; and she'd seen what love looked like when Mackenzie's eyes filled with images of her and tears spilled down his face.

Mackenzie's tears overwhelmed her. In that moment she'd known why sex should only be shared between people who loved each other. It was because it was more than a physical act; it was a physical manifestation of love. Looking at Mackenzie love her with everything he had, she'd known that she would never allow another man into her body because it belonged to Mackenzie.

«»*

Mackenzie was complete. Gathering Carolina to him he held her so closely that it felt as if they had double heartbeats. Closing his eyes he once again thanked God. Opening them, he thanked her.

«»*

Carolina burrowed into Mackenzie's strength and felt at home. She had so many things that she wanted to say but right now she had to catch her

breath. This man had taken her to Church with his lovemaking. Looking him in the eyes, she reached up with a shaky hand and traced his lips. Seeing the love in his eyes and feeling the protectiveness of his body, silently, she thanked God before speaking aloud.

“God is good,” she breathed.

“All the time,” Mackenzie finished.

«»*

Both looked at each other...neither knowing what to say after that. Holding each other tighter, they did the reasonable thing and sealed their promise. Eyes full of tears and hearts full of love, they conveyed their love with looks and touches. And that was how they fell asleep.

Chapter 16

Promises to Keep

Mackenzie awoke with Carolina in his arms and a smile in his whole body. Rising, he tucked the covers around her. Making his way across the floor he picked up that scandalous outfit, folded it and placed it atop the dresser. Later, he'd take it to the dry cleaners so that he could have that outfit framed and hung on the wall above their bed. Heading to the adjoining master bath, he took care of his needs although he didn't shower. Right now he wanted to keep the smell of his woman on him. Later, they'd shower together. At the door he turned and looked at her.

"I'm not letting you go. You're mine. If it takes ten years, twenty years, if it takes the whole of my life...if I have to get extra lives and live through them, I'm going to make you my wife," he said before he gently shut the door and let his woman sleep.

Padding to the kitchen, he grabbed a cup of coffee and headed to the deck. Looking out at the sky he watched the sun rise. The coffee in his hand was hot and black just like the woman he'd made love to all night and most of the morning. He smiled thinking of the woman sleeping soundly in his house that had

known no other woman...*ever*. Mackenzie had broken all his own rules when it came to Carolina...and he didn't give a damn.

He hoped that Carolina didn't still believe that she was going to continue to elude him...that he would allow her to continue to go about without a Roberts on the end of her name. There was no way in heaven or hell that he was going to allow that to happen. Not when she owned his heart. Not when they had a son together that needed both of them.

He loved Carolina. He was in love with Carolina. He was never letting her go.

«»*

Picking up the phone, he called Samson, not caring that it wasn't a decent hour for phone calls. All he could concentrate on right now was his woman, and the procuring of her. As soon as he heard Samson's deep timbre, he started speaking.

"Samson, I cannot let her go right now. I need her for a while. Can you bring David? I'll call Tom," he began.

"Concentrate on Carolina. There's no need to call Tom. He's already here seeing to things. Tom's a hella foreman. Let him do his job. When you're ready for David, ring me and I'll bring him," Samson said.

“Bring him this afternoon...and thank you, Samson.”

“No thanks needed. We’re family now,” Samson said before disconnecting.

Mackenzie chuckled. Going to the refrigerator he pulled out the stuff for a meal. He couldn’t cook like Carolina—who could?—but he could make a decent brunch. He was putting together *cubano* sandwiches when he heard the unmistakable sounds of his woman waking up.

«»*

Carolina woke to the smell of coffee and food. Her growling stomach reminded her that she’d missed eating pretty much all day yesterday. Her aching muscles reminded her that fine ass Mackenzie Duncan Roberts had worked her hard all night and several times throughout the night—not that she was complaining. Oh goodness—that man...that man...that fine ass man who belonged to her.

Taking a moment to look around the room she realized that this room was not a man’s room. This was a room designed to evoke an erotic response. The room was a beautiful mixture of class and boom-chica-now-now. Tastefully decorated, the focal point of the room was the canopied king-sized bed piled

with rich red fabrics. No, this wasn't a man's room; it was a couple's room. And not just any couple—a couple who was deeply in love. Smiling, she knew that Mackenzie had redecorated this room for her.

Getting up, she strutted to the opulent bathroom—she could do no less than strut for even after being intimate with Mackenzie all night, they'd never gotten around to removing her boots. Her man was a freak and she liked that. The man also loved her and cherished her and she reveled in that. The bathroom was just as amazing as the bedroom. Featuring copious tiling, heated floors, and a 27" inch LCD television set, it had a sunken oversized whirlpool tub with eight adjustable jets that could comfortably seat three of her; a separate luxury shower with a sculpted glass door and his and her vanities with granite countertops. Sitting on the counter was a basket piled high with her favorite products. Having used the restroom and brushed her teeth, she sat at the vanity and looked at herself in the mirror wondering what it was that Mackenzie saw when he looked at her.

Hearing Mackenzie's footfalls, she looked up just as he walked in the door.

"Morning, Sweetness," he drawled.

"Good morning, Mackenzie," she returned.
How in the hell did the man manage to look so

damn scrumptious all the damn time? Bastard—her bastard—but a bastard nonetheless.

“I made brunch,” he said as he came behind her and dropped a kiss on her head.

“I need a shower,” she countered as she leaned into him. “But first I need you again.”

“Sweetness,” he tried to protest.

“Mackenzie,” she purred as she drew him down to her. Drawing him down to his knees, she pulled him into her arms and poured her love into her kiss. Feeling Mackenzie wrap his strong arms around her, she toppled him to the floor and straddled him, which was easy considering that she knew that Mackenzie wasn’t about to fall atop her. He was protective of her even in his need.

Kissing him, she trailed kisses down his body. Reaching his fly, she unbuttoned him and drew his jeans down his body. She smiled realizing that wearing underwear apparently wasn’t a regular habit for Mackenzie. Crawling back up his body she stroked his already erect dick into full hardness and took him into her mouth. Using one hand she held him as she lightly licked his dick from base to tip until he purred her name. Reaching his head, she licked across the tip, reveling when she felt him stiffen beneath her. Hearing him groan, she closed her eyes and took him all the way in her mouth. Lightly grazing his sensitive skin with her teeth, she massaged his sac. Fi-

nally, she relaxed her throat muscles and deep-throated him until her nose was buried in his downy nest of pubic hair.

Hearing him groan her name she continued to deep-throat him. Over and over she drew him in and out of the warm cavern of her mouth. Feeling him tense she sucked harder wanting to make him come. She was getting ready to take him in her throat again when she felt him drag her up his body.

“No, I want to come inside of you,” he whispered harshly.

Gaining his feet he pulled her up, tossed her over his brawny shoulder and carried her to the bedroom. Dropping her on the bed he spread her out and plunged two fingers inside of her testing her readiness.

“Mackenzie!” she screamed as she wrapped her legs around him and accepted his body into hers. Their lovemaking was furious. Mackenzie stroked into her like he was drilling for oil. All she could do was take him and scream out his name in time to his thrusts.

“Mackenzie! Mackenzie! Mackenzie!”

Gripping her hips, he drove into her so hard that he nearly drove her across the bed. With one final thrust he shouted her name and came so hard she felt it.

“Sweetness!” he yelled as he dragged her atop him.

Bending down to kiss him, she sighed his name, stretched out atop him and promptly fell asleep—with her boots still on.

«»*

Mackenzie lay on his back and gently held his woman who was lightly snoring in his ear. This woman was his world and she’d just rocked it once more. She had amazing hands, an amazing voice, an amazing mind, an amazing tongue, an amazing sense of justice and most importantly an amazing heart. Everything about her was beautiful and everything on her was his to care for, to love, to protect. As soon as she awakened he was taking her to the natural hot springs on the property. She was going to be sore if she kept walking around looking beautiful.

«»*

Carolina lay in the circle of Mackenzie’s arms enjoying the bubbling hot spring that was on the property. Though she enjoyed the soothing, hot water, what she enjoyed more was being held by this man. She knew, without a doubt that, he loved her. It seemed that his love for her knew no bounds. Not

only did he love her, he cherished her and that was a first for her. Though none of the men in her life had ever laid a hand on her, many had choked her with their indifference, slapped her with their suppositions, and countered her uniqueness by parading antiquated ideals of femininity in front of her that she could never attain nor ever want to. But not Mackenzie, oh no, he'd stroked her with promises that he fulfilled, embraced her with his everything, and stalked her with the power of his unwavering love. Oh goodness, she loved this man.

She'd finally removed her fuck-me boots but with the way that Mackenzie looked at her she didn't need them. He was always touching her. Having fed her the delicious *cubano* sandwiches, he'd shown her around the house. He'd had to drag her kicking and screaming from that kitchen. Between the kitchen and master suite she didn't really need anything else...that was until she saw the library. There were shelves upon shelves just awaiting books to fill them. And on the center shelf there was a gift certificate for several bookstores including her favorite little specialty bookstore in Atlanta—Jeanie's Lounge. Mackenzie was the motherfucking man. Tossing the throw in front of the fireplace, she'd commanded him to get on his back and then she'd had her way with his person.

Sighing at the memory, she looked at the Carolina blue sky and the wildflowers that dotted the green expanse of his property. Colorado was beautiful. Turning in his arms, she looked into Mackenzie's eyes noting that the emerald green of his eyes matched the greens surrounding them. Running her fingers through his hair she bent and kissed him.

«»*

Mackenzie had always loved this spot. In fact, of all of the areas on the property, this slice had been the reason that he'd wanted it. This was his temple—the place that he visited when he needed to commune with God. The sky was bluer here, the wildflowers more intense in color, the grasses more lush, the evergreens taller. And now that his woman was there with him, it all paled in comparison.

Holding her in his arms brought him a measure of peace that he didn't know that he was craving. When she turned in his arms and looked at him with love and acceptance in her eyes, his heart had stuttered before righting itself. Carolina was life. In that moment he knew what it was that black women felt when they threw their hands up and moaned in church. They weren't just feeling the sermon; they were feeling the Spirit and they were offering thanks to God. In this moment, he wanted to throw his own

hands in the air and offer sacrifices to God upon the altar for this woman.

Not realizing what he was doing, he opened his mouth and the wedding vows poured out. *"To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness or in health, to love and to cherish 'til death do us part."* When the last word was said, he didn't feel trepidation or regret; he felt...married.

«»*

Carolina's thoughts were interrupted by the words of love spilling from Mackenzie's mouth. He loved her, which was fitting being that she loved him. She was about to return the sentiment when she realized exactly what he was whispering. Oh, God in Heaven. Mackenzie was whispering the wedding vows to her and before she could stop herself she responded in kind. *"To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness or in health, to love and to cherish 'til death do us part."*

«»*

They were silent after that. Drawing closer, they did the only thing that made sense. They sealed

their promise with a kiss and filled the silence with their prayers.

“I’m not letting you go, Sweetness,” Mackenzie drawled as he carried her back to the house.

“I’m not asking you to, Mackenzie,” she responded.

“And I’m not letting our son go either, Sweetness,” he said as he held her tighter.

“I know, Mackenzie and I cannot help but love you more because of that.”

“I miss our son already,” he confessed.

“Me too,” she smiled.

“Let’s call our son home.”

Smiling, she agreed. “You know the rest of the family’s going to come with him, right?”

“I can’t see how that could ever be a bad thing. We have a great family,” Mackenzie said.

“We do. Welcome to it,” she smiled. Pausing, she asked. “What are we going to tell David about us?”

“The truth,” he said as he took her hand.

“I love you,” she whispered as she reached up and hugged him.

“And you can be assured that I will be thanking the Maker for that every moment of every day,” he said.

Carolina was in that dream kitchen arranging the dozens of chocolate, chocolate chip cookies that she'd made for her babies when she heard the unmistakable sound of Samson's truck pulling up. Covering the cookies with a cloth, she ran to the door and greeted Mariana and David with big hugs.

"Hi, Auntie," Mariana piped. "I smell dessert," she said before pushing past her and walking in the direction of the kitchen.

"Hi, Baby. Of course you smell dessert. How could I have my children come over to a dessert-less kitchen? Help yourself but share with your brother," she admonished before turning to her baby-baby.

"Baby!" she exclaimed as she hugged him to her.

"Momma!" David whispered as he was dragged into her arms.

She held him for long minutes before putting him a little ways away from her. "I missed you, baby."

"I missed you too, Momma."

"Are you sure? Did you cheat on me with other mommas because you know that my two sisters are trying to steal you from me?"

"No, Momma. I like Aunt Virginia and Aunt Georgia, but only *you* are *my* Momma," he said with a shy smile.

“Good, then I won’t have to kick their asses.”

Virginia who’d been riding in Georgia’s truck heard her comment. Wrinkling her nose, she said. “That’s just because you didn’t give us enough time to change his mind.”

“Little David, you beware of other mommas. Other mommas have germs so stay away from them.”

“Even Aunt Virginia and Aunt Georgia? Do they have germs too?” he asked.

“No. Virginia’s really old; she just has worms. Georgia is too crazy to have germs,” she said as she reached up and kissed his forehead.

“I missed you, Momma,” he whispered as he hugged her back.

“I missed you too, baby. You’re not allowed to stay away from me for so long. I don’t like that.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, Momma,” she corrected.

“Okay, Momma,” he said.

“While y’all have your moment, we’re going to look around the new digs,” Virginia said as she dragged Georgia with her.

“Where are the guys?” Carolina asked.

“They’re dragging in our stuff of course,” Virginia answered.

“So y’all are staying?” Carolina asked.

“Damn skippy. We’re not leaving our nephew unprotected,” Georgia said.

“I love y’all,” Carolina said.

“Of course you do,” Georgia countered.

“Why don’t you let us bring the stuff in while you and Mackenzie talk to young David?” Mosé suggested (translation: handed out an instruction that he meant to be followed).

Carolina knew not to ask if he was sure; Mackenzie didn’t.

“Mosé, are you sure? I can help,” Mackenzie started before Mosé interrupted his question.

“Young Mackenzie, I have secured my family. Now go secure yours,” he instructed.

“Thank you, Mosé,” Mackenzie said before grabbing her hand and calling for David.

“Son, let’s go for a walk,” he said as he ushered them out of the door.

«»*

Carolina was a little nervous. She and Mackenzie had decided to tell David about them and answer any questions that he might have...even if they were of a sensitive nature. Their family was a close-knit bunch who rallied around each other. There were few secrets among them and they wanted to continue that tradition. Both of them wanted

David to feel included. They wanted David to know that not only was he a valued part of their family; he was the center of it.

Walking to one of the most beautiful spots on the property, they stopped and looked out over the intensely beautiful area.

“David, Mackenzie and I,” she stopped. This was more difficult then she first thought. It wasn’t that she was ashamed of having made love with Mackenzie; she was concerned that David would think badly of her. Seeing Mackenzie about to speak, she shook her head and gathered herself. She wanted to be the one to tell their son.

“Mackenzie and I consummated our relationship last night, baby.”

“That’s a special word about sex, isn’t it?” David asked.

“Yes, baby, it is,” she said gently.

“Do you love him, Momma?” David asked.

“Yes, baby, that’s why I made love with Mackenzie,” she answered.

When David remained silent after her announcement, she asked. “Do you think badly of me?”

“No, Momma. I could never think less of you. I love you,” he answered as he hugged her.

She couldn’t help it; she broke down in sobs as she hugged her baby.

"Momma, why are you crying?" David asked. "I don't like it when you cry," he said as he took the edge of his shirt and dried her tears. The tenderness of the gesture only served to make her cry harder.

"Dad, do something. Make Momma stop hurting. She's crying," David pled as he looked at Mackenzie.

"I don't like it when your momma cries either, son but she's not hurting. She needs to get these tears out because now that she's ours she won't have any old ones left in her."

"I was so worried that you'd think badly of me," she confessed.

"Momma, I love you. I know that Dad loves you too."

"That I do, son," Mackenzie agreed.

"Then you're okay with us?" Carolina asked.

"Yes, Momma. You still want me, right?" he asked.

"David Gilchrist-Williams soon-to-be Gilchrist-Williams Roberts, you are on such restriction! How dare you ask such a ridiculous question? You're damned right I still want you," she began.

"We still want you," Mackenzie corrected.

"You are our baby and you are also on restriction," she said as she hugged him to her hard.

"Okay, Momma. I was just," he began.

“You were just working your way into a lengthy restriction. Now you’re on restriction until you’re one hundred forty-five years old.”

“Okay,” he smiled.

“I don’t think that you’re supposed to be smiling about restriction, son,” Mackenzie interjected.

“I can’t help it. I want Momma to want me,” he said.

“You are now on restriction until you’re one hundred fifty years old. I wanted you the moment that I saw you!” she said.

“And I wanted you the moment that I saw you too,” he said as he looked up at her with those beautiful, honest eyes.”

“So did I son,” Mackenzie said. “You are obviously a Roberts man,” he said as he gently clapped him on the back.

Carolina loved the byplay between her son and her man, but she gently told David off all the way back into the house. And once they returned to the house she washed her hands and got him some more cookies and a glass of milk.

«»*

When they returned from their walk, they washed their hands and settled in the pimped-out kitchen, which boasted copious seating and a 42”

LCD. Between the television and the cookies there was no reason for anyone to leave the coziness of the area. Someone had done a lot of shopping from the numerous bags folded in a neat stack and the fact that the refrigerator was now overflowing with proper Southern staples. Though Mackenzie had fed her, he didn't have a drop of iced tea in the house.

Virginia was currently in the process of restocking the food in the freezer, which meant that she was going over the contents with a critical eye. Pulling out a handful of canned biscuits, she turned to Mackenzie.

"What, pray tell, is this?" she asked holding the tins away from her.

"Frozen biscuits," Mackenzie answered after he swallowed the cookie he was busy inhaling.

"Are you from an eastern bloc country?" she asked.

"No, I'm from Colorado although my parents were Scots."

"Then why in the name of all foods cooked with gravy do you have canned biscuits?"

"Because I like biscuits," he shrugged.

"Oh. My. Goodness! That is unacceptable and if you plan on being a husband to *my* sister and a father to *my* nephew, then I'd better not see such mess again," she exclaimed before throwing that shit directly into the trash where it belonged.

Looking at David who—like Mackenzie and his sister—was eating cookies like they were the best thing that they'd ever tasted, she leaned over and kissed him. "Baby, I never want that kind of mess to pass your lips, okay?"

"Okay," he smiled as he went back to eating cookies and drinking milk.

After another wonderful meal prepared by Mosé, they all pitched in and cleaned up the kitchen before heading to the den. Putting in a movie, they all got comfortable and enjoyed a family comedy. Though the movie was good, Carolina hardly paid it any attention for she was too busy enjoying the moment.

Stretching, she tucked her baby's head into her shoulder and enjoyed this moment. She was surrounded by her family. Leaning in her man's protective arms, she closed her eyes and enjoyed the beautiful view and the feel of her baby in her arms.

«»*

David felt like closing his eyes and releasing a drawn out sigh of satisfaction. He was fed, clean, and well-loved. His Momma held him in her arms and every so often she leaned down and kissed the top of his head. She was always hugging him. His favorite thing was when she ran her hand down the side of

his cheek before cupping his cheek and reaching up to kiss him. It was the look in her eyes when she touched him thusly. She looked at him like he was everything she'd ever hoped for. And she didn't just start looking at him like that after he was clean; she'd looked at him like that since the first time. Her eyes were filled with such love...and it was for him. He didn't know a whole lot of things but he knew that his Momma loved him. Snuggling into her warmth and love he wondered why she loved him being that he had nothing to give her, not that she seemed to mind that at all.

One day he was going to be like the men in his family. Wow, *his* family. Every time he said it, his heart stuttered. He had a family and they wanted him—him. Every one of them just decided that he was his Momma's stuff and therefore their stuff too. They all loved him, looked after him, and included him like he was important. They also told him off—very nicely, because his Momma was real particular about how people treated him—and instructed him, and took time to teach him stuff.

The women all spoiled him. His aunts and big sister were always hugging him and feeding him and calling him 'baby.' Though they weren't as big or strong as men—they were strong. All of them were real smart and knew how to handle themselves.

The men all spoiled him too but in a different way. They didn't hug all over him but they watched out for him and taught him guy stuff like how to carry one's self. His dad, uncle and brother-in-law were all big, strong and successful men, but his heart and eyes told him that they weren't the kind of men that used their strength and privilege to hurt people...unless provoked mightily. He'd spent a lot of time watching them. At first, it was because he was afraid of them. Later, it was because they were so different from the men that he'd become accustomed to.

They were good men and treated people fairly and with respect. He watched how his dad treated his work crew and never once did he see him yell at them or call them names. Instead of lording over his work crew, his dad worked with them and listened to them. They weren't afraid to approach him with new ideas or talk with him when they had problems. And no matter how busy he was, his dad always took the time to listen to them. That's probably why they did such a good job for him.

All of the guys in their family were like that, even more so when they interacted with women. They always said 'please' and 'ma'am'; they opened doors and stood when they entered the room. It wasn't just how they acted in front of other people. They were like that all of the time. At home they

were even better. Even when they interacted with his Aunt Georgia, who according to everyone was an expert at fighting and tearing stuff up, they were really careful of her. They never forgot that a woman was a woman even when they were being cussed out. They weren't just men; they were gentlemen...and when he grew up he was going to be just like them.

Looking around the room, he noticed how gently these big men touched their wives. He didn't have to look at his dad to know that he was touching his Momma the same way. His dad loved his Momma and his Momma had finally admitted to loving his dad. When they went out last night he didn't know what was going to happen. It had been hard for him to sleep being that his Momma hadn't tucked him in. He wasn't a baby but he was already used to his Momma tucking him in before he went to sleep and his dad coming in and making sure that he was okay. His Aunt Virginia had tucked him in and His Aunt Georgia had checked on him. Actually, his Aunt Georgia hadn't gone to sleep because she'd spent the night making sure that he was safe. He knew because he hadn't slept. Their care was nice, but it wasn't the same as his Momma and dad.

He was surprised when Samson had told him that his parents wanted him to bring him to them. When they'd loaded most of his stuff in the truck he wasn't sure what was going on. Briefly he thought

that maybe his Momma and dad didn't want him anymore since they were probably going to have their own family. He smiled remembering how his Momma had told him off good when he'd said something along those lines.

They loved him (and he loved them). But as much as they all loved him, nobody loved him like his Momma loved him. And he loved his Momma so much that he was surprised that there was room left in his heart to love anyone else. Closing his eyes, he inhaled the scent of his Momma before reaching his arms around her and hugging her. As always, she hugged him back and kissed the top of his head. And as always, his whole body sighed and his heart said her name—Momma.

He would do anything for her—even leave if it meant that she'd be taken care of. His Momma deserved all of the best things in life. He wasn't that smart and he didn't have any money but he had her love and in the last four weeks he'd had three examples of how to treat a woman. Sitting up, he cleared his throat and called his dad.

“Dad?”

“Yes, son?”

“Do you love Momma?”

“Absolutely,” he answered.

“Momma?”

"Yes, baby?" she answered looking at him with concern.

"Do you love Dad?"

"Yes, darling. I told you earlier that I did. Even though Mackenzie gets on my last nerve, I haven't changed my mind about that," she said.

"Doesn't matter if you tried to change your mind, woman. You're mine," his dad drawled as he pulled him Momma close and kissed her.

"Stop that," his Momma said although she was smiling as she said it and snuggling closer to his dad.

David was glad that they loved each other, but he wanted more for his Momma. "Dad, when are you going to marry my Momma?"

"As soon as I can, son," he answered.

"Well, until there's a ring on her finger, you..." he started but stopped. This was hard. He wasn't trying to be cheeky. He was just trying to make sure that his Momma was treated right.

"Baby, are you okay?" his Momma asked as she squirmed out of his dad's grip and took his hands in hers. His Momma had soft hands, loving hands...and no ring on any of those fingers.

"Yes, Momma," he answered while smiling up at her. She was beautiful. "Dad, until there's a ring on my Momma's finger, you cannot do any more consummating with my Momma," he finished.

The room went silent. Well, more so than it already was. But after he'd made his announcement it was like God had pressed a mute button and the whole world went silent waiting for what was going to happen. He didn't know what to expect but it wasn't all of the women sighing and coming up to hug him. His Momma had grabbed him up in a hug so tight that he could hardly breathe—not that he was going to complain. He enjoyed the hugs and the kisses that the women rained down on him, but he was waiting for his dad's reaction. Nervously, he looked at his dad waiting to see if he was going to be mad.

Getting up, his dad approached him and got down on one knee. "Son, you know that I love your Momma, right?" his dad asked.

"Yes, but you need to marry her if you want to make love to her again. It's just right. My Momma isn't one of those kinds of women," he said.

"Actually, she is," his Aunt Georgia teased.

"You, shut up, Georgia. My baby knows that I'm all innocent and Mackenzie just won't keep his paws off of me," his Momma teased back while hugging him closer.

"David, you may want to protect your father's virtue from your Momma," his Aunt Virginia smiled.

David enjoyed the teasing, but he needed this settled. The men were all strangely silent. He'd said

all the words in his heart so he waited for his dad to speak.

"I love your Momma, son."

"I know you do," he replied.

"And as much as I love her, know that I love you just as much. You love your momma as much as I do. And you're right to demand this."

"You're not mad?" he asked.

"I'm proud...proud that you're my son."

"Our son," his Momma corrected.

"Our son," his dad agreed.

"Well I love this little love fest but can I get a chance to hug my nephew?" his Aunt Georgia asked as she waded through the women and his dad to get to him.

"Fine, if you must," his Momma said before hugging him some more.

"My son's a damn fine boy, isn't he?" his dad asked.

"Okay, can you stop being a bragging bastard for two seconds?" Samson said. "You're not the first man to have a son."

"No I'm not but I'm going to be bragging on my boy all of the time so get used to it," his dad said.

"You're a fine young man," his Uncle Mosé said.

"Yes, he is," Samson agreed. "I'm glad that you're my *Somente Mina's* brother."

“Me too, but I’m still the baby,” his big sister said as she hugged him.

That settled, they all settled down and finished watching the show.

«»*

The movie was good but Georgia kept her eyes on her new nephew, David. Though David had only been there for a month, he’d already been transformed into a beautiful boy. And it wasn’t simply because his tall frame was slowly filling out, just as it had nothing to do with his shining wheat-colored hair that was almost the exact shade of Mackenzie’s, or his clear, green eyes. No, it was the cleanness of his soul. It was the way that he always put himself in front of the women (including her) when someone else entered their vicinity. It was the way that he looked at her baby twin: he looked at her like she was his whole world...the same way that Mackenzie did. The difference was that David was too in awe of his Momma to attempt to hide it. His love for her sister was there on his honest face for the whole world to see.

When Carolina had called her crying, she’d been deep in the jungle, doing...stuff. Regardless of what she was doing, hearing her baby twin speak her name with the tinge of fear in her voice had put an

end to her adventure. She'd swum, climbed, trekked, hiked, did whatever she had to do to get back to civilization so that she could get back to the U.S. to get to Carolina.

When Carolina had told her about David she hadn't even blinked an eye. Her sister didn't claim a lot of people but once she did; that was it. She got that from their Momma. Virginia had started telling her about the sorry state that David was in when he'd arrived but Georgia had simply shook her head and walked out—not able to hear anymore without going into a killing rage. Glimpsing the fear that sometimes entered his eyes when he thought that he was unprotected was simply not acceptable. David was going to be safe. There was no question about him being Carolina's. And when *her* baby nephew had made his pronouncement, her heart had burst from pride...and her own momma instincts had kicked in. *DIBS!* David was hers in the same way that Mariana was Carolina's. Yep, her baby nephew was going to be safe...regardless of what she had to do to insure that. Getting up, she announced that she was taking the dogs out for a walk, which was code for she was going to do recon.

Chapter 16 *and Some More* *Ask and Ye Shall Receive*

Georgia mulled over the situation with David as she re-conned Mackenzie's (now her baby twin's) property. The DMF (dead MF) who posed as his father should've made an appearance. It'd been a month. What kind of sorry bastard left his child to fend for himself for ten minutes much less a fucking month? Oh, yeah, the same kind of sorry bastard who'd beat a child. Curling her hands into tight fists she had to force herself to breathe. Damn, she wanted to kill that man. Something gave her pause—not about killing DMF; she still wanted to do that. No, something gave her pause about this whole situation. That asshole should've made an appearance by now. The fact that he hadn't shown up caused her great concern.

She looked at the facts before her. David wasn't a coward. Though he was wary, her baby nephew was brave. He may have disagreed with her assertion but she knew bravery. She'd seen it in him. Soon, she'd teach him to see it in himself. That baby had spent almost the whole of his life struggling to just fucking survive. Facing a litany of horrible tomorrows took courage. If he could face that, then logic would lead

her to believe that whatever frightened David was indeed something scary. She was good, scratch that, she was fucking fantastic in the fighting arts, but she had a feeling that she was going to need a little something extra.

Even thinking such heavy thoughts as she walked the dogs she couldn't help but notice the beauty surrounding her. Her twin was now the owner of a beautiful piece of land. It wasn't North Carolina but it was a close second. Walking along she stumbled across a sudden thought. Coming to a sudden stop she thought it over and with a grin that could only be described as *crafty* she flipped open her cell phone and dialed. Her call was answered after what felt like ten minutes, although in reality it was probably only two minutes. Normally, she hung up after three rings, but she had a fifty minimum ring rule when it came to the individual that she was calling.

"Hello?" A deep and cultured *male* voice answered finally. Georgia held her phone away from her ear and looked at the phone number that she'd dialed. Seeing that it was indeed the correct number, she put the phone back to her ear,

"Where's Teijana?" she asked sweetly.

"Ah, if you don't mind holding...I'll get her," the unidentified male informed her.

Georgia waited impatiently. She could hear the deep, cultured voice murmuring, then a squeak of sound before the unmistakable sound of someone trying to wrestle away the phone. A few seconds later a breathless Teijana finally answered.

“Hello?”

“Does Franklin know that you’ve got a man all up in you right now?” were Georgia’s first words.

Georgia grinned when she heard Teijana’s embarrassment as she cussed out the man who’d answered her personal cell phone.

“I do not have a man *all up in me* right now—” she began.

Georgia laughed before responding.

“Maybe not right this second, but thirty seconds ago,” she began. The laughter went out of her tone as she recalled the reason why she was calling Teijana. “I will rag you about this later, but right now I need your brilliant lunatic mind.”

She listened as Teijana literally morphed from the quintessential floundering scientist geek to dangerous mastermind.

“Begin,” was all that she said.

“Someone made Carolina cry,” Georgia said.

“Do you need help with disposal?” Teijana inquired as if she was discussing something mundane.

“Not yet. Right now I’m more concerned that I’ll need help with the previous step.”

She could literally hear the wheels cranking over in Teijana's brain as she processed information and began to sort it into workable categories. Once she had done that, which took all of a split second, she was speaking in her *no-nonsense-or-else* voice.

"I'll need the address of her whereabouts, please. I'm on my way," Teijana said sounding every inch the angered-best-friend-ready-to-do-battle.

Rattling off their whereabouts she said, "I'll email you additional details in a few minutes. I need to finish recon. Let me know when you plan on leaving and I'll be at the airport to get you."

"Roger, copy that," Teijana said.

Georgia grinned to herself as Teijana answered. Everything was going to be just fine.

"So now that I know what a whore you are, I guess that I don't have to ask why you're up at this hour. If you're not getting your freak on with your laptop and those pretty formulas then you're getting your freak on with some man who sounds way too cultured to be sullyng your lab with his only above average intellect," Georgia laughed.

"So sayeth the woman whose best dress-up outfit has cargo pockets and plenty of hidden compartments."

"You're one to talk with your sense of style," Georgia teased.

“When did you get free time? Don’t tell me that you’re all out of ninja duties,” Teijana teased.

“There are *always* duties for a *true* ninja. By the way, little girl’s pregnant.”

“I so hope that you’re talking about Mariana. Einstein knows that Virginia’s too old—even if she is a freak for that hot ass Mosé and if it’s Carolina then I’ll be getting my popcorn ready so that I can watch your Daddy beat the living snot out of the man who did it,” Teijana said.

Georgia thought about her personal hero—who in some circles was better known as her father—beating any man that got her sister pregnant without the benefit of a wedding ring. Mosé was only alive because he’d begged and pleaded and did everything within his power to get permission to marry Virginia. Hearing Teijana’s glee at the prospect of a well-deserved beating, she smiled before she finally answered.

“Yes, it’s Mariana that’s pregnant, you crazy woman.”

“Some say crazy, some say genius,” Teijana said with a derisive sniff. “So the Mommas are all in Colorado, eh?”

“All except the Alpha Momma, but she’s on her way. Carolina of course, was first on the scene no doubt cooking up a storm to make sure Mariana eats proper food—aka Southern food. You know she’ll be

signing that fetus up for advanced placement courses before the first sonogram pictures are taken,” Georgia laughed loudly.

“Right you are, Miss Ninja.”

“Who knew that you mad scientists were such haters. So have you created my very own brand of explosive’s that will be smaller than a tampon yet?”

“I knew there was something that I forgot,” Teijana said with a grin,

“So how’re your sexy ass brothers that all want me?” Georgia asked blithely.

“I have no idea and please don’t involve me in your sexual exploits,” Teijana said while pretending to be sick.

“Well *someone’s* got to keep the coochie in full working order,” Georgia teased her twin sister’s best friend.

“Okay, now I’m officially going to throw up, so I’m just going to hang up and go lie down,” Teijana said. “And while I’m lying down, I’ll be plotting.”

“You know I’m so glad to have you along,” Georgia said.

“Yeah, nothing like plotting sieges together,” Teijana said before ringing off.

Georgia felt so much better when she’d finished her talk. Heading back to the spacious home, she knew two things: 1) With Teijana on their side, their side was stacked; and, 2) She was going to be staying

in Colorado for a bit (for at least the next six years) to watch her nephew's back and to give him the benefit of all of her training.

«»*

Dressing for bed, David wasn't surprised to hear the knock on his door. He was surprised however to see his Aunt Georgia on the other side even though he wasn't surprised to see her in her ninja gear.

"You finished dressing?" she asked as she entered his room.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered out of habit. His Aunt Georgia was as imposing as his Momma but she might be a little bit more crazy—just a little bit—and right now she was looking crazy, not that he was scared that she was going to do something to him.

"All right then, I'm calling dibs on the extra bed," she said while rolling back the comforter on the other king-sized bed in his room. His dad had said that he'd need that for when he had friends come spend the night. He'd never had friends before but the prospect had made him smile.

"Um, Dad's supposed to sleep there," he said.

"Yeah, I know, but he needs to sleep downstairs with your crazy ass momma to watch over her. You

know that she'll be up here every two seconds to check on y'all otherwise."

"But they cannot be alone because Momma is beautiful and Dad won't be able to keep his hands to himself," he said.

"Yeah, me and your momma are beautiful but you know what, that's why they make floors. Your daddy can sleep outside her door."

"Auntie Georgia, you're so bad," he said.

"Yeah, but I got that from your momma. It all started in the womb. I was the good twin and then she corrupted me. You know she did her first protest in the womb. She was like it's dark in here and I want gravy."

He couldn't help but laugh, especially since knowing his Momma that story could be true. It didn't help that his aunt told that story with a straight face.

"But you could just sleep in the room with her and dad could sleep in here," he said.

"Yeah, I could but being that I already shared a womb with her for those hellish nine months, um no. That was a good plan though. You're a smart kid, but then you are my nephew so I expect no less. We got brains going on in this family," she said.

"Thank you, Aunt Georgia," he said as he ducked his head to hide his blush. No one had ever called him smart.

Feeling his aunt put her finger under his chin and tilt his face up, he looked her in the eye. He was kind of speechless. Though his aunt was nice, she wasn't one to go casually tossing about compliments.

"Why are you blushing, honey?" she asked.

"Because, I...I'm not smart like you guys and..." he began. He stopped when she hugged him to her.

"Little David, you are smart. And more than that you're brave and even better than that you love my baby twin. Do you know how much I love you for that alone?"

"But it's easy to love Momma," he said.

"Yeah, once you get past her scaly exterior and peel back the layers of hate," she said. "David, I'm calling *DIBS!* on you...just like your momma did Mariana. You're my special baby to watch out for so there. And since you're my special baby, I shall teach you the ways of the ninja, which means that you're going to be seeing a lot of me," she said as she hugged him.

"But Momma says you are one endless adventure."

"I am and you, my baby nephew are my next adventure. You're never going to be alone again and you'll never feel defenseless. I'm going to make sure of that," she said.

Looking at the determination on her face, he could only say one thing. "Wow."

“Yeah, I know. Aren’t I the coolest?” she asked with a big grin.

* «*» *

David was about to answer when his Momma and the rest of the family walked in.

“You don’t have to answer that, baby,” his Momma said as she reached over and hugged him. He watched as the rest of the family filed in.

“Don’t be a hater, Carolina,” his Aunt Georgia said.

“As effing if,” his Momma returned.

“What are all of y’all doing up here?” his Aunt Georgia asked.

“We’re here to tuck my baby in. It’s his first night in a new room and we want to make sure he’s comfortable,” his Momma said.

“How can he be anything but with these spacious digs?” his Aunt Georgia said spreading her arms out.

“Well, we still have to make sure. And what are you up here doing? Are you up here trying to con my baby out of his room? He saw it first and it’s his,” his Momma said.

“Well since he saw it first, I’ll let him have it,” his Aunt Georgia sighed dramatically.

“Are you up here corrupting my baby?”

“Noooooooo,” she said, sounding like Mariana but looking way more dangerous.

“Baby, is she corrupting you?” his Momma asked.

“No, Momma. She said that she’s going to teach me the ways of the ninja.” He didn’t know what happened but the room went silent after he said that.

“Do you mean that, Georgia?” his Momma asked.

“Yep, and I’ve already called *DIBS!* on him so there,” his Aunt Georgia said.

“Damn,” he heard his Uncle Mosé say.

“So it’s like that?” his Aunt Virginia asked.

“And that’s the way it’s going to stay. Anybody got a problem with it?” his Aunt Georgia asked.

“That means that you’re going to stay then?” his Momma asked.

“Damn skippy,” she said.

“How come he gets to be taught the ways of the ninja, but not me?” Mariana whined.

“Because you don’t have ninja traits,” Georgia answered.

“Like what? I can fight,” she said.

“But you won’t be doing any more of that or people will go missing, *Somente Mina*,” Samson growled.

“Fine, gosh,” his big sister pouted.

“Stop pouting, Mariana, to my knowledge she hasn’t offered to teach anyone else the ways of the ninja,” his Aunt Virginia said.

“Again, because being a ninja is a more serious undertaking than being a page to a knight. You have to be smart and brave, not crazy like y’all,” his Aunt Georgia said.

He watched as the men tried to hide their looks of incredulity and he smiled hearing his dad laugh out loud.

“What are you laughing about, Mackenzie?”

“Nothing, I’m just saying you know craziness seems to run in your family, just a little bit...enough to make y’all real interesting women. But maybe it’s a Southern thing more so than a family thing,” he answered.

“That is why you won’t be taught the ways,” his Aunt Georgia said.

“I don’t think that you’re all crazy, Georgia...just mostly crazy. After all, you are right about my son being smart and brave,” his dad said.

David was proud that his family thought that he was those things, but he wasn’t. And he wasn’t a liar. So he spoke up.

“Thank you for saying those nice things, Aunt Georgia but I’m not smart or brave.”

David was going to explain when he was immediately interrupted by a chorus of vociferous (an-

other word that his Momma had taught him) objections. That was followed by the commonplace decree of restriction from his Momma.

“Restriction, young man,” his Momma said.

“But Momma,” he began.

His protest was met by a chorus of ‘don’t talk back to your Momma.’

“But Momma nothing,” she said. “You are smart and brave. Now hush. Why don’t you think that you’re smart and brave?” his Momma asked.

He was going to answer but his Momma had just told him to hush the sentence before.

“Well?” his Momma prompted.

“Because I get scared sometimes,” he began.

“And if you didn’t, then you’d be a fool, son,” his brother-in-law Samson said.

He watched as his dad and his Uncle Mosé nodded.

“See, I told you,” his Momma said. “Now why don’t you think that you’re smart and you better not try that because you did poorly in school mess? You’re smart.”

“But I also don’t read well,” he said.

“Yet. The key word is ‘yet,’ and you do other things quite well.”

“But all of y’all are so smart. You’ve all gone to college and have ‘Dr.’ in front of your names.”

“And so will you, but just because we’re smart in some things doesn’t mean that we’re smart in all things,” his Momma explained as she took his hands in hers. She had soft hands.

“Yeah, tell him about his soon-to-be-ninja-teacher’s famous biology incident,” his Aunt Virginia said laughing.

“Are y’all ever going to let that go?” his Aunt Georgia asked.

“Nope,” all the women in the room said.

He listened as his family filled him in on what was known as ‘the biology/dissecting incident.’ And he laughed so hard he cried. His Aunt Georgia, who was about to have her doctorate conferred upon her had had to retake the dissecting part of biology class. When dissecting the pig, she’d labeled improperly. Instead of marking the vital organs and such, she’d butchered the pig and labeled it by its food parts. Thus she had pork chops, ham, etc. David couldn’t help but laugh.

“And what really put it over the top was the pile of intestines that she’d put in a neat little pile before labeling them ‘chitlins,’” his Aunt Virginia said as she wiped tears from her eyes.

Wiping tears from his own eyes he reached up and hugged his Aunt Georgia. Though she protested the telling of the story, she too filled in bits of the story like how their Momma had come down to the

school. Upon looking at what she'd done, she'd promptly taken the dissecting knife in hand and did some cutting. When she finished she labeled that bit as 'bacon' before taking her child home.

When the laughter died down, all of the women kissed him and the men patted him on the shoulder before wishing him good night. His dad was getting ready to settle into the spare bed when he called out to him.

"Dad?"

"Yes, son?"

"Um, Auntie Georgia is sleeping there. You need to sleep in the room with Momma so that you can look out for her."

"Son, I promised you that I wouldn't take any more liberties with your Momma until after we were married," he said.

"I know, and I trust you. If you said it then I believe it. But I have Auntie Georgia up here so someone needs to be with Momma down there in her room."

"You know it's going to be hard for me to lie next to your Momma and not touch her," his dad said.

"Yeah, but Momma's worth it, right?"

"Damned right, son."

"Okay then, goodnight Momma and Dad."

"Good night, son," they both said.

They kissed him and were on their way out when he called his Momma.

“Momma?”

“Yes, baby?” she asked.

“If Dad cannot you know, then you cannot wear those boots anymore until after you’re married. And then only when you’re in the room with dad. You can only wear them out in public if you’re surrounded by an army of warriors.”

“Yeah, what our son said,” he heard his dad say.

“Okay, baby. I love you. Sleep well and ignore Georgia’s snoring.”

* «*» *

On their way down to their own bed, Mackenzie and Carolina talked.

“We have a remarkable son,” Mackenzie said.

“Agreed.”

“Not that I don’t fear for the Western U.S. with Georgia intent on staying nearby, but what’s so significant about Georgia staying put?” Mackenzie asked.

“The fact that nothing has ever made her stay put before,” Carolina answered.

“Then she must really love our son,” Mackenzie remarked.

“Yes, she does.”

“Our son seems to be acquiring quite a contingent of warriors.”

“The best.”

“No one will take him from us, Sweetness,” Mackenzie said.

“Not and live,” she countered.

Chapter 17

Arrivals

“Haul ass, Frenchy,” Teijana ordered without looking back to see if Carl Lefevre was following. She had an emergency situation on her hands and the fact that the Frenchman was with her was testament to the urgency with which she needed to be in the soon-to-be cold ass city. Carl had quickly divested her of her luggage, which pretty much consisted of the bag which had been haphazardly slung over her shoulder and the two cases that he’d insisted that she needed—just in case. Glancing at his array of luggage, she shook her head. He was such a fucking *prima donna...who could eat a mean pussy her subconscious threw in*. Oh shut up, she told it and walked faster. Everybody doesn’t need five suitcases of shit. Teijana’s plan was to go in fast and hard and deal with the situation with the quickness so she wouldn’t need excess luggage since she would only be staying for a few days at the maximum.

«»*

Carl watched Teijana with a look of disbelief all over his handsome visage. He didn’t know what to

think of the woman who'd turned him inside out. She was nothing and everything like Carolina had described. Never had he come across a woman who literally threw him for such a loop and that was saying something considering that he knew both Carolina and Mariana.

The woman had actually thought that he was going to allow her to traipse off somewhere unattended. As if. He was surprised that her very large brothers with their very large fists and very nonexistent tempers allowed her to walk down the hall without an escort and a nursemaid. Teijana hadn't even packed her luggage. Pinching the bridge of his nose he recalled the little fit that she'd thrown when he'd made her wait while he packed it. There was no way that he was letting her finish it after he witnessed her idea of packing. Her idea of packing luggage was even worse than her idea of what constituted decent food.

If he wasn't with her he just knew that she would've eaten plane food. Of course considering the vending machine food that in her opinion constituted a meal, she would find nothing wrong with that. That's why he'd hastily put together a sandwich for her before they left. Though she might not care about what she consumed, he knew that if Carolina thought that he'd allowed her best friend to eat that

shit that she'd have an ass whipping waiting for him on arrival.

The woman drove him mad but even so, she was so...so intriguing, beautiful, intelligent, beautiful, insane, beautiful...*did he mention beautiful?*...while she did so. He'd known her for less than three weeks and already he couldn't bear being apart from her even though she spent the majority of their time together ignoring him, confounding him, or being annoyed with him. Maybe it was him but he figured that if you gave a woman an orgasm so intense that she forgot the quadratic equation, it deserved some small talk at the very least. Apparently, Teijana didn't prescribe to that. All plane ride he'd attempted to get her to talk about what they'd shared before they'd been interrupted and all plane ride, she'd attempted to brush him off politely before telling him outright to please shut the fuck up so that she could plan her siege in peace.

He was busy scanning their surroundings for danger and trying to insure that she didn't accidentally hurt herself by tripping over something, running into something, or trying to walk through something, when she suddenly stopped walking.

"Woman," Carl muttered as he wrapped his arms around the woman who had him so tied up in knots that his body went haywire around her. Holding her was like holding onto home—that was if

home were a rocket hurtling through space at speeds many times that of light. Still, he held Teijana tightly against his body as he steadied both of them. He was sure that Teijana had no idea that she was leaning, setting alight the hard-on that he'd managed to control (barely) since they'd been interrupted by the phone call from Carolina's twin. There were two of them? Knowing Carolina he could only imagine what her twin was like. Perhaps they were polar opposites and Georgia was demure and um, sane.

"You can let go now," Teijana's softly spoken words seemed to come from far away.

Sighing, he buried his face in the curve of Teijana's neck and breathed deeply. Feeling a shudder reverberate through her luscious body, his whole body went hard. Instead of dragging Teijana beneath him right there in the middle of the airport and giving her orgasm after orgasm, he drew upon his inner strength and borrowed some from the universe. Straightening his big body, he took her hand in his and walked towards the exit.

«»*

Teijana bit her lip as she walked beside Carl who insisted on holding her hand. No, we're allowing him to hold our hand so he will step it up, she reconciled with herself. For a man who wasn't one of her

brothers he was decidedly bossy. All right, so she'd actually given herself over to the feelings that Carl created inside of her...somewhat. Fine, dammit, but just because he knew where her clitoris was didn't mean that she wanted anything more. And it didn't mean that she didn't. Honestly, the man was French for goodness sake! And there was also that tricky matter of him being gay. How gay was he she wondered because that man played a clit like he was first chair in an orchestra.

Teijana's thoughts were broken by her name being drawled in that fantastic-cream-inducing-voice of Carl's. Lifting her eyes up to meet his, she promptly lost her train of thought. *Dammit!*

"Huh?" she asked him when she realized that she didn't understand a fucking word that he was saying. Perhaps he was speaking French.

"Where are we going?" Carl asked.

She frowned as the words finally made sense. *Yeah, where the fuck were they going?* She was about to make something up when she heard her name being screamed from somewhere close by. Looking around for the culprit, she relaxed a little as she caught sight of Georgia striding their way.

Georgia had staked out arrivals since an hour before Teijana's plane was due to land...just in case. And though she'd been planted in the same spot for a hot minute, she was worried when she didn't see Teijana. Not seeing her but pretty sure that she was somewhere around, she went playground and hol-lered her name out loud. Seeing her stride her way, she smiled brightly (aka grimaced less) until she realized that the tall white dude was with her.

She'd decided to dismiss him until Teijana made her feel all bad and shit.

"Georgia, be nice. We don't have time for you to go on a killing spree right now," she admonished.

Deciding to show her Southern hospitality, Georgia asked. "Who the fuck are you?" Looking him up and down she noticed the hand-holding going on but decided that she'd get to that later. They had things to do, people to kill, you know, that sort of thing.

«»*

Carl was taken aback and it wasn't simply because of the threat that was dressed up as a greeting or the fact that there was another person that shared Carolina's looks and that I-will-fuck-you-up-ness aura. It was none of that. It was the ninja outfit. Though Georgia didn't have on the head thing, he

recognized the outfit for what it was. Georgia Gilchrist-Williams looked like she'd just stepped off of the set of a Zhang Yimou film. *So much for his theory that perhaps Carolina's twin was demure and sane.* This woman might be demure (in parallel universe world) but no way in hell could anyone mistake her for sane. Considering all of the Southern people that he'd met, he surmised that craziness must be a Southern thing, and damn, they did it so well.

"Obviously you don't understand perfect English, so let me slow it down for you. Tell me who the fuck you are or I'll," she began.

He didn't even need to hear the rest of that sentence. "Carl Lefevre, ma'am. I know Caro—" he stopped when he realized that Georgia had stopped paying attention to him and was now busy staring at he and Teijana's linked hands. She might not like it, but he wasn't letting go of Teijana.

"Oh shut up," he heard Teijana mumble as Georgia wagged her eyebrows at her.

"C'mon. I will kick your ass later," Georgia said while looking at him. Swinging her gaze back to Teijana, she continued. "And I'll tease you when this shit is over."

Having delivered that joyful tiding, she marched off, clearly expecting them to follow.

Taking a deep breath, he said a quick prayer and followed the ninja to who knows where, not that he particularly cared where he was going. He was merely glad that he was with Teijana.

«»*

Carl was treated to a ride that rivaled a rollercoaster, a drag race and being shot out of a cannon all rolled into one forty-five minute slot of time. Though they were on a paved road, he was sure that he was on the verge of *mal de mer*. Reciting the directions to his favorite recipes, since he felt closest to God when cooking, he surreptitiously looked for a place where he could vomit if need be. Either Georgia suspected that they were being followed by enemy ninjas or she was trying to break the sound barrier.

«»*

“What’s up with Lover-boy back there?” Georgia asked Teijana as she drove.

Accustomed to the Gilchrist-Williams sisters’ brand of piloting anything that had wheels, Teijana sat back and enjoyed the ride confident that they’d arrive mostly in one piece.

“What?” Teijana answered a question with a question, knowing that that particular quirk annoyed the shit out of most people. Being that no one in the Gilchrist-Williams family was ‘most’ people, she wasn’t surprised when Georgia simply threw her head back and laughed.

“It’s not like you to need back up,” Georgia said casually. Though her laughter came to a slow stop, the grin plastered all over her face didn’t go anywhere.

“Take that back!” Teijana cried all insulted at the suggestion that *she*—Teijana Bailey, the bringer of the detailed battle plan with scientific advances that would have made her billions if she’d let on that she was so freaking smart—so did not appreciate Georgia mocking her. How rude!

“I’m just saying...it’s not like you to travel with *company*,” Georgia waggled her fucking eyebrows suggestively...*again*!

“Don’t make me hurt you,” Teijana said calmly as her lips slid into a pout.

“You wish,” Georgia chortled happily.

Enjoying the banter, even though most of it was at her expense, Teijana needed more details. “Is she all right?” Teijana asked, seriousness etched into her features as she asked after her best friend.

“Can we talk in front of him?” Georgia jerked her head in the direction of Carl who was stuffed in the back seat.

Teijana smiled inwardly. Georgia was trying to rile Carl, who’d insisted that he was going to be her traveling companion when she’d set out. Once he’d discovered that Carolina needed help, she knew that there would be no shaking him. Despite being so much like her brothers (in some ways) Carl was decent. Still, she knew that Georgia was aware of who Carl was, but as always; trial by fire was the way Georgia did things.

“He’s fine,” Teijana answered biting the inside of her bottom lip as she tried to keep her grin at bay. *Hell yeah, that motherfucker is fine her clitoris exclaimed.*

Teijana watched as Georgia became serious. Taking a deep breath, Georgia began the tale of Carolina’s new baby boy and the circumstances surrounding his birth, life and the number one fact that her baby twin wasn’t giving him up for any damn thing.

Teijana listened as Georgia spoke, sorting every bit of information into the internal database that served as her brain. Folders were created as well as different headings for each until Teijana had five folders full of data that she’d thoroughly analyzed and could recall at will. Yeah, she may have five

folders, but she had only one possible outcome: Carolina was keeping her baby.

“So what are you thinking?” Georgia asked.

“I’m thinking that even though northern Colorado isn’t known for being all that hot a week before October, that if anyone tries to take Carolina’s baby from her, it’s going to get hotter than the hinges on the gates of hell.”

“And that’s why I called you,” Georgia said as she drove on.

«»*

David looked on as his Momma hugged the woman she introduced as ‘crazy, lunatic, genius.’ She was pretty—not as pretty as his Momma though—and fun. And she was just as crazy as his Momma, both of his aunts and his big sister. Yep, he liked her...and he liked her even more when she embraced him and introduced herself as his Aunt Teijana.

“And I don’t give a damn what your momma says, I get to spend time with you and I can spoil you all I want to,” his Aunt Teijana announced loudly and with a smile as she tugged him down next to her.

“Remember what I said about other mommas, baby,” his Momma said before she mouthed the word ‘germs.’

Smiling, he answered his Momma. “Yes, Momma. I remember. And I love you.”

Sitting next to his new aunt, he looked at the big white man who’d arrived with her. He was all prepared to hate him when he heard his dad, his brother Samson, and his Uncle Mosé discussing him. His dad was angry because he suspected that the man liked his Momma; Samson was angry because he suspected that the man liked his big sister; and his Uncle Mosé was really angry because he was related to the man that had caused Mariana to cry. The men in their family were real particular about the women...and he could understand why. He was real particular about them too. Right now he couldn’t fight that well, but he made a note to add the man who’d made his sister cry to his list of men he was going to have what his Momma called ‘a word of prayer’ with later on.

As far as Mr. Lefevre liking his Momma or his big sister, he was just going to have to get over that because his Momma belonged to him and dad and his big sister belonged to Samson.

He watched as his Momma and his big sister took turns hugging the man. Until then, he’d never really seen his Momma hug any other man that wasn’t related to her. Seeing that, he realized that he didn’t really like that. It wasn’t because the man might like his Momma. No, he just didn’t like any

man touching his Momma that wasn't his dad. Without thinking about what he was doing, he got up and squeezed himself between his Momma and the man. He wasn't sure how his Momma would feel about him getting in grown folk's business, but he noticed that as always, she paused in what she was doing and kissed him before hugging him close to her.

"Carl, this is my baby, David," his Momma introduced. "David, this is my friend Carl Lefevre. Carl is under the misguided impression that he can cook better than me." She smiled.

"Hello, Mr. Lefevre," he began. He remembered to call the man 'mister' because his Momma was real big on manners and he didn't want to do anything to disappoint her. Seeing all of the men glaring at the man, he spoke. "I'm glad that you're my Momma's friend, but she belongs to me and my dad. Okay?"

"I understand, David," the man said. "And I must congratulate you and your dad on your fine taste. One day when I have a son, I hope that he is as protective of his mother as you are of yours."

David was all prepared to hate the man, but looking at him he didn't see any malice. And though he looked at his Momma and Mariana he didn't look at them like his dad looked at his Momma, his Uncle Mosé looked at his Aunt Virginia, or Samson looked at Mariana. No, the man looked at them like he looked at them—with awe. Ducking his head a little,

he smiled looking at the man look at his Aunt Georgia. He looked at her like he was a little bit scared. No, he couldn't hate this man, but seeing how he was looking at his Aunt Teijana he was going to have to keep an eye on him.

«»*

Samson, Mosé, and Mackenzie all stood stiffly in the corner of the room glaring at Carl. They were all tense as their women hugged him; then again they were tense whenever any man got too close to their women. As soon as they settled Teijana, they were going to drive the Frenchman into Boulder and tuck him up into a nice hotel—away from their women.

Mackenzie watched as his son inserted himself between that man and his momma. He couldn't help the smile that settled over his face. Yep, his son was cock-blocking hard. It hadn't escaped his notice that David never allowed any other men close to his momma. Hearing David warn off the other man, he tensed. Normally, David was a lot more subtle, but not this time. Tensely, he waited for the other man's reaction to his son's warning. Seeing it, he sighed knowing that he wouldn't be taking the Frenchman to a hotel.

“Dammit, he had to go and be decent,” Mosé groused.

“Yeah. I guess that I cannot beat him to within an inch of his life when it’s obvious that it’s Teijana that he wants,” Samson growled.

“So should I put him in the room next to her?” Mackenzie asked.

“Definitely,” the men said watching as David moved to protect Teijana.

Chapter 17 *and Then Some Oh, No, You Didn't*

A heavily pregnant Destiny Mann exited the sleek black 1970 Plymouth Barracuda that she had lovingly restored over the past year. It had been a monumental year with her meeting, marrying and procreating with Jack Mann—the Supreme Alpha of the Black Ridge Pack and also the Northern Hemisphere.

“Honey—” Jack called out, like she gave a damn.

She didn't even spare him a glance as she stomped away from the car she'd petulantly allowed him to drive since she was unable to being that she could barely fit behind the wheel, which was his fucking fault. At eight and three-quarters months pregnant, she was huge. Even if she could've squeezed her giant stomach behind the wheel she didn't want to do anything to hurt their baby. She smiled thinking of her baby but being that she was the one having to deal with all of the consequences of Jack's potency, she became pissed off all over again. Her being mad at him was never good and being pregnant and mad was even worse. But today she was pissed off to a whole 'nother power...and it was

all Jackass's fault. When he'd told her the true reason they were going to visit one of his distant relatives, it had taken everything she had not to smack him back in time right back into his momma's womb.

"Honey," her husband called again.

"Fuck you, Jackass! I want no fucking part of this shit!" Destiny shouted over her shoulder at her husband as she marched—well as best a heavily pregnant woman could march—up to the door of the log style home owned by one of the best friends of his cousin Samson Madeira.

"Honey!" Jack tried again.

Destiny didn't have to look at him to know that he was fucking smiling. Instead of getting the hell out of dodge like most men did whenever she showed any bit of temper, the jackass got all hot and bothered. That was how she'd gotten pregnant in the first place. Not that she wasn't just as needy as he was. Closing her eyes, she recalled the few times that she'd seen her man angry—and the hot lovemaking that had followed. Jack was beautiful in his anger, only because it was never directed at her. He only raved when she put herself in danger, and even then he did it whilst fucking her. She remembered the night at the Locke Brotherhood mansion when he'd ripped the doors off of the hinges and stalked to her

demanding that she come to him. Sighing, she had to call upon her will to refrain from fanning herself.

“I am so not listening to you!” she yelled before the door was opened by a woman who was a lot taller, but just as curvaceous as her. An imposing figure, she looked like she’d straight kick ass in a bar fight, not that she was allowed to do any fighting anymore. Sighing and ignoring her husband who was on her heels, she stuck her hand out and spoke her mind.

“Hi, I’m Destiny Mann and my husband’s a dick.”

«»*

“Carolina, it’s for you,” Georgia yelled as she stepped back from the door. They were expecting Mr. Mann, as he’d rung Samson a few hours ago. What they hadn’t expected was the spitfire that he had as a wife. She looked like she was a first-class shit starter, and being Carolina’s twin, she recognized a shit starter when she saw one. Even though she looked as if she could drop that baby any second, she was raising hell even as her sheepish husband entered the house. And she wasn’t even being polite about it. Destiny Mann looked like her kind of chick.

«»*

David looked at the Mann brothers and their wives as best he could from where he sat shielded by his Momma, his Aunt Georgia and his new Aunt Teijana. He was quiet as they talked because a) he knew better than to get in grown folks business even if he was that business and b) he was busy stealing peeks at the men who sat around the huge den. He remembered Josiah from the canine sanctuary where he and Mackenzie had gotten his dogs from. Inwardly, he shook his head. Every moment of the day he was amazed that he was so blessed. Not only could he shower every day, but he ate hearty meals several times a day, slept in a comfortable bed every night (and at nap times), and even more amazing was that he could sleep without fear. It had taken him a little bit to get over being scared but he'd quickly found out how fierce the womenfolk were when it came to him. They all took turns taking care of him even though he could take care of himself. When he'd told them that, they'd all had the same reaction: they smiled and hugged him and then went right back to spoiling him.

Though he liked everything, the best thing was *his* Momma. Nobody took care of him like his Momma. All of the women looked after him, pampered him, talked to and with him, but they weren't his Momma. His Momma had seen him and just took

him. He'd never forget that moment when she'd literally snatched him from his dad's hold and hugged him to her. Even though he was dirty; even though he smelled bad; even though he was raggedy; even though he was a thief; even though he wasn't very smart, she'd held him to her and started loving him. She'd even kissed him before he had a bath. And when she started taking care of him she didn't just give him leftover anything...she gave him the best of everything and demanded that everyone else do the same. He was so loved by his Momma that he was having a hard time remembering how he'd ever lived without her. Every time that he thought of his Momma he thought of God and how could he not. God had given him his Momma and if God chose not to do anything else for him that was okay because God had given him so much.

His Momma was all of the best things. Though she spoiled him she also corrected him. No one else had ever bothered to correct him. They only yelled at him, hit him, or ignored him. His Momma did none of those things. She loved him and she had expectations for him. She expected him to be a Christian; she expected him to be an upstanding citizen; she expected him to treat all people well—starting with himself.

She didn't take any nonsense—not that he was planning on engaging in any—from anyone. Every-

one in their family knew it, but he suspected that the Mann brothers did not. That was why they didn't know they were wasting their breath and their time trying to convince his Momma to let them take him since they were distantly related. They would learn...probably while they were getting told off and/or beaten. His Momma was looking mighty fierce. He was a little bit scared for the Mann brothers. Though she was quiet, he knew that her mind was going full throttle. He'd been up under his Momma enough to know that when she was quiet, she was the most dangerous. He squeezed closer to her and as always she paused and hugged him back before kissing him.

Doing what he could to reassure his Momma, he went back to peeking at the Mann brothers. All five of them were big and they shared the same eye color. They also had that same air of *'don't eff with me'* that his Momma currently had. Though the Mann brothers were impressive, they paled in comparison to their wives...and though beautiful and interesting their wives paled in comparison to the women in his family. And even they paled in comparison to his Momma although they did the best that they could.

His Auntie Virginia was doing most of the talking. His Auntie Georgia had added a few things but was mostly silent and watchful...and real close to

him. His Momma had opted to remain silent. She simply held him tight to her. He could feel her tenseness so he held her back, not wanting her to jump up and suddenly go on a killing spree.

The Mann brothers' wives were an interesting bunch. Mrs. Destiny Mann was a whole lot like his Momma. In fact, the two of them were busy glaring holes into Jack who was also being grilled, scratch that, told off by his Aunt Virginia. Jamieson Mann's wife Sunny was sitting beside Aunt Georgia and though Georgia was doing all of the talking Sunny was nodding and commenting in the right places in between glaring at her husband. Jaron Mann's wife, Tag (funny name), was laughing with Mariana about something. She smiled a lot—when she wasn't glaring at her husband—and David was positive that her skin actually *glittered*! Jared and Josiah's wives were Chloe and Morgan, but they were busy being the Amen corner. Whenever the women in his family said something they simply nodded their heads and said things like, '*mmm hmm, tell it, Amen.*' They were the only ones not glaring at their husbands and that's probably because they refused to look at them at all.

It didn't seem to matter how their wives looked at them or didn't look at them. The Mann brothers all looked at their wives like his dad looked at his

momma. That was, they looked at them like they were hungry.

He looked around him (as best he could) and smiled. He didn't know how it had happened but somehow all of the women—including the Mann wives—were surrounding him. Everyone had started out spaced a good distance apart but somehow all of the women had inched closer and closer until he was in danger of being lost in a sea of impressive women all intent on protecting him. Even the little girl that was on Josiah's lap had made her way over to the throng of women and squeezed up next to him. He didn't spare her a glance because he was busy trying to listen to what was going on; he simply moved closer to his Momma so she'd have some room.

«»*

Jack spoke so that they all could hear, but he knew to whom he must appeal: the woman that had the dragon child so close to her that he was damn near in her lap. When they'd first started their conversation, the dragon child had been surrounded by three women. Now, only ten minutes later, he was surrounded by every female in the room—including their wives. Sighing, he tried once more.

"Your son is extraordinary," he paused. He didn't know how much they knew about the other-

worldly community and he didn't want to freak them out. Humans still freaked out about other humans of different races and religions moving into their neighborhoods. What would they do if they realized that there were different species living in their gated communities?

During his brief pause Mackenzie spoke. "Tell us something that we *don't* know," he said harshly.

Before he could respond, the woman who considered the dragon child hers, finally spoke. "I've listened patiently while you spoke and until now you haven't said anything worth hearing. You indicated that David is our son—ours. Yes, he is and he is also extraordinary but we don't need you to point that out to us," she said as she pulled the dragon child tighter to her.

Oh, hell. His gut told him that regardless of what he said this woman wasn't letting the dragon child go. It was just as obvious that the dragon child didn't want to go. It hadn't gone unnoticed that the dragon child maintained constant contact with the woman he viewed as his mother. Before he'd come Josiah had told him that the man named Mackenzie had a special bond with the dragon child, but he didn't say anything about the fierce woman.

'That's because she wasn't with them,' his brother answered in his head. *'And even if she was*

would it make any difference? Would we still be here?

'No, it wouldn't have made any difference,' Jack answered. He belongs with his own kind.

Looking at Carolina, Jack tried again. "His parents are," he began.

"Us," Carolina and Mackenzie spoke simultaneously.

"I'm sorry, his birth father—" he tried again.

"Piece of shit is how he's referred to in this house—with our apologies to shit," Carolina spoke coldly.

"That's what they call him," the woman who was obviously the twin to the dragon child's mother began. "I like to call him DMF—Dead Mother Fucker."

"All right, then. Here it is: David's not human. The woman that carried David in her body was dragon. The man that fertilized her is a wolf shifter."

It didn't go unnoticed that no one flinched although the dragon child's eyes got big.

"What am I, Momma?" The dragon child asked with concern.

"Our son and you're staying with us so don't get any ideas," Carolina told the dragon child.

"You still want me even though," he began.

It was comical watching the woman drag damn near six and a half foot of gangly dragon child in her

lap. “Restriction. I have told you about asking ridiculous questions. You’re damned right we want you,” she said as she kissed him and hugged him tighter. He was sure that the dragon child would have bruising from her hugs. And he was just as sure that the dragon child would not care.

Jack continued. “His people—”

“Are about two seconds away from handing you your ass,” Carolina effectively cut him off.

“My little brother’s a dragon? That is so freaking cool!” Mariana exclaimed.

Jack was sure that if he could get headaches, he would’ve had one. “Since his birth mother disappeared, the council of the dragons and has been searching for him.”

“Well now you’ve found him. Thanks,” Carolina said.

“The dragon child,” he began.

Carolina took a deep breath and started speaking. And when she spoke the first word, a chill raced down his spine. She wasn’t yelling, but he’d actually rather she did instead of that crazed, shaky whisper that she used. It was clear that she was trying hard to hold on to her temper. “First, our son has a name and it isn’t dragon child. His name is David Gilchrist-Williams Roberts.”

Jack wanted to physically back up from this woman. He watched as she held her hand out as if to

ward off the crazy that was seeping out of her. “Second, my baby has suffered...” she almost choked on that last word. Breathing deeply she continued. “He has suffered damn. Near. Twelve. Years. Of...” She drew the word out. “Abuse,” she hissed.

“He’s only twelve?” Jack asked.

“Shut the fuck up when I’m talking, please,” she whispered. Even though she whispered her voice wobbled from emotion, which everyone in the room recognized as rage. Any other time he’d be amused that even whilst cussing him out, that Southern politeness came out. He’d never had a sentence directed at him that had both the command to ‘shut the fuck up’ and the polite addition of ‘please’ in it.

“My baby is through,” she articulated that last word. “Suffering,” she whispered dramatically as she nodded her head vigorously. “You motherfuckers...” She actually pronounced the –er ending on the word motherfucker.

“And by motherfuckers, I mean dragons, shifters, trolls under a fucking bridge, Loch Ness Monster, people who don’t like gravy or sweet iced tea, what...the...fuck ever,” she gritted out.

“Are sad-ly,” she broke the word into its phonetic parts, “...mistaken if you think that you’re going to take *our* baby. Ours. Ours. She reiterated the word several times just in case they didn’t understand that she considered David theirs.

“Away from *us*?” Carolina paused and broke into a chorus of laughter that could only be described as maniacal—and that was a lenient description for the bone-chilling sound that erupted from within her. I—” she stressed. “Don’t,” she pronounced sounding suddenly as if she was from northern Minnesota. “Think. *Sooooo*,” she finished. “No. No. No. No. *Mmm mmm*. Not *happeningggggg*.” She shook as she finished the word. Closing her eyes and hugging her baby closer, she lapsed into a strange mix of praying and cussing and threatening.

«»*

Carolina listened to those motherfuckers and somewhere between their greeting and their ridiculous suggestion of taking her baby, she’d lost her fucking mind. She was trying...Lord knows, she was trying to remain calm being that there was a little girl present but from the look on the Mann brothers’ faces she wasn’t succeeding. Taking a deep breath, she’d made an effort to smile, which only served to magnify the crazy. Hearing that everyone had quieted down, she’d stopped talking aloud and kept all her evil thoughts inside, where she could control them better.

I don’t think anyone or anything should try and take my baby. I’ll kill everyone, here. Okay,

wait that sounds crazy. Okay, I'll kill everyone but not my baby boy because he's my baby-baby. And not Mariana, because she's my baby too, but not my baby-baby, but she's still the baby like she reminds me. Yeah. Okay, and not my sisters because then mom would be all mad...and plus they got my back in the killing spree. And not Samson because he's my baby's man. And not Mackenzie because he's my man and I've still got more outfits. I'm going to fuck that fine ass bastard into a coma after we get married. That wedding better be soon because he's one hella good man. He loves my son...and he loves me. Yeah, he's mine so I can't kill him. And I can't kill any of the women because well, they're the bearers and sustainers of life. It's not their fault that their husbands are assholes. It's not, so I'm not going to kill them. Plus Destiny's pregnant and she's good people. I don't know why her crazy ass husband dragged her out when she's about to have that baby. If I did chicks I'd take her from him because he doesn't deserve her. Luckily, I saw Mackenzie before I saw her or I'd take her from Jack. So, that just leaves the Mann brothers but killing them would leave their women sad. Dammit, the pickings on my killing spree are getting mighty slim and that's just wrong because clearly someone's going to have to die because no one is taking my baby. Oh, how about the dragons. Dragoncide sounds like a good

possibility. I wonder if dragon tastes like chicken? Anyway, once I'm on the killing spree, I'll go find that POS that hurt my baby and kill him too. Okay, so killing off the dragons—except for my baby. Goodness, he's so beautiful and smart and handsome ... and mine and no one should try to take him from me. Yeah, so killing off the dragons and POS. Okay, going to need to find a good going-on-a-killing-spreed outfit so when the authorities catch me I'll look fly. I don't want my baby to be ashamed of his Momma. I don't deserve him but I'm keeping him. Yep, he's mine. God said.'

Hearing that fine ass Mackenzie call her name brought her out of her little fantasy.

"Sweetness?"

"Yes, darling," she answered.

"I think that perhaps you should lie down," Mackenzie said.

"No, I'm not tired. I feel great," she began. She stopped when she felt her son rocking side-to-side and singing a chorus of la-la-la-las.

Gently removing David's hands from his ears, she spoke. "Baby, what's wrong?"

"You're saying stuff that you want to do to Dad and to that lady if you didn't know Dad," he whispered.

"No, I don't think so."

"Yes, Momma you did. I can't know about my parents doing stuff," he said.

"Are you sure that I said that out loud? I was sure I was merely thinking it. Can you read minds?"

"No. I don't think so. You said it, Momma," he insisted.

"Yeah, Little Sister, you did. You said that you're going to fuck Mackenzie into a coma," Virginia added.

"Yeah, but let's talk about the killing spree," Teijana said.

"What killing spree?" Carolina asked.

"The one you're plotting without us, which is just damn wrong," Georgia said. You already have that fine ass, Mackenzie. You cannot bogard the killing spree. I mean seriously, you should share. I'm telling Momma if you don't share."

"I'm not going on a killing spree, *per se*. I'm just going to kill a whole bunch of dragons and POS," she said.

"Well, we are coming along. It's only right," Georgia spat.

"Yeah, what she said," Teijana threw in.

"Fine, gosh. I'll share. Let's go get some going-to-commit-dragoncide shoes," Carolina said.

"Sweetness, I'm going to have to," Mackenzie started. "No," he finished. "No killing spree right now, okay?"

“Mackenzie, Mackenzie, Mackenzie. You’re so cute when you try and stop a cooperative killing spree,” she smiled as he and David both wrapped their arms around her.

«»*

Jack watched as his wife and all of the Mann women sided with the humans about the issue of the dragon child. Jack knew that Destiny was truly pissed at him but he’d been appointed as the messenger by Gaia and her husband Drake who’d recently discovered the existence of David who’d been lost to their people for the last twelve years. The dragon child was someone important and Drake had visited him a few nights ago as he thought it would go over better if someone with a connection to the family approached them about relinquishing the dragon child to their care. Jack laughed bitterly. He didn’t think that it would matter who approached that woman. She wasn’t giving up the dragon child. And he felt sorry for anyone who tried to take him from her.

“I simply came to talk,” Jack spoke directly to Carolina and Mackenzie. They gave him a ‘go to hell’ look for his efforts.

Sighing, Jack decided to appeal to his cousin, who was named after Jack’s own father. He spoke

quietly so that he wouldn't upset the family any more than he already had.

"Samson, cousin, you know that regardless of what I think that I'd never snatch a child from their family."

Samson raised his eyebrows at his distant cousin as he shook his head. "Jack, actions speak louder than words."

«»*

Samson was so glad that Morgan had covered that little girl's ears because wow, just wow. He'd never really heard so much crazy in such a small space. His *Somente Mina* wasn't helping—at all. Nope, she was currently sitting next to Destiny Mann sharing a tin of oatmeal raisin cookies watching the crazy play out like it was a motion picture.

Rising, Samson spoke. "I think that you should leave, cousin."

The Mann brothers rose *en masse* and held out their hands to their wives. Jack wanted to try once more but after that chilling display he thought better of it. Carolina and the women of her lineage surpassed any kind of crazy he'd ever encountered. And that was saying something being that he was married to Destiny. His beautiful wife hit him in the arm before snuggling up to his chest.

“I would never condone the taking of a child from his parents, Carolina. I apologize for upsetting you,” Jack said sincerely. The rest of the Mann brothers walked out silently while their wives threw apologetic looks over their shoulders. It was only when the first of the powerful cars started that Carolina relaxed—well as much as a crazed momma could.

“No one’s taking him, Sweetness,” Mackenzie crooned as he rocked her and their son in his big arms. Carolina nodded jerkily but didn’t speak as she reveled in the love she felt for her family.

«»*

David closed his eyes and hugged his Momma. Once again, she’d exceeded his puny expectations. When the man had divulged (yep, yet another word that she’d taught him) that he was dragon and shifter, she hadn’t even cared. He smiled recalling her dragging him across her lap and rocking him. She’d restricted him and hugged him harder telling him that he was hers and that was all that there was to it. How could he not smile even whilst hugging her to calm her down? Hearing the stuff she said about him and for him, he felt ten feet tall. Of course, he could’ve done without the bit about what she wanted to do to his dad and that lady but other than that, he

knew that he was well-loved. And not just by his Momma; but by everyone, although his Momma was the one that mattered the most because she took up the most room in his heart.

He almost felt sorry for the Mann brothers. In his almost thirteen years, he'd heard some bad things—most of it directed at him—but he'd never heard anything like that. Never had he been cold, but when his Momma spoke those threats, a shiver had raced down his spine and spread throughout his body. The Mann brothers had no idea who they were messing with when they came here wanting to take him someplace away from his Momma. They may think that his Momma was crazy (they better not tell him that though because after his Auntie Georgia finished teaching him the ways of the ninja, he'd exact revenge on them later for that), but he knew that his Momma was not playing. She'd go on a killing spree over him. Not that he wanted her to, but she would. Whereas everyone in his past had fought him, this woman fought for him. Hugging her tighter, he kissed the top of her head.

Chapter 18

We Interrupt This Chapter to Bring You a...Damn, You Got Knocked the Fuck Out

Ion scanned the stack of light green cards that announced that several attempts had been made to deliver a certified letter. Certified mail generally meant something legal. Who would be sending him something legal besides a job? Screwing up his face he thought about who would be sending him certified mail. Stuffing the card into his jeans pocket, he walked up the back steps of the dilapidated house that he came back to when he wore out his welcome with whatever broad had taken his fancy. Rubbing his hands across his square jaw, he thought about the latest one. She hadn't been much to look at but what was between her thighs was as good as if it'd been attached to a better-looking woman. He'd long ago cowered the bitch but her fucking brothers were another story. Those shotgun-toting bastards had migrated here from somewhere in the backwoods and frankly, the pussy hadn't been worth the constant threat of being filled with lead. Oh well, he'd soon find another bitch to replace her.

The world was filled with lonely women with soft hearts who longed for a good-looking man like him to pay them attention. Being around women he knew the things that they wanted to hear. He did whatever it took to gain their trust. Sometimes, when he wanted some quick pussy he simply found a woman in need. Those women were the easiest. Usually they had an abusive boyfriend or some other problem that he easily took care of, thereby ingratiating himself with them. It wasn't long before he was tucked-up in their beds getting treated like the king that he was.

Now he was going to have to start fresh. Go through the trouble of finding another woman. Walking through the house he wondered where that stupid kid was. He'd raised the ungrateful little shit that his bitch of a wife had trapped him with. Ion scowled as he listened for the bastard kid. Hearing nothing he continued walking through the house wondering where the sniveling-waste-of-space was. It wasn't like he was in school. Maybe he was out working. The little bastard needed to earn his keep and pay him back for keeping a roof over his head.

"Dumbass! Where are you boy?!" Ion yelled out for the little shit. He didn't bother using his name—then again he couldn't remember it, not that it mattered. The kid would answer to whatever name he called him if he didn't want a good hiding. Receiving

no answer, he used his *shifter* senses to search for him. Feeling no sign of the fucking bastard, he went to the fridge for a beer. Opening it, the first thing he did was do a tally to make sure that the little shit hadn't filched one. Since the only thing that he kept in the fridge was beer it didn't take him long to do the count, besides he was good with numbers. All sixty long necks accounted for; he grabbed one, opened it and took a quick sip. He sighed as the cool liquid hit the back of his throat. Now all he needed was some grub. There wasn't any need for him to look in the cabinets for food, besides if any was there that ungrateful shit had probably eaten it, which is why he'd stopped buying it. Kid was damn near seven feet tall; he could get his own damn food. He was too damn big to be eating up the grub he'd gotten for himself. Dammit, he'd have to go back to town to procure some. First, he'd get some food; then he'd deal with that ungrateful shit that had the audacity to call him 'dad.'

Finishing off his beer, he slammed out of the front door almost missing the note taped to the door. Reading it, he smiled. Someone had the little brat—and not just anyone, but Mackenzie Roberts. He knew that name. Hell, he'd briefly worked for the man until he'd been fired for...Fuck it, that wasn't important. What was important was that Mr. Roberts was rich and so was his best friend Samson

Madeira. He bet that's what all of the notices at the post office were for. Digging around in his pocket he pulled them out and smiled. He was getting ready to get paid and hopefully, he could get rid of the little brat in the process. Looking at his beat up truck and run down house he wondered what the going price was for a kid.

«»*

Having filled his belly, he took his time reading the letter. It was on fancy, thick paper—the kind rich people used for correspondence. Apparently, Dumbass had been taken-in by Mackenzie and now some woman named Carolina wanted him to sign over the rights to the little shit. He'd never heard of her but if she wanted the useless little fuck she sure as hell was going to pay for the right. The corner of his cruel mouth lifted in a smile. He was going to get paid today *and* if all went well he was also going to be rid of the little bastard that was more trouble than he'd even been worth. Already spending the money in his head, he thought of the new truck he'd get and the women he'd be able to impress. *Oh, yeah, this was turning out to be a damn good day.*

«»*

“We are truly leaving?” Jamieson Mann, the eldest of the Mann brothers asked Jack. He watched as Jack—the Alpha of their pack and the Northern Hemisphere—gathered himself.

Rubbing his temple with thumb and forefinger, Jack sighed. He heard the note of surprise in Jamieson’s voice. Knowing that all of his brothers were awaiting his instructions, he began speaking.

“I do not want to anger this family anymore than we have and it is obvious that he is well-cared for and loved,” Jack said with a shake of his head sneaking a peek at Carolina Gilchrist-Williams who was still glaring a hole in him...and still hugging the dragon child, oops, David, to her.

“And if the father of the dragon child arrives? Do you believe that the family will be able to keep him?” Jamieson asked.

“Do you think that they will be safe?” Josiah added with raised brows.

All of the Mann brothers had been privy to the information about David being that they were his closest council and they’d all been present when Drake—Jaron’s father-in-law and Tag’s father—had approached them a few days earlier.

“I will send guards of the pack—” Jack began when he was cut off by Jared, who’d been surveying the area silently.

"I can feel another *shifter* with malevolence on his mind coming this way," he announced as he pointed to the vehicle heading up the long driveway to the house.

The Mann brothers formed a protective front line in front of their vehicles. He knew that all of them would be extra vigilant being that their wives were present, and Josiah would be even more mental being that his daughter was present. Sighing, he wondered if that was enough when his cousin called out to them.

"Jack, bring your women and niece back to the safety of the house," Samson ordered.

He watched as his women were ushered into the house. Later, he'd smile at the irony of the males attempting to protect what were all-in-all some of the most dangerous beings he'd ever encountered and that was saying a lot considering he counted vampires and dragons among his friends. Still, as men they could do nothing less than protect the females.

Turning his attention back to the vehicle, he noted that the driver took his time. Standing shoulder-to-shoulder, there could be no mistaking their intent: they were gearing up for an encounter with the driver of the truck. When the rundown truck came to a halt a few feet from them, the brothers directed all of their attention to the threat.

«»*

“Shit,” Ion cursed as he saw the Alpha of the Territory standing with his brothers outside of Mackenzie’s house. He didn’t have time for this. Already, he’d wasted valuable daylight trekking over to Samson Madeira’s spread only to be told that the family was at Mackenzie’s house. He snarled recalling the chilly reception that he’d received there. That place was guarded like it was fucking Fort Knox. It wasn’t that he wasn’t sure that he could take Tom or the rest of the guys present; it was that he knew that Tom was, well, a son-of-a-bitch when riled. Tom had been one of the ones who’d dragged him off of the kid he’d been pounding on for daring to speak to him before being spoken to. When he’d looked in Tom’s eyes he saw all that he’d needed to. That man wouldn’t cower; he’d shoot him and be done with it. Being that he was about to be paid, he let it go and made the short ride to Mackenzie’s house.

And now this. Damn. He’d been hoping he wouldn’t have to deal with his own species, but, he had his free pass and Alpha couldn’t touch him without major repercussions. Being that Jack was known for being a play-by-the-rules guy he knew that he was safe. And more importantly, he was about to be paid. After he received his money, he’d never have to

deal with these assholes again. He couldn't help but smile as he exited his truck.

* «*» *

"Alpha," the pretty-boy shifter greeted, as he bowed his head slightly in Jack's direction.

Knowing that his brothers were all glaring in the interloper's direction, he spoke.

"What brings you here, Ion?" Jack asked the *shifter* that had been given Lone Wolf status by the Alpha of his small pack. What had been a move to attempt to offset some of Ion's grief over the death of his wife almost a decade ago had turned out to be a bad move. Ion had been causing shit ever since, but since the bulk of his shit was done off of pack lands, he didn't really have reason to discipline the fool. Jack was aware that the other man's Lone Wolf status was due for renewal. Being that Ion's past was littered with shady goings-on since he insisted on mixing with the bottom-feeders of any being he encountered, be it otherworldly or human, that renewal would not be granted.

"Oh, so this greeting isn't in my honor?" Ion asked snidely.

He felt Jamieson tense beside him.

'Easy, Jamieson. Our first thought must be for the safety of those inside. Keep the humans and our

wives and children safe,' Jack spoke directly into his brothers' heads.

"Son, what is wrong?" Samson Mann asked inside Jack's mind.

'Lone wolf Ion has arrived on Mackenzie Roberts' land,' Jack informed his father via their telepathic link.

'Beware of him Alpha. Ion is not to be trusted. There is a darkness in him that has only grown over the past decade.'

Acknowledging his father's words, Jack closed the link. Sharing the information with his brothers, he watched as they stationed themselves close to the porch of Mackenzie's house. Samson, along with Mackenzie, Mosé, and Carl, had long ago taken up positions in front of the women. All four men wore that give-me-one-reason-to-rain-down-a-beat down look and considering what they were protecting he couldn't blame them. As dangerous as they looked, the women were the scariest. It was obvious that they didn't appreciate any kind of threat to them or theirs. David's wide eyes showed true fear, but being that he was busy trying to keep his mother in the circle of his arms, he suspected that the dragon child's fear was for his mother, not himself.

"What are you doing here, Ion?" Jack asked again. This time his tone was demanding and cold.

"I've got business with Roberts," Ion stated.

“You’re damned right you do,” Mackenzie’s voice vibrated with leashed anger as he began to stride towards Ion. In that moment Jack realized exactly *who* Ion was and *what* he was doing there. That motherfucker was the man who passed himself off as David’s father, which meant that Ion was the bastard who’d abused David! Jack felt his canines explode in his mouth. Sharing his discovery with his brothers via their telepathic link, he wasn’t surprised when they had similar reactions. Of course that bastard Ion didn’t notice. He was too busy showing exactly how much of an asshole he was.

* «*» *

Ion couldn’t believe this shit. All he wanted was his fucking money and to get rid of that useless brat. First, the men at Samson’s house had all looked at him like he was scum and now not only was the Alpha of the Black Ridge Pack—and all of his brothers—here confronting him, he had a bevy of uppity black women all looking at him like he wasn’t shit. His shifter hearing had allowed him to hear their not-so-quiet feelings. As soon as they’d discovered who he was choruses of profanities coupled with insults, the like of which had trumped all he’d heard were directed his way. His annoyance coupled with his non-existent temper had got the

better of him. Instead of simply signing over the boy and getting some cash, he'd felt compelled to show these fucking humans just who was in charge of these negotiations. When it was over, he'd have fully made his point. He would show Mackenzie Roberts and the rest of these humans just why few dared fuck with him and to top it off, he'd have his money and his freedom from the responsibility of that little brat. Maybe he'd leave that little brat with a good beating. You know, one for the road. If he was feeling up to it, he just might smack that bitch around who was hugging that dumb, thieving brat to her all the while glaring at him—six and a half feet and 280 pounds of shifter in his prime—like he wasn't shit. Maybe for good measure he'd fuck her right in front of Mackenzie and the brat just to show them who was in charge. See how much they'd want the useless shit then.

He wasn't worried about the Black Ridge Pack. Why should he be when he had a free pass? Besides, they'd be too concerned about their own bitches, especially Jack, whose bitch looked about ready to drop any minute now. No need to worry now, and when it was time to worry, he'd be long gone.

Switching his attention to Mackenzie, he snarled. He hated that man. Just who the fuck did Mackenzie Roberts' think he was? Talking to him

like he was shit? It wasn't like Mackenzie's shit didn't stink. He might be a respectable business man now, but his family had come from less than nothing. Asshole. Looking at the fire in the other man's eyes, he didn't even bother to hold back the taunt that was just behind his lips. Mackenzie might be big, but he was confident that he could take him. After all, he was bigger; he was meaner; he was shifter...and he had something that Mackenzie Roberts wanted.

"Well, here I am, Mackenzie," he sneered.

"You took your time," Mackenzie gritted, this time not even attempting to conceal his anger.

"Well, I took my time so that you'd have time to gather the money it's going to cost you to keep the little shit."

"Do not refer to my son like that again," Mackenzie snarled.

"Well then, I'll simply refer to him as, oh I know. Since it's obvious that that black woman," he paused to point at Carolina, "is the one who wants him—and I don't know why, nor do I care—I have the perfect name for him. How was it that the late owner of that baseball team in Cincinnati referred to her best player? Yes, he's my million-dollar nig—" he started. His words were cut off by the sounds of shotguns being pumped and safeties being disengaged from rifles.

“That’s my son you’re talking about,” the black bitch yelled as she attempted to jump over the rail.

“Only if I consent to it, not that I’ll even pretend to know why the fuck you want the useless little fuck,” he taunted.

He sneered as he watched a fresh wave of rage wash over the woman. Sucking his teeth in disgust, he noticed the kid lock his thin arms around the woman. It was comical the way she fought so hard to get to him. The heart might be willing but the fact of the matter was that her fragile human body wasn’t able to do shit with him and he knew it even though she did not. Looking at this woman he knew that she’d fight him...to her death...and gladly over that useless kid. Stupid fucking humans. He had to give it to her though. She was feisty and was currently giving Mackenzie a hell of a fight. And she wasn’t faking it...none of them were.

Though he couldn’t smell the emotions of the otherworldlies, he could smell the emotions of the humans. Every human present wanted to harm him.

“Ah, I can sense you want to hurt me,” he taunted.

“No. We don’t want to hurt you,” that woman said in an emotionless tone. “We want to destroy you.”

He was a bit taken aback by that. In his 39 years he didn’t think that he’d ever had a woman

actually hate him that much. They lusted after him; they wanted to be dominated by him; and eventually they came to fear him, but none had had the courage to hate him...and let him know it. This woman not only showed him her hate; she put it on full display. Her hate coupled with her fight and aggression turned him on and made him want to cower her. He couldn't stop the lust that coursed through him at the prospect of making her submit. Filled with that much passion, he knew that she had to be a good fuck. Not able to resist, he taunted her with a smile. He knew that she saw it when she gave him the finger and followed it with another heartfelt profanity.

“Motherfucker!” she screamed.

“You heard my woman,” Mackenzie said through clenched teeth.

He watched as Mackenzie placed his woman into the capable hands of two large men before making his way off of the porch and strode towards him.

Ion grinned at Mackenzie, baring his teeth. He was going to take his dignity, then his woman, and then most of his wealth.

“What the fuck do you want?” he asked him.

“Sign the papers and leave. You're not welcome here,” Mackenzie said as he closed the distance between them.

Ion didn't move; he didn't need to. It wasn't like Mackenzie could make him leave before he

wanted to. Spitting at his feet, he switched his gaze from Mackenzie to David.

“Bring your useless ass over here, boy!” he called out, noticing that he had yet to release his grip on the big black woman.

“David, stay with your momma,” Mackenzie countered without taking his eyes off of him. He was a smart man not to do so.

“I’m your father, boy, and I said get over here!” he repeated. His ire continued to increase as the kid defied his commands.

“You. Are. Not. His. Father! You forfeited that right when you neglected, abused, and abandoned *my* baby,” the woman yelled. Noticing that every woman on the porch nodded their heads in agreement, he rolled his eyes. Perhaps he’d fuck them all. Well, at least the humans. He wasn’t sure if the otherworldlies would be worth the trouble.

“Oh, isn’t that sweet? You’ve bonded with him,” he sneered.

“From the moment that I laid eyes on him,” the woman said.

Realizing that his barbs weren’t really doing ought but making him want what he’d have to take, he turned his venom on the brat.

“They might want you now but do they know that besides being useless that you’re also a thief? Did you tell them that while you’re sitting up there

like you belong with them? Did you tell them how dumb you are? Can't even read. How many times have you been in the fourth grade?" Ion asked David snidely.

He heard the women all reassuring him and more than that he saw the kid believing them. Damn, he hated that kid. That damn dragon half of him prevented the familial link from allowing him to be able to sense what he was feeling. That's why he kept the boy cowered. Fear was easy to sense. Right now he didn't sense that though.

"Picking on a child is the best that you can do, huh? You need to sign the forms we sent you," Mackenzie said coldly.

"Hell yeah that's the best that he can do. He's a straight bitch," the woman yelled.

"Sign the papers," Mackenzie repeated.

He watched the other man struggle to hold his temper. Ah, he just couldn't let sleeping dogs lie when Mackenzie was so close to the edge. It would only take another comment or two to push him over. And he wanted to...push Mackenzie over that was. Actually, he'd rather push Mackenzie over a fucking cliff. Of course, he couldn't do that. That was against all kinds of rules. His Alpha might consider him all kinds of an asshole but being an asshole didn't violate any kind of rule. And what else didn't violate any

kind of rule was self-defense. All he had to do was get Mackenzie to throw the first punch.

“You can’t control your bitch, what makes you think that you can control me?” he asked to further incense Mackenzie.

“That’s my wife that you’re referencing,” Mackenzie snarled as he stepped closer.

“Well then, after I whip your ass, I’ll be sure to remind her of that when I’m fucking her,” he taunted.

“Mackenzie, get him to sign the papers *before* you whip his ass,” the woman yelled frantically.

“How about I whip his ass *and* he signs the papers?” Mackenzie threw back.

“That’ll work just fine, darlin’,” she began. “But make sure that you get him to sign those papers.”

“Sign the papers, Ion,” Mackenzie repeated.

“I don’t need to do shit. He’s *my* kid and he stays mine until I get what I want,” Ion said as he leaned casually against his truck.

Mackenzie stepped forward getting into Ions face. “What do you want?”

“Maybe I want that fine truck you have there,” he said.

“Sign the papers and it’s yours,” Mackenzie agreed.

“For starters,” he finished.

“Sign the papers,” Mackenzie said. “You’ve already tried all of my patience.”

“And that useless little fuck will try yours, but if you smack him around a little bit, he’ll soon stop doing that.”

* «*» *

There was no warning. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to pinpoint movement of any kind. The breeze literally froze mid-air. Breathing became faint; heartbeats slowed. Everything seemed to move in slow motion as Mackenzie closed in on Ion. All could only watch him in silence as he slammed his fist into his face.

Mackenzie literally saw red as Ion blithely mentioned beating his son. Later Carolina would tell him in detail everything that he did. More importantly, she would kiss him all over his bruised body showing appreciation, awe and love in every touch.

* «*» *

David watched the verbal altercation with wide eyes. His dad was amazing. And he was willing to fight—over *him*. He continued to watch in silence. Though his dad was big, he was still concerned. That man—he already knew better than to even try to

refer to him as his father—could do...stuff. Stuff like he was getting ready to do. He'd seen that look before...many times before. And every time it had brought pain.

“Dad! Get away from him!” he cried. Trying to get to his dad, he attempted to run to him. Momentarily forgetting that he was in the arms of his Momma, David made to step away from her warmth. When his feet didn't respond to his brain's instructions to move, he looked down into his Momma's eyes that though not as angry, were still filled with anger and pain—on his behalf.

“Don't even think it. You're not going anywhere near them, baby,” she informed him.

He shook his head.

“But Momma—”

“But nothing, Baby Nephew. If you try to rock up into that fight your Momma will do the same, and then your Aunt Teijana will jump in, and then I'll have to jump in, then your big sister who's all pissy because she can't fight anymore,” she started.

Mariana interrupted. “I'm allowed.”

“No, *Somente Mina*, you are not,” Samson informed her as the rest of the family nodded in agreement.

“Auntie Georgia, that man is strong. He can fight for a long time. What if he hurts Dad or worse?”

Looking at the women surrounding him, he knew that they were there to stop him. Still, he tried once more to break free from his Momma's arms so that he could help his dad if he needed to.

"David, if anything looks to be going awry, then my brothers and I will step in," Jack Mann announced as the women turned stony eyes his way.

"I think you've helped enough for today pal," Teijana said.

"Yeah, you know how you could have helped? You could have paid attention to what was going on right under your nose for twelve fucking years," Carolina spat.

"Please, God, don't take my Dad away from me and Momma. We just found him," David prayed. His voice softened everyone's heart as they heard his words and silently prayed right along with him.

«»*

Right now, Mackenzie was merely bones, muscle and sinew that moved in fluid vicious motion. Securing one of his big work-roughened hands around Ion's throat, he slammed his whole body against the hood of his beat up truck. Repeatedly, he slammed him into that truck. His fingers screwed into a fist, Mackenzie proceeded to punch Ion in the face not caring that he felt bones crumpling. He was

simply lost in the memory of how David had looked when he'd first set eyes on him. He saw the desperation in his son's eyes. He heard the pain drop from his son's lips. He felt his son's hunger, fear, and most of all he remembered the moment when his son had surrendered himself to his reality and admitted that he was defeated. Without regard to the wellbeing of the piece of shit that had neglected, abused and mistreated his son for the past twelve years, he exacted revenge on this man. His blood flowing hot, laced with adrenaline it sped through his veins invigorating him. He felt no pain; he only felt determination. Buoyed by righteousness, he did not tire. His lips stretched into a smile as he thought of his son's smiles. Recalling David's first taste-test at calling him Dad, his smile became bigger. And thinking of this piece of shit trying to take him away from them caused his smile to turn lethal.

"You'll have to kill me to get that little shit," Ion gasped.

"Promise?" Mackenzie asked coldly as he head-butted the other man into near unconsciousness. Ion was falling and Mackenzie thought it only right to help him get to the ground as painfully as possible. Hitting Ion with a body punch that caved in a few ribs, he jerked him back up and hit Ion in the other side. Smiling, he picked Ion up and threw him onto the hood of his truck so hard that his windshield

cracked. He watched as Ion tried to scramble away from him. In his haste to get away from him, Ion headed towards the Mann brothers. When he realized what he was doing, he paused in his attempts to get away, which gave Mackenzie time to reach him.

* «*» *

Ion did his best to fend off Mackenzie but his best didn't even faze that motherfucker. Though he'd gotten in a few hits, Mackenzie never faltered. He kept coming and he kept delivering blows that staggered him. If he didn't know better he would've sworn that he was otherworldly, but he knew better. Mackenzie was one-hundred percent human and right now he was one-hundred percent wearing him out. Before he could finish that thought, he was picked up by the front of his shirt and damn near thrown through the windshield of his own truck. He'd seen the looks on the Mann brother's faces as he'd gone flying past them. They stood with their arms folded merely watching the human hit him. They were *allowing* this to happen! Well, fuck that, if they were going to side with the human, then he wasn't going to fight fair. He needed to shift. That would stop Mackenzie Roberts in his tracks. Then perhaps he could get a little of his own back before taking whatever money he could get and getting the

fuck out of dodge. All he'd wanted was money. He still wanted that but he wasn't sure that this ass whipping was worth what he'd get.

«»*

Carolina watched Mackenzie with fucking awe—as did everyone else on the porch. She'd seen a lot of fights but damn. Mackenzie was straight handing that piece of shit his ass...and then some. Why was she getting hot? If Mackenzie would just stop and rip his shirt off that would be the hotness. She was going to have to marry Mackenzie quick, fast and in a hurry because he was straight fucking bringing it. Holding her baby tighter, she kissed him and watched the fight.

«»*

Georgia could not believe her eyes. She figured that Mackenzie would be the victor considering what he was fighting for, but she had no idea that he would be so rude as to bogart the handing out of pain. DMF was getting *fucccccccccked* up. After all of his bravado, after all of his taunting he was straight getting his ass waxed. And she was glad. He was a big man and he'd used his size, strength and conniving against her baby. Cradling the high-powered

rifle, she leaned against the railing and watched DMF go down.

«»*

Teijana winced as she watched Mackenzie toss that dude through his own truck window. That had to hurt because it obviously hurt the truck. Not only was Mackenzie wailing on that dude; he'd fucked up his already fucked-up truck. That dude and his truck needed to be condemned because the internal structures of both were severely compromised. Knowing that the hidden cameras she'd planted all over the property were rolling, she couldn't wait to watch the playback of this. This was like blockbuster summer action flick beat down.

«»*

Jack was concerned when Mackenzie hit Ion. For all of his strength and courage, Mackenzie was still human. Ion, for all of his despicability was shifter—and not just any shifter but a shifter in his prime. He was going to step in, but he never got the chance. He and his brothers watched on in silent disbelief as Mackenzie Roberts did what no other human had done: he defeated a shifter in hand-to-hand combat. Surely, this would need to be dis-

cussed in Council. Sighing, he knew that many things would have to be discussed such as the goings-on on Pack Lands. He'd been too lax, but as of this minute that shit was over. Never would another child suffer as young David had and he not know of it. And never would a child suffer even a second longer after he found out about it.

Watching Mackenzie throw Ion into his windshield brought a smile to his face. That was something. He felt like he should hold up a sign with a score on it. That move deserved a ten out of ten, as did the next move. Mackenzie grabbed his foot and slung him off of the truck. When Ion's body finally skidded to a stop in an undignified heap, Mackenzie used his windpipe as a resting spot for his knee. *Damn*. That was truly shifter-worthy. Seeing the subtle movements that indicated that Ion was going to *shift*, he tensed.

«»*

Mackenzie felt the popping of bones beneath Ion's skin. Narrowing his eyes on the piece of shit beneath him, he could see Ion's limbs beginning to re-shape. With a smile full of intent, he leaned forward exerting more pressure on Ion's windpipe. Though Ion's eyes were quickly swelling shut,

Mackenzie didn't fail to miss the arrogant gleam that briefly entered them.

"If you *shift* and I kill you like you deserve, then you'll be written off as road kill," Mackenzie announced. He knew the exact moment that his words registered with the piece of shit.

"H-h-how?" Ion gasped out around Mackenzie's knee that was cutting off his air supply.

Digging his knee in deeper, Mackenzie sighed before his lips stretched into a grin. It wasn't a pleasant grin, but it wasn't meant to be. No, it was a caveat.

"I've lived in Black Ridge Territory all of my life and I know all about *shifters*," Mackenzie announced with his grin still firmly in place.

«»*

It was at that point that Ion truly understood the predicament that he was embroiled in. He was screwed. Squinting up at his Alpha he saw no help there.

Using the remaining bit of his strength he yelled. "If you kill me, I won't sign the paper and the brat will go into foster care."

Laughing, Mackenzie replied. "You forget that I told my wife that I'd whip your ass and you'd sign the papers."

“How you gonna’ accomplish that, Roberts?”

“Like this,” Mackenzie said. Standing, he jerked him to his feet and slammed him into the ground—over and over.

«»*

Everyone stilled. No one spoke. Not the humans; not the otherworldlies, not even the Alpha. No one moved until David called out.

“Dad, don’t kill him. I know he deserves it, but you don’t deserve to have to do that. And besides you’re not allowed. If Momma’s not allowed to go on a killing spree, then you’re not allowed to either. You’re going to get into trouble if you do that.”

«»*

Mackenzie stopped upon hearing his son’s words. He loved that boy and his Momma...more than he could ever love himself. As long as he drew breath he could do nothing but insure their wellbeing.

“Son, there is no punishment that I wouldn’t bare in order to keep you safe in your momma’s arms.”

«»*

Jack listened to the exchange and felt both shame and pride. He felt shame for his own failures. He felt shame on behalf of shifters for this ridiculous excuse for a shifter. He felt pride over David. He knew why the Dragon would want his return...and he also knew that he could not allow this family to be separated. It was time he started making amends. Speaking to his brothers telepathically, he stepped forward.

“Mackenzie, I acknowledge my part in this by failing to protect one of ours. I owe you and your family an apology that you are in no way obligated to accept. Ion will sign this paper.”

“You cannot make me,” Ion spat.

“Yes, we can,” Jamieson said.

Requesting a copy of the papers, Jack waited as Virginia handed them to him showing him all of the places that Ion needed to sign. Thanking her, he watched as Jamieson turned Ion over, took his broken arm in his hand and *helped* him sign the papers. Handing them to her, he looked at Carolina as he spoke.

“I and all of my brothers will attest to the fact that Ion willingly signed these.”

“You’ll need to do something with that piece of garbage, and then come inside and sign as a witness. Step it up, I want to get these filed with the quick-

ness,” Virginia ordered before skirting around him and running in the house.

“Forgive me, Carolina,” he said, but she wasn’t listening. She was busy hugging her man and her son.

Chapter 19

Because I Said So, That's Why

Before going inside, Jack made a call. Seeking his father's council, he did as he was advised. Calling upon the men to whom he'd entrusted Destiny the night that he'd first brought her to his home, he waited until they arrived. Being that Mackenzie's home was located close to Pack Lands, he didn't have to wait long. Instructing the men to watch a still unconscious Ion, and to knock him back into unconsciousness when he regained it, he and his brothers knocked and entered Mackenzie's home...and judgment.

* «*» *

Stepping into the den, he noticed that all of the women scooted closer to David as if at any moment he was going to whisk him away. Even if he really was the bastard that almost every woman in the room thought him at the moment, he'd never take a child from its parents. He watched as Carolina marched past him and flipped him the bird without bothering to spare him a glance. A freshly showered Mackenzie merely shrugged. It didn't escape him

that the man had hardly a mark on him, if one didn't count his woman's lipstick. He was sure that the man was angry, but when in the company of an angry woman—or a horde of them—a man's anger didn't even register.

“My wife's not going to ask you to sit, so I will,” Mackenzie said as he pointed out several empty spots.

He was about to speak when the Elementals—the female embodiments of fire, water, air and earth—arrived with their husbands. Adena (fire), Naida (water), Isaura (air), and Dianthe (earth) didn't even pause to greet him; they merely appeared and took up residence with the rest of the women leaving their mates to do as they would. None could call Sage, Gabriel, Riven, or Falcon fools, which is why after shaking their heads at Jack and his brothers; they went to stand behind their wives. Sighing, he was damn glad that Gaia, the mother of the Elementals, and her husband Drake, pure dragon, didn't put in an appearance.

No one spoke; they merely all glared at him. Damn, this was quickly going to pot...and with the quickness. Clearing his throat, he looked at the assembly and spoke. “I apologize for many things.” And he heard the Gilchrist-Williams women answer in *mmm hmms*.

Making what was a rare overture for an Alpha, he finished. "And I give you leave to speak freely." And the floor opened up...and after insuring that Krystal's ears were covered, Carolina let him have it.

"First off, Motherfucker, you owe *my*—key word *my*—baby an apology."

"Our baby, Sweetness," Mackenzie said.

"Okay, fine. Our baby," she corrected. "Second, you owe my man an apology for making him have to take care of your fucking job. Every mark on him—not that there's many because Mackenzie is man to the motherfucking core—is your fault. David, cover your ears baby. Third, you can kiss my whole entire ass. You don't give me permission to do a damn thing." She paused because all of the women were getting in their two cents worth. Choruses of '*that's right, you tell him, go ahead*' reverberated around the room.

"You might be their alpha," she said pointing at his brothers, but you aren't my momma," she began.

"Yeah, but *I* am your momma and I want to know what in the hell's going on. I can hear y'all carrying on from the car," Dr. Camille Gilchrist-Williams said as she stepped in the door with her husband, Retired Col. J. Thurgood Williams.

Jack exhaled as the whole room went blessedly quiet...for a moment. Then he sighed listening to the Gilchrist-Williams sister rat him out to their mother.

He'd thought that Carolina was fierce, but that was because he hadn't met their mother.

* «*» *

Walking into the house, Camille Williams couldn't believe her ears. How could grown folk make as much noise as an entire floor of a high school? This didn't make any kind of sense. *Why were the two children present quiet while the adults were all busy acting the damn fool?* She was about to put an end to this nonsense.

"First off, y'all need to settle down. I'm not going to repeat myself. Second, why do you have these babies up in here while y'all are acting like good sense hasn't been invented?"

"Um," they began.

"Mmm mmm, I'm not even trying to hear that mess. Y'all are old enough to know better. Where is my new grandbaby?" she asked as she tapped her boot-clad foot.

"Right here, Momma," Carolina said as she walked David over to her Momma.

Though Virginia and her girls had called her and told her about her new grandbaby, she didn't expect this. Though he was looking better—and it was a good thing else she'd have taken a switch to all of her girls—she could still glimpse the faint traces of

extended abuse and neglect in this baby. She'd been an educator for too many years not to know abuse and neglect when she saw it regardless of how well it was dressed up. Gentling her voice, she reached out to him, not wanting to frighten him.

"May I have a hug, baby?" she asked.

She smiled as she watched the boy's eyes light up upon seeing her acceptance. When he came willingly into his arms, she couldn't help holding on tight to him. Closing her eyes, she poured every ounce of love that she could into that hug. Pulling back, she kissed him soundly on the cheek before talking to him.

"David, I'm your grandmother Camille. You can call me Grandmomma or Grandmomma. Which do you prefer?" She smiled at him.

"Um, Grandmomma," he said.

"Good choice, baby," she said as she hugged that baby again.

Hugging David to her she walked over to Krystal, whose mother had her hands over her ears.

"Who's this little cutie?" she asked.

"I'm Krystal. Josiah's my daddy and Morgan is my momma now," the darling little girl said.

"Well, Krystal, like I told David, my name's Camille but you can call me Grandmomma or Grandmomma, okay?"

“Okay, but I already have one grandma,” she said.

“Well, it’s okay to have more than one, Sweet-heart.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Maybe sometime your momma will bring you by and I can bake some goodies for you. Would you like that?”

She watched as the little angel nodded her head. Before she could ask, she reached out to her. Lifting her up, she hugged the little girl to her. It felt good to have some babies in her arms. Handing her back to her mother she turned to the adults. We’re getting ready to have some grown people talk so y’all make these babies comfortable in another room. Waiting while they selected a movie that Krystal wanted to watch, she turned to Carolina.

“Why is David so skinny?”

“Momma, I just got him five weeks ago.”

“Well, obviously you haven’t been feeding him.”

“Momma, I feed him,” Carolina replied.

“How many times a day?”

“Eight,” Carolina responded.

“Why only eight?” Camille asked.

“He has to sleep sometime, Momma,” Carolina said.

"Well, wake him up and feed him. There are twenty-four hours in a day. There is no excuse for this mess," Camille responded.

"I tried to give him some ham and she got mad at me, Momma," Georgia tattled.

"You tried to serve my baby a cardiac arrest!" Carolina spat.

"Well, at least I was trying to feed him," Georgia said.

"Is this true?" Camille asked while hugging on David.

"Momma, you know that Georgia is nuts," Carolina said.

"And you know what else Momma? She won't share. She's all stingy with him and we hardly get to spend any time with him at all," Georgia pouted.

"Yeah, what she said, Momma," Virginia threw in.

"Y'all are such," Carolina began.

"Carolina, share your baby," Camille ordered.

"Momma, I do share," she said.

"You're supposed to share everything with us," Georgia said before turning pleading eyes to her father.

"Carolina was trying to go on a killing spree and she wasn't going to share. You should tell her off, Momma"

“Carolina, share the killing spree with your sisters,” Camille said.

“And David,” Virginia reiterated.

“And your baby,” Camille stated.

“I share now. Those wenches are trying to take him over,” Carolina said.

“Wait, why is there a killing spree?” Col. Williams asked patiently.

“Because that man’s trying to take my baby, Daddy,” Carolina pouted.

“Yeah, Momma, him and his brothers came here and tried to get Carolina to give David to some...stranger,” Virginia said.

“After they didn’t check on him in the first place,” Georgia threw in.

“What?!” Camille asked.

“Can we go on our killing spree, Momma?” Georgia asked.

“Not yet. Sit down and tell me what’s going on,” Camille demanded.

When they all started to talk, she held up her hand and ordered. “One at a time.”

Camille listened in silence. And the more she listened, the angrier she became. When they finished explaining, she rose.

“Thurgood, come with me. The rest of you stay here. And I mean right here. Do you understand me?” she asked as she went to retrieve David.

Waiting and receiving a chorus of yeses, she and her husband took David to the kitchen where they sat him down and poured him a glass of milk. Taking his hands, she bid him. "Tell Grandmomma what happened, baby."

Listening to that baby talk broke her heart...and it pissed her off. It also pissed off her husband who'd clearly said that he was letting those girls go on their killing spree. Smiling, she walked David to the room where Krystal awaited him before going outside. Finding a good bush, she broke off a switch. Walking up to the man sprawled on the ground she looked at the big men surrounding him and spoke.

"Is he conscious?"

"No ma'am, they answered.

"Well then beat him into consciousness," she demanded.

She waited while they roused the man. As soon as he opened his eyes—well as much as he could—she spoke.

"This is for my grandbaby," she said as she proceeded to switch him up one side and down the other. Switching him until the switch broke; she kicked him in the ribs one good time with her sturdy riding boots, and went off to find another switch.

Walking up the stairs, she looked back and instructed the guards. "Kick his ass one more time," she said before walking in the door.

Going in, she knew that the others had witnessed her actions but she really couldn't care. Walking to the other room she spoke to David and Krystal.

"Babies, Grandmomma is about to do some grown folk talking so I'm going to shut this door all the way. Okay?"

Waiting for them to give her a hug, she left the room. Walking over to Jack she told him and all of his brothers to stand up. When they complied she went to switching and cussing. "What the hell is wrong with y'all? You don't come in here trying to take my grandbaby anywhere. Now apologize to him and you go and you see about your little region and if anyone else is neglecting or abusing any babies you whip their ass. Do you understand me?" she asked when she finished.

Hearing a chorus of mumbled yeses, she turned to the girls. Putting down the switch, she used her hands and began swatting all of their behinds.

"Momma, what did we do?" Virginia asked.

"That's for acting the damn fool. Y'all are grown and the only ones acting like they have any lick of sense is the two babies in there," she said as she

continued swatting butts. She paused when she got to Dessie.

“Sit your pregnant behind down. Why are you even out here when you about to have that baby tonight?”

“Um,” Dessie began.

“Um nothing. Where is the man who got you in this condition?”

“Right there,” everyone pointed at Jack.

Going over to Jack, she switched his behind some more.

“What is wrong with you? You don’t have your pregnant wife out here when she’s this pregnant.”

“Um, ma’am,” he began.

“I don’t want to hear it. Where’s your momma?” she asked.

“Um,” he began.

“Don’t um me. Tell me where she is.”

“Our mother is at home, ma’am,” Jamieson offered.

“Give me her number,” Camille demanded.

She waited until he rattled off the number. Pulling out a pad, she wrote it down before turning to Dessie.

“And where’s your momma, little girl?”

“I don’t have a momma, ma’am, but I have two sisters,” Dessie answered while looking up under her eyelashes at her.

“Don’t even try giving me that pitiful look. Since you don’t have a momma, I’m your momma...and your sisters’ momma too.”

“But Star already has a momma. Only me and Jaylee don’t,” Dessie said.

“Well, now Star has two mommas,” Camille said.

“But,” Dessie started.

“Little girl, I don’t know what else you are but part of you is black and ain’t nothing changed about being black since black was invented. We’re all family now hush before you go into labor.”

Sighing, she went back to her butt-swatting but paused when she reached Carolina. Walking over to Mackenzie, she switched his legs good.

“Do you want to tell me why my daughter’s pregnant and not married, little boy?”

“What!?” Everyone exclaimed.

Watching Carolina sink to the couch and her young man rush to her, she listened as Carolina spoke.

“What do you mean I’m pregnant?”

“I mean that you’re with child. Obviously I came just in time. Mackenzie you’re putting us up and put us in a room far from y’all so we don’t have to hear any of that boom, chica, now now mess,” she said.

"Oh, Momma, what do you know about boom chica now now," Georgia asked.

"I have three babies so don't ask stupid questions," Camille responded.

"I'm going to be sick," Virginia said.

"Hey maybe being fast runs in the family," Georgia said.

"I am not fast," Virginia returned.

"So says the girl who was pregnant as soon as she finished the age of fifteen. I believe that we call it first date pregnancy," Georgia smiled.

"I married Mosé," Virginia huffed.

"Mmm hmm...and didn't he cry all the way down the aisle?"

"That's because he loves me," Virginia answered.

"Slut," Georgia mouthed.

Camille listened to the banter between her girls and rolled her eyes. Why were all of her children nuts? She'd thought that they'd outgrow it but, no. Shaking her head, she noticed Teijana laughing in the corner.

"I don't know why you're laughing. I already called your momma. She's on her way...with your brothers."

"Why?" Teijana asked. "Because I've had decades of knowing you, baby. If you're involved, there's trouble somewhere in the mix. And it's a good thing

that I called her. I see that little boy over there making eyes at you. It's a wonder that you're not pregnant from just his looks alone."

"But he's gay," Teijana whined.

"Give that boy five minutes alone with you and he can prove to you that he's not. A gentleman is what he is and he wants you. Now you need to be in a room next to me so that I can keep one of y'all unpregnant before marriage."

Looking at the rest of them, she sighed. "I don't even know what to do with the rest of y'all. Whoever doesn't have a momma for whatever reason—she's dead, exiled to some backwoods hell hole, or she's a cunt—consider me your momma now. And for the rest of y'all who do have mommas. I'm still going to treat you like you're mine. Y'all are all on restriction. Now those of you with mommas give me their phone numbers."

When no one made a move, she repeated her demand and this time she put more momma up in her voice. That got some action. Writing down all of the numbers, she directed the women to the kitchen so that she could feed them. Looking at the men, she gave all of them an admonition and a momma-means-business look before going off to the kitchen to feed these wild children of hers. Though she had a houseful, she wasn't worried about there not being

enough food. Her daughters might all be crazy as hell, but they were Southern so there was plenty.

* «*» *

“What the hell just happened?” Jack asked.

“Their momma just happened,” Mosé answered.

“But something about this just doesn’t seem right,” Jack began.

“Yeah, but I’m not going in there and messing with that lady,” Jamieson said.

“Y’all need to hush before she comes back in here and starts using that switch again,” Sage said.

“Yeah,” the rest of the men said rubbing their legs.

“We’re going to have another, baby,” Mackenzie smiled.

* «*» *

David wondered what was going on out there even though it was grown folks business. Though he had exceptional hearing, right now he couldn’t concentrate. Though he was sure that he wasn’t going to be separated from his Momma, his emotions were in turmoil. So many changes had occurred in such a short time, but something in his gut told him that

more were coming. Shaking his head he couldn't help but smile at all that he'd gained in five short weeks. As always, it amazed him when he thought about his family, especially his Momma.

Though his dad and all of the men were really strong, all of them together weren't even half as fierce as his Momma. He'd never forget that telling off that she'd given Mr. Mann and pretty much everyone else who thought that they were taking him away from her. His Momma only brought him good things while he only brought her bad things. Sometimes, he wondered if he should just leave, but then he turned coward. Walking to the window, he stared out into the night. Swallowing the lump in his throat, he knew that even though he'd lived almost thirteen years without her, now that he'd had her as his Momma he couldn't go back to...life before her.

"Be still," he heard a soft voice say. Looking down and then down some more his eyes collided with Krystal, who until a few minutes ago had been curled up in the chair on the other side of the room looking at the cartoon. Now she was precariously perched on the arm of the sofa. He had no idea how old she was but he knew that she was too tiny to be where she was. She could get hurt. Reaching out, he gently took her in his arms and sat her down. Taking a seat further down from her, he was surprised when

she quickly scrambled from her seat and walked over to stand before him.

This one was going to be trouble he thought. She had that same way about her as all of the women in his family. Smiling, he looked into her eyes. Her eyes were *actually* black! Her mocha skin looked as soft as his Momma's but she was delicate where his Momma was all strength.

David felt something in his chest tighten. He went to press the heel of his hand against his chest wondering if at almost thirteen years old he could be suffering a heart attack. Before he could finish the thought, her tiny hand covered his chest just over his heart. Touching the small hand, he was surprised at the instant warmth. It traveled along his arm and spread through his body, before settling itself around the region of his heart. Turning wide eyes towards Krystal he was staggered when she smiled at him. Training eyes that twinkled like a night sky full of stars on him, she watched him as if he were the most fascinating person she'd ever met.

"Costas brayer Daviard," she whispered. *Just breathe, David.* Well, she didn't really whisper; she merely spoke very quietly.

David gasped. The little girl had spoken a language only his birth mother had ever used and she'd also used his *real* name!

“Who are *you*?” he asked. His throat was dry; his heart was thundering in his chest; and he felt too hot. Just when he thought he couldn’t stand it, she pressed her hand harder against his chest and immediately the too hot feeling dissipated and was replaced with a tingling cool sensation. He blinked rapidly as the warmth from the girl’s touch continued to invade his senses.

“I’m Krystal. Josiah’s my daddy and Morgan is my momma now,” she told him proudly. Later, he’d smile at that, knowing that was how she always introduced herself regardless of how many times she was asked.

“Those words you said...” David couldn’t finish his question.

“You’re like me. Your daddy was bad and your momma died trying to save you,” she said before climbing into his lap and laying her head against his chest. Getting comfortable, she smoothed gentle fingers against his cheek and quickly leaned forward and brushed her lips across the skin she’d just touched before closing her eyes.

“*Lus armen musta, Daviard,*” she whispered before closing her eyes and drifting off to sleep. *We are meant to be, David.*

David’s heartbeat increased ten-fold. Perhaps if he wasn’t so flustered he would’ve asked her the meaning of her words. His sensitive ears would’ve

picked up her words—not that he could understand them.

* «*» *

Mackenzie lay in the fantasy bed holding his fantasy woman. Carolina had long ago succumbed to a much-needed rest. The pregnancy coupled with the events of the day had worn her out. Closing his eyes he replayed the last half an hour and grew hard. After insisting that he soak in the bath so that she could see all of his injuries—which had been minimal—for herself. After kissing every bruise, she'd rubbed aromatic, but healing body butter into every inch of his skin as she thanked him over and over for protecting their son. He'd tried to stop her thanks but she shushed him with her passionate kisses and her smiles.

Holding her as she slept, he turned her gently in his arms and held her closer to him before dropping a soft kiss on her temple. He wanted to indulge in her body, not simply to ease the hard-on that he constantly had, but to celebrate their love, to feel alive. Though he'd lived thirty-seven years without her, he couldn't imagine his life without her. Carolina was the wealth that their family—which was growing by the day—was built upon. Though they hadn't yet had the pregnancy confirmed by a physi-

cian, he was putting his money on Dr. Camille Gilchrist-Williams, especially after Destiny Mann had indeed gone into labor shortly after her arrival.

Though he intended to keep the promise that he made to their son about refraining from making love to Carolina until she was officially Mrs. Roberts, he couldn't resist touching her. Splaying his big hand across her stomach, he closed his eyes and offered God thanks for this woman, their family—as crazy as they were—the life that they'd created together, and for every blessing...including those that were disguised as other things. Touching his temple to hers, he breathed in her scent as he prayed. Feeling Carolina come awake, he opened his eyes and told her that he loved her with his eyes before saying it with his mouth.

“I love you, Sweetness,” he rasped.

“I know,” she said as she pulled him down for a kiss before succumbing once again to sleep.

Chapter 20

On This Day...and Every One After

David looked out of the window at what seemed to be hundreds upon hundreds of people all dressed up for his Momma and dad's marriage ceremony. All he could do was say 'wow.' Southerners were a particular kind of people...and they sure liked sweet iced tea and dishes with gravy—not that he was complaining. Though his Momma and his aunts fed him well, since the arrival of both Grand-mommas (Teijana's momma had immediately taken him over), there was scarcely a moment when he didn't have one of the ladies feeding him. They all cooked delicious dishes though none of them cooked better than his Momma although the Grandmommas were pretty close. When his Dad's momma arrived, it'd only gotten worse. Grandmomma Cairistiona wasn't southern but you wouldn't know it by the way that she fed him. Though she'd just arrived yesterday, she'd already fed him what she called a good and proper Scottish meal. Recalling the disgruntled looks of the men, he laughed. Like his big sister Mariana he was spoiled. There was no way that he could eat everything that they cooked, but he tried.

He'd already been introduced to so many people, yet they kept coming. Apparently, his family knew a whole bunch of important people, including the group of women with the scary-looking husbands. Though he didn't know them that well, he liked the women even though some of them rivaled his Aunt Georgia for crazy. They'd even let him hold their babies. Well, actually they'd insisted that he hold their babies as they pulled him in for soft hugs. He didn't know what they did but he knew that they were good at it.

His Aunt Virginia had called them for help. They'd been helping from back in Atlanta where they all lived, but that wasn't good enough for them. Arriving a few days after his Grandmomma Camille, they stayed in Samson's guest house, which had just been completed. As Ms. Victorious had stated, they were dismantling the whole system. He laughed recalling what Ms. Reign had said.

Pulling him to the side, she'd whispered. "That means them motherfuckers are fixing to get their asses whipped—pissed off Southern momma style."

He couldn't help but like her. She was a funny woman with a massive movie collection. When she'd discovered that he'd seen his first movie last month, she'd driven to Denver and almost bought out the video store. Dragging him to the den, they'd been watching movies for almost two weeks straight. Even

the movies that weren't that great were funny because she did commentary when they were on. Of course there was a price to pay for watching all of those movies. His Momma insisted that he be debriefed after each movie so that he'd understand the power of media images and stereotypes.

"Baby Brother, are you okay?" Mariana's happy voice reached out to him. Smiling, David turned to look at his big sister. She was so beautiful—not as beautiful as his Momma—but really, *really* close. For the wedding she was dressed in a Carolina blue (*as if there was any other kind of blue* his Momma would say) dress that draped over her rounded stomach that was carrying his niece or nephew. He hoped that she let him hold the baby. After getting a chance to hold the babies of his Aunt Virginia's friends, he discovered that he liked babies.

"I'm fine. There are a lot of people out there," he commented a little nervously.

Mariana moved closer and grabbed him up in a hug. Out of habit, he leaned his head down so that she wouldn't have to stretch in order to give him his kiss.

"You're not worried about that are you? You know that no one's going to dare mistreat you or try and take you from our family. Not only is your momma crazy, but so is her best friend, all of her brothers and that contingent of women from Atlanta

aren't wrapped all that tight when it comes to people messing with people's babies," Mariana stated as she smoothed a lock of hair behind his ear before kissing him on his cheek. "And then there are their husbands."

Smiling at her description of the women in their family and their acquaintances, he hugged her back and answered.

"No, I'm not worried about that. I just don't want to do anything wrong that will ruin Momma's day," he answered honestly.

Mariana hugged him tightly before gently grabbing his chin and making him look at her. He couldn't help but notice that her eyes were full of love and ferocity.

"The only thing that would ruin Auntie's day would be if you weren't here. You should know by now little David that *you* are always going to be her baby."

"Yeah," he smiled recalling the moment when his Momma and dad had informed him that his Momma was pregnant. Hugging his Momma he'd looked at his dad and told him that he had to marry her right away, which is why they were getting married so quickly. Well, that and the fact that she belonged to them and he and dad both wanted everyone to know that.

“That won’t change even after your brother or sister is born. You know that, right?” Mariana spoke gently.

He nodded as he gave his big sister a smile that always made her hug him tighter.

“Okay, but even after that, I’m still the baby. Okay?” she said while doing the eyes at him.

“Okay,” he laughed as he hugged her.

“Good. Now don’t forget that we all love you or I’ll tell and you know how crazy your momma is. Come on, let’s go check on her before she throws a fit,” she said as she took his hand and dragged him down the hall to the master suite.

A chorus of female voices could be heard through the door. After Mariana knocked, his Aunt Georgia opened the door a smidgen.

“Code word,” she said with a suspicious look at them.

David smiled and Mariana sighed before they both did *the eyes* on her. Cussing, Georgia immediately opened the door wide and swept them into her arms and gave them both kisses before admonishing them.

“That is so not ninja-like,” she said as she closed the door behind them.

David stood stock still and stared. He was pretty sure that his mouth was hanging open but he didn't care. All that he could see was how absolutely stunningly beautiful his Momma was. He didn't know the color of that dress; he didn't know the style of dress that it was; he only knew that his Momma looked more beautiful than any of the women modeling dresses in the wedding magazines, than all of the fairytale princesses in books, on television, and in his head.

Looking upon her in all of her beautifulness, he couldn't help the tears that pooled in his eyes. She was...so...*beautiful*...in every way. His Momma only brought goodness to him. She protected him, fought for him, and loved him...more than he had a right to be loved. Never did she see his failures or allow him to dwell on them. Instead, she saw possibilities. Always patient with him, she always welcomed him with open arms regardless of what she was doing or how busy she was. Some of his best times were when he curled up next to her when she was wrapped in quiet.

"What's wrong baby?" his Momma asked.

Wiping the tears away, he looked at her. He could see her concern in her eyes.

Not able to get words past the lump in his throat, he merely shook his head not knowing what he wanted to say or if he was nodding yes or no.

He watched as she raised a single brow before shaking off her sister and walking to him. Blinking fast to clear the tears from his eyes, he watched as the veil floated behind her as she moved swiftly to him and gently took his face between her hands.

“Baby?” she questioned.

“N-n-nothing, Momma,” he stammered. He didn’t know how he managed to force words out of his numb lips but whatever he’d said he knew that it didn’t convince his Momma.

“Baby, you know that we don’t tolerate mis-truths of any kind in our family. Now tell me what’s wrong. Is someone bothering you because we can whip their ass real quick before this marriage kicks off,” she said with the full power of the Momma voice.

He looked at his Momma and knew that she was contemplating (another word that she’d accidentally taught him when she’d used it in a sentence that had both Jack Mann’s name and a threat in it) doing just that.

“Momma, nothing’s wrong. You’re just so...so...so...very *beautiful*,” he breathed in awe.

«»*

Carolina couldn’t believe that she had a baby and a baby on the way and she was getting mar-

ried...to that fine ass Mackenzie. David didn't know it but they'd received the paperwork back and her baby was officially her baby and no one could take him away from her. Goodness, she was blessed. *Thank you, Jesus, she praised.*

Hearing the knock on the door, her momma senses alerted her that it was none other than her baby along with her baby-baby. Looking at the door, she couldn't help but smile. She loved those babies.

Watching as they entered the room, she was about to speak when she saw David's face. Her baby looked like he was hurt, and hungry, and sad and overwhelmed at the same time. Jumping up from the seat, she marched over to him asking what was wrong. Though her wedding was scheduled to begin in a few minutes she still had plenty of time to whip somebody's ass right quick. And if someone had done something to her baby, ass-whippings would commence.

She was all ready to get to it when David spoke. Hearing him whisper how beautiful she was caused everything in her to go soft. Oh goodness. Pulling her baby into her arms she rocked him side-to-side as she hugged him tight.

She felt him wriggling to get free but she simply held him tighter.

"Momma!" he protested. "I'll wrinkle you!"

Leaning her head back, she cupped his cheek.

“Hush. You’re my child and there will never be a time when I’m too dressed-up to hug my baby.”

“But, I’m not,” he began again.

“I don’t care if you’ve been out inventing a new kind of dirt. Whenever I want to hold you, I will,” she declared.

“Okay, Momma,” he said before smiling.

David’s smile was so pure that she felt tears come to her eyes. Sighing, she kissed him on the cheek before releasing him.

“I’d better get ready before Dad comes to get me,” he said.

“Too late!” Mackenzie called through the door.

The women in the room hustled Carolina to the bed before standing in front of her to prevent Mackenzie from seeing her in her wedding gown before the ceremony. She could’ve told them that their little strategy was wasted. Mackenzie had promised that he would wait for her to walk down the aisle and his word was his bond.

“C’mon son! Your uncle finally arrived and he wants to meet you!”

Carolina blew a kiss at her son as he stepped out of the door. As soon as he was clear of the door, Georgia slammed it shut...and Mackenzie’s mother helped her.

“Georgia, that was so unnecessary,” she said.

“Was not, Mackenzie’s still out there,” Mackenzie’s momma answered as she high-fived Georgia.

She smiled upon hearing Mackenzie’s voice.

«»*

Now that his brother had finally arrived, Mackenzie didn’t have anything to keep his mind off of his woman. In less than an hour, she’d officially be his. *His!* This had been the longest week of his life, but a fulfilling one. Just two days ago, they’d received word that David was officially theirs and by the end of this day they’d officially be a family. In reality, they’d been a family since the day that David had come into their lives. They accepted it, but he wanted the whole world to recognize that.

Since he wasn’t able to see his woman just yet, he went off to search for his son, needing to hug him and show him off to his kid brother. And while he was at it, he could brag to Samson and Mosé and anyone who was within ear shot about *his* son. Not seeing David in his room, he headed to the room Carolina was holed up in knowing that he’d be there. That boy loved his momma...and he couldn’t blame him. The boy had damn good taste. After all, he’d chosen Carolina as his momma and him as his father. Yep, damn good taste.

Walking to the door, he'd yelled for his son. He threw an arm around him as soon as he walked out of the door. Ignoring the fact that Georgia had slammed the door in his face, he hugged his son before speaking through the door.

"How you doing, Sweetness?"

"Very well, thank you," she called back.

He was silent for a moment letting her love-filled voice wrap around him.

"I love you, Sweetness," he drawled.

"And I love you, too, Mackenzie. You too, baby!" she yelled to her son.

«»*

David smiled. As always he felt such privilege whenever he witnessed the love of his parents. Actually, he felt it whenever he was around his family. Love was doled out in endless portions and it seemed that they always had enough to share it with other people. Their family continued to grow, yet there was enough love for everyone. He'd thought that he might be loved a little bit less with the babies and the other people, but he'd been so wrong. With the arrival of more people, he'd been loved more. He wasn't willing to give it up...for anyone!

David looked up as his dad slung an arm around him and ruffled his hair. Walking to the male

end of the floor—well the side of the house on the second floor where all of the men were situated, he listened to the excitement in his dad's voice. He liked how his dad didn't ever try to hide his love for his Momma.

"Now how about we go and get ourselves ready? You know what your momma's like when we're late," his dad said.

David only smiled. His dad was already fully dressed and he bet that he'd been so for a while now.

"What's your momma look like, son?" he asked as they walked.

"Beautiful," he answered truthfully.

"You always say that," his dad said.

"Because it's always true."

"You're right," he said as they stopped before the door.

Walking through the door, he was welcomed by the occupants. All of the men were in various states of dress, though they were all almost-dressed. Some had their shirts on, even though they weren't done up yet; some had on their shirts but no shoes; some were doing up their ties. This was the first time that he'd been party to such a thing and it was interesting, but it was the man dressed in a kilt like his dad's that caught his eye.

Though there were subtle differences between the other man and his dad, there was no mistaking

the blood that they shared. David watched with wide eyes as the other man approached them. Holding out his hand for him to shake, he was a bit confused when the man shook his head. He was about to drop his hand when the man used his hand to pull him into a quick, but warm embrace.

“Hey nephew, I’m your uncle Greg. Welcome to the family.”

«»*

When the wedding march started playing, Mackenzie’s heart started beating so hard that he was concerned that it might beat right out of his chest. Turning to watch his bride walk down the aisle, that concern was quickly forgotten. His heart beating out of his chest was probably preferable to it out right exploding. Breathing deeply, he tried to regain his composure knowing that he just had to touch that woman, just once. She was so beautiful that she stole his breath, his good sense, his ability to focus on the details, details such as breathing. He must’ve been doing a piss poor job of breathing for both his brother and son clapped him on the back.

He guessed it was them, for all he knew it could’ve been that damn roving group of ninjas that Carolina and Georgia were forever on the lookout for. Honestly, he didn’t give a care as long as they

didn't interfere with his bride. She was beautiful; she was stunning; she was gorgeous and yet none of those sentences alone nor all of them combined, did her justice. Carolina was the most beautiful anything that he'd ever seen. David and Greg spoke simultaneously.

"See, I told you, dad," David whispered.

"She's beautiful, brother," Greg said.

"She is more than that but there aren't enough words in either English or Gaelic to do her justice," he whispered.

"Well, then how about we go with beautiful then?" Greg asked.

"How about we go with 'mine?' Carolina's mine," he reiterated.

"Easy brother, no one is going to take her from you," Greg said.

"Not and live," he growled as Carolina got closer.

He was sure that the church was full of people; he remembered them being there earlier, but the closer that Carolina got, the more the rest of the world faded into the background. All that he could see was the woman walking to him. Wrapped in a strapless, champagne-colored gown that hugged her breasts, she wore a lace thing that covered her arms from shoulder to wrists. Flaring out at the elbow in a medieval style, the garment was heavily beaded with

crystals and with every step that Carolina took; she sparkled, dazzled, glowed. Situated behind her tiara, her veil flowed down her back and trailed behind her. Made of fine silk and decorated with lace and beading, he smiled recognizing his mother's handiwork. He knew that Carolina hadn't planned on wearing the veil but he was grateful that she'd respected his mother enough to incorporate it into her ensemble. And what an ensemble it was.

Though her gown was top notch, it was the boots that got him. Carolina had on those fuck-me boots in the same color as her gown. As soon as he returned from his honeymoon, he was definitely going to send Duro Amorvestio a fine bottle of Scotch because clearly the man knew what he was about when it came to making women's boots. Pulling his eyes from those boots he returned to Carolina's face. She should serve as the paradigm for woman, princess, queen, empress, all of that. And though she was all of that and more, she was first and foremost, the only woman that could be, that would be, Mrs. Mackenzie Duncan Roberts.

When Col. Williams handed her over to his care, he pulled the man in for a hug.

"Thank you," he croaked before pulling Carolina into his arms.

Wrapping himself around her, he closed his eyes and inhaled her smell. She smelled like love. He

didn't know how long he'd stood there holding her, breathing in her scent, and raining soft kisses over her face before he took her lips, but apparently it was too long, because Dr. Indy Jamison cleared her throat loudly before announcing that she could come back after they were finished.

Reluctantly, he stopped kissing Carolina although he didn't let her go. Calling David to them, he watched as Carolina wrapped her arms around their son. The surprise on David's face brought tears to many eyes, including theirs. And that was how they exchanged their vows. Carolina was holding their children and he was holding them all.

When he was given leave to kiss his wife, he first kissed his son, as did Carolina. Handing David over to his brother, he gently turned Carolina in his arms. Placing his hands on her hips and pulling her closer, he breathed her name. Starting at her temple, he kissed his way to her luscious lips. Over the sound of his thundering heart, he heard Dr. Jamison introduce them as husband and wife.

Sending up a prayer, he thanked God and sank to his knees gently pulling Carolina down with him. Gently laying her upon the dais, he addressed their audience.

"Get out," he thundered.

He didn't know how long it took their guests to comply; it was all that he could do to hold his emo-

tions at bay. Stopping to kiss Carolina's stomach, he chanted a litany of thank yous that echoed throughout the sanctuary. It was by no means a perfect prayer, but he knew that God still heard it and accepted it. Though his eyes were closed, he knew tears streamed down his face.

In this moment he wasn't manly. There was no room for pride in God's house. Burying his face in his wife's shoulder he wept fully, unable to control his tears and not trying to. Feeling Carolina's arms encircle him, he knew that she understood. He couldn't speak because his heart was too full for words. He tucked all her I love yous in his heart and took comfort in her love. And more than that, he fully welcomed God's presence in his heart and in his life.

Drained of tears, he looked into her eyes before dipping his head and kissing her properly.

"Mackenzie," he heard her whisper his name.

Pulling back, he responded. "Carolina, this isn't wrong."

"I wasn't going to say that it was, Mackenzie. I was only calling out the name of the man who is my husband."

Smiling, he answered. "And I am not dishonoring you or God's house. I've married you properly in front of witnesses but this moment belongs to us. The only person that I need here is you and God.

You, so I can show you my love, and God so that I can offer up a sacrifice for all of my blessings.”

“And what is your sacrifice?” Carolina whispered.

“My pride. My ego. I love you Carolina.”

“I love you, Mackenzie.”

“Thank you God,” Mackenzie shouted.

“Amen,” Carolina rejoined.

«»*J&J*«*»*

This concludes Carolina's, Mackenzie's, and David's beginning. Thank you for reading. We hope that you enjoyed the tale as much as we enjoyed writing it.

~Jeanie & Jayha

Praises, compliments, adulation and the like for Jeanie and Jayha can be left at:

www.jeanieandjayha.com

*This information available at the HIV/AIDS Policy Fact Sheet published in February 2006 and distributed by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.

About the Authors

A kickass tag-team bound together by the pen, Jeanie (the shagalicious wordslinger) and Jay-ha (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.