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VEILED PASSIONS

JEANIE JOHNSON & JAYHA LEIGH

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As always to our Mr. Me's. And also to Robert Mackenzie, who shamelessly spoils my bambina. To Antoinette and her Sven. To Von, Rolanda and Dréa, who get jiggy with it on a regular basis. And a special shout out to Chandra in Switzerland for introducing us to the Teuscher champagne truffle. *OH MY GOODNESS!!!!!!*
Jeanie and Jayha

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Foreword

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

THE FIRST PARTNER

Njarðar—The Brain

Chapter 1a

STRUCTURES & ENVIRONMENT

The phrases ‘professional engineers’ and ‘getting jiggy with it’ so didn’t belong in the same sentence, Isoke Morehouse thought as she shook her head at the debacle surrounding her—the debacle being the annual convention of the NSPE—National Society of Professional Engineers. But what could she expect? It wasn’t as if engineers were accustomed to getting jiggy with it. Nope, the majority of engineers with whom she was acquainted suffered some degree of OCD. And it didn’t get any better when you gathered a bunch of engineers in one place. If there was anything worse than a handful of engineers trying to get jiggy with it, it was a horde of engineers trying to get jiggy with it. Looking around at her colleagues, she simply shook her head as she watched the debacle unfold. This was sad on a whole new level, she thought as she watched two engineers launch into a heated discussion about the mathematical cosine.

Looking around the banquet hall, she came to the conclusion that large groups of engineers didn't mix with a lot of things, including: a-the general populace; b-copious alcohol; and, c-any place where she planned to be...and she said this being an engineer herself, having a brother who was an engineer and having parents who were mathematicians. Okay, so her daddy was also special ops, but dammit, he was a mathematician at heart. Jennings Morehouse's profession revolved around calculations such as determining the odds of someone getting an ass whipping, the percentage of villages that were going to be reduced to piles of smoking rubble, that sort of thing. It was moments like this that she wondered what had ever prompted her to become an engineer in the first place. Oh, yeah—the money, the opportunities for career advancement, the respectability, the way it made her momma get off her ass. Okay, it hadn't actually done shit to get her momma off her ass, but at least she had gotten a head nod and a “hmm” from her at her hooding ceremony. That might not seem like

much, but it was indeed high praise from Dr. Angelina Hale Morehouse.

She should've simply been a racecar driver for a NASCAR team, but there was that little issue of trying to squeeze all of her titties, hips and ass into that tiny car window à la Duke Boys style. So instead of being a race car driver, she'd marched off to North Carolina A&T State University and gotten her B.S. in Mechanical Engineering and learned how to soup up anything that had an engine. And she meant anything. Once she'd learned the fundamentals of the combustible engine, and subsequently learned how much it cost to do those things, she'd marched off to grad school and kept marching until she had a Dr. in front of her name.

Had she listened to her inner self, she would've been at Talladega, surrounded by the sounds of roaring engines and screaming fans with the sights of butt cracks and shiny cars zip-ping around the two point sixty-six mile oval, instead of here in the Sonoran Desert being bored amongst other things. Since they were hell bent on coming to Arizona, they should've had the

decency to schedule the convention to coincide with the race at Phoenix International Speedway. *But nooooooooooooo*, that would've made this convention suck at least twenty-two point three percent less, which would have apparently offended the emperor and empress of suckdom.

She'd tried everything she could to get out of attending, all to no avail. It wasn't that she didn't like Phoenix or the resort. Their bosses had put them up in the best suites in the spectacular resort and spa and had supplied them with a more than generous per diem. She didn't find fault with the beauty of the area or the hospitality; it was that she didn't like being that fucking hot. It wasn't simply hot; it was practicing for an extended stay in Hell hot. The average temperature in May was in the nineties, and yet so far the lowest high temperature since their arrival had been a balmy ninety-seven degrees Fahrenheit. Whoever had decided Phoenix was a good place to be at in May needed their ass handed to them.

She grimaced thinking about her first step into the hot Phoenix sun. As soon as she'd stepped from the plane for a moment, she'd

thought she'd stepped into the third book of Daniel. She'd actually looked around for Hananiah (Shadrach), Mishael (Meshach), and Azariah (Abed-nego). To her great relief, she hadn't seen them or King Nebuchadnezzar, but she had seen Scandinavia. If she hadn't been busy trying not to stave off spontaneously combusting, she would've tossed them down the stairs.

By Scandinavia, she didn't mean the Nordic countries of Norway, Sweden, Denmark and their homies Finland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands, but the group of men who owned the engineering firm for which she worked. She called them that because a-they all hailed from the aforementioned Nordic countries; b-it was easier to recall then their last names, all of which ended in "son"; and, c-she really didn't give a damn what their individual surnames were as long as they continued to sign her checks. Damn, they tried her last nerve...all except for her direct boss, Dr. Njarðar Valdason, who was the polar opposite of his five homies.

Njarðar was the only reason she hadn't quit on day one. Whereas the other guys who made up

Scandinavia were bona fide assholes who'd fuck anything that moved and fight anything that challenged them, Njarðar was one step above a recluse. Njarðar wasn't a scary loner; but given time, he could be, which was why she made it a point to crash his fortress of solitude on a regular basis. She'd considered trying to get him out of his office but nixed the idea, knowing she'd have to literally drag him kicking and screaming from it. Plus, it was a cool office, as were all of the partners'. Once she killed off the other partners, she was commandeering the office next to his. Maybe she should simply beat Yngvi's ass now and take it—not that she needed a reason to want to beat his ass.

Despite being one of the owners, Njarðar was quite laidback. He insisted everyone use his first name instead of calling him by his title, which was good, since she had every intention of interacting with him on a first-name basis. Being from the South, she used her God-given right and nicked his name. Though the last part of his name was actually pronounced closer to Thor, she called him Roar. She just couldn't call a man

Thor unless he wore a loincloth and carried a hammer. And every time she thought of Roar in a loincloth, she almost pissed herself laughing knowing that he'd press creases into it.

There was simply something about Roar that appealed to her inner advocate. In spite of being the quintessential privileged white male, there was a loneliness about Roar. He didn't seem to bask in his wealth, intelligence, or good looks. In fact, it seemed he did everything possible to understate all of the things that other people seemed to value. While the rest of Scandinavia strutted around flashing their wealth and beauty, Roar generally dressed in plain white dress shirts and dark, cuffed dress slacks and wore his hair tied back in such a way that one could only guess at its texture and length. Though he attempted to downplay his looks, it wasn't working...at all. Roar possessed the kind of fine that didn't need dressing up. She didn't tell him that, though, choosing to let him believe no one noticed those devastating hazel eyes or that rock-hard physique.

Whereas it wasn't difficult to spot the rest of Scandinavia, as they were usually the ones with a beer in one hand and a big-titted blonde (*or a big-titted brunette/big-titted redhead; hell, it could've been a big-titted bald woman for all they gave a shit. The key word was big-titted*) in their other hand, Roar was the one who always stood alone even amidst the boisterous presence of the rest of Scandinavia. Currently, he was nursing his bottle of water and looking like he'd rather be any place but here. He could've remained back in Atlanta while the rest of Scandinavia attended (and subsequently, she could've remained home also), but they'd bugged him to fucking death until he'd given in. They probably wanted him to play nursemaid to them. You know, make sure they had a designated driver for their drunk asses, make sure the women they picked up were actually women and weren't on fire with STDs...that sort of thing.

Roar was the sole reason she stayed. One day, she'd exact vengeance on both their behalfs. She'd invade their countries and establish herself as a benevolent despot. Perhaps she'd

offer them jobs kissing her ass. She'd spare Iceland, being that that was where Roar hailed from. And she'd decree that everyone (except for her) was to leave him the fuck alone, or die. She got giddy thinking about that. Ah, the possibilities. She didn't know that she was smiling or that Roar saw it.

Having stabilized her body heat and gone over her dreams of invading Scandinavia, Isoke now had time to realize two things. First, she was bored, and not simply run-of-the-mill bored, but watching-wet-shit-harden-into-a-lump-of-dry-shit-would-be-more-amusing bored. Second, she was hungry, which was ironic being that she was at dinner. True, she was at dinner, and in spite of the hotel's five-star rating, she was duly unimpressed. Blame it on her good Southern genes, but she just couldn't in good conscience eat food that only had one redeeming quality, that being that it was pretty to look at. To think the chefs who prepared this were considered masters. *Masters of what?* she wondered. As far as she could tell, they were only good at putting too small food onto too big plates. She smiled, thinking of what

her great-grandmomma's reaction would be to it. Her grandmomma would storm into the kitchen, snatch the head chef up by his or her ear and deliver a sermon on hellfire and damnation and grease and gravy.

Nqobile Mandla Morehouse was one of those old school Southern women. When she said 'old school,' she didn't mean twenty years ago; she meant back when there was only one direction—yonder. And when she said *southern*, she didn't mean states below the Mason-Dixon Line, she meant countries south of the Equator. Though her great-grandmomma had been an American citizen for over fifty years, she was Zulu to the core.

Way past eighty, Grandmomma Nqobile had a molten lava core that perfectly complimented her cousin Nombuso's ice cold one. When people hailed their heroes for being mavericks and risk-takers, they needed to add women like her great grandmomma and her cousin to the list. It wasn't as if Mozambique (or, for that matter, anywhere in the world) in the 1930s was a hotbed of women's rights; still, those women hatched a plan to

make their way to an America steeped in Jim Crowism, bigotry, and sexism just to have a chance to do something other than die early in childbirth. Hatching a plan, they “convinced” two male friends to pose as their husbands and picked their way across the hot African plains. Being poor, they literally walked across Africa. Though Nqobile couldn’t read, like most Africans, she had an affinity for languages (which was why the Portuguese used them as translators) and a strong sense of direction. Making their way through Mozambique (which was at the time a Portuguese Territory), they cut through the center of southern Rhodesia (modern-day Zimbabwe), the southernmost tip of Northern Rhodesia (modern-day Zambia), and the northernmost part of Bechuanaland Protectorate (modern-day Botswana), which were all territories belonging to or controlled by Great Britain. They trekked through the northeastern sliver of South-West Africa, which was the South African Mandate (modern-day Namibia) before finally making it into Angola, which was another Portuguese Territory, where they made a march to the

Atlantic Ocean. Tired from their harrowing journey through hostile territory, they remained close to the shore and slowly made their way north, cutting through Belgian Congo (modern-day Democratic Republic of Congo) before finally reaching Cabinda (enclave of Angola), where they rested for a year. An important forestry and agricultural center, Cabinda offered plenty of food and access to work. More importantly, there was access to missionaries.

There they soaked up knowledge. Not only did they learn to read, they learned basic doctoring. More importantly, they learned the ways of white Americans and Canadians. Having saved their money, they got on a boat headed to Brazil. Speaking Portuguese, they spent another year in Brazil working. They worked their way up the South American continent, going from Brazil to Columbia in about six month's time. They spent another year making their way north through Central America, dodging civil wars, carnivorous animals, and disease. Finally, they made their way to northern Mexico and walked across the border to the US.

They settled themselves in Texas. The colored population of Texas had risen by about twenty percent during the 1930s, so it was a good place to be, especially being that black folk regularly claimed other folk as family. Despite their thick accents and foreign ways, the women of the community took them in, thereby giving them safety and ties to America.

It was in Texas that they learned of black women having actual medical degrees, and more importantly, they learned where they'd obtained them. Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee admitted colored folk and women, so that was where they headed. There was only one state between them and Tennessee, but being that that state was Arkansas, they had to tread carefully. They had some harrowing scrapes, but within a few months they made it to Nashville. Six months later, they'd both made it through the doors of institutions of higher learning. Nombuso entered the doors of Fisk as a student, and her great-grandmomma made it through the doors of Meharry Medical College as a domestic worker. Being poor, one of them needed to work, and

while her great-grandmomma was good at languages, Nombuso was better at doctoring.

Nombuso eventually went on to earn her MD; then it was her great-grandmomma's turn to go to school. Entering Fisk University, she earned her degree in mathematics. Not bad for two girls from Mozambique. Seven years after they'd left Africa, they'd made it to America, created American identities, and earned degrees. Them divas didn't have no quit in them, and they passed that no retreat/no surrender legacy on to their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Isoke had grown up watching people call her great grandmomma all kinds of nasty names, talk to her any kind of way, and instead of getting mad, her great-grandmomma had brushed it off like it wasn't shit. That wasn't to say she'd just taken abuse. As long as a person didn't put their hands on her or threaten her babies, they got to keep their hands and the heart beating in their chest. She smiled, recalling the incident when some young something got smart with her great-grandmomma.

‘Don’t let me being old fool you,” she’d said. “I might be old, but I ain’t forgot how to fuck somebody up. You don’t know me or what I got in this handbag. Could be chewing gum, could be tissue, could be a big old wad of *‘fuck somebody’s shit up.’* I suggest you go ahead about your business, or you going to be limping to find some first aid.’

Yep, her great-grandmomma was a hellraiser, and being that she spent so much time with her, she couldn’t help but pick up some of her ways. Along with teaching her things such as how to select the ripest fruit and how to can, she taught her all about her history, how to kneecap someone, how to bring an out-of-line boy to his knees. Isoke wished she could’ve talked her great-grandmomma and homie into coming to Phoenix with her, because right now, seeing a good ol’ old lady smackdown would have entertained her to no end.

Chapter 1b

SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT

Maybe it was wrong of me to wish for a good old smackdown. Maybe it was wrong of me to make fun of my colleagues. Maybe the universe just had a fucked up sense of humor. How else could you explain Phil deciding to sit at my table? Out of all of the tables in the banquet hall, he and his cronies just had to sit at mine. Damn, he knew I hated him, which was probably why he'd sat his trifling ass down next to me.

So now, instead of merely snarling my lip at the shit masquerading as food on my plate, I was snarling my lip at the human next to me masquerading as a man. Phil might be many things ("things" being the key word), but first and foremost, Phil was a shithead. Actually, he wasn't just a shithead, but the Emperor of Shitheads in all of the universe, and his conversation just further proved my hypothesis.

Being next to him, I was privy to the most demeaning conversation about women I'd ever

had the misfortune to overhear. It was the kind of conversation that would get him a mouthful of fist if he was anyplace with a high ratio of Southerners. Oh, there were other people at the table, but they were in two camps: those in Phil's party of shitheads, and those who were seated because they were already three sheets to the wind and couldn't do more than manage a half-assed kind of stagger.

So yeah, there I was sitting right next to needs-a-fucking-foot-in-his-trifling-ass Phil, listening to him go on and on and on. If my girl Teijana was here, I'd get her to dig out his voice box and transplant it into someone who appreciated the ability to speak. Even though Phil wasn't talking loud, I *knew* that Phil knew I could hear him. And just as he knew I could hear him, even with his less-than-stellar mathematical skills he most likely calculated that if he got outrageous enough, I'd say something to him.

He'd had time to learn my ways, being that we'd been colleagues for a hot minute now. Scratch that, we weren't colleagues; we merely worked in the same place and had our checks

signed by the same man. Phil had been a dick a few minutes before my first day had even begun. Motherfucker actually had the gall to hit on me in the elevator on my first day. Since my ‘no thank you,’ he’d tugged out his Guide to Not Getting Laid and serenaded me with a bevy of the lamest pickup lines I’d ever heard. When he finally got it through his thick head that I wasn’t about to date him regardless of how highly he thought of himself, he resorted to insults. While he might not be shit at math, I had to give him his props for his ability to deliver a good insult. I’d heard them all, although I have to admit that my personal fav was: ‘I thought they hired you to be my ho-fer.’ Regardless of how bad I wanted to play the dozens with him, Sons Engineering was my place of employment, not a frat house, the quad or a sports bar. Instead of indulging, I answered him with a look that let him know I didn’t think he was shit.

Today was different. This wasn’t the office of Son’s Engineering. This wasn’t Atlanta. This was hot-ass Phoenix, Arizona. Though I could’ve gotten up from the table and walked away, I wasn’t

in the mood to be Phil's bitch today or any other day. Really, if I'd walked off, I might as well have walked into the office and given him my lunch money every day to save him the hassle of coming to shake me down for it. Like I said, today was a new day. I was hot. I was hungry. I was officially annoyed, and though things might get out of hand, my big brother Zuberi was hanging about. Having been honorably discharged just last month, he'd come here so he could fly back to Atlanta with me. A reserved man, Zuberi wasn't one to start shit, but he finished it with the quickness.

Breaking my *'no speaking to complete dicks rule,'* I addressed Phil.

"Phil, while I do appreciate your First Amendment rights and your attempts at discretion, I don't appreciate the conversation at all. Perhaps you could table that conversation for a more appropriate venue." *Like when you're sitting around Hell's antechamber.*

"Bitch," he replied.

“I see that your conversational prowess is equal to your mathematical prowess—meaning close to zero,” I returned.

“That’s your problem. You think you’re fucking better than everyone else.”

‘No, I don’t think I’m better than everyone else; I just know I’m better than you’ was what I thought, but what I said was:

“No, Phil. I don’t think I’m better than everyone else, and there’s a lot I don’t know, but I know this: I can out-math you any day of the week.”

That might not sound like an insult, but believe me, to question an engineer’s math skills was the equivalent of hurling a ‘your mama’ at someone.

“Yeah, because it’s not like you have anything to distract you from *your* math...you know, like a life. You don’t have a man. For that matter, you don’t even have a dog, so I guess you should be able to out-math even Pythagoras himself.”

That was pretty good, and any other day that might’ve stood, but yeah, like I said, I was

hot...and hungry. And though my brother wasn't present, I knew he had my back.

"I probably could take old P-thag (*that's what I called Pythagoras because, well, I'm Southern and I'm entitled to totally fuck up someone's name*), but that's neither here or there, being that he's not here to defend himself or his theorems. As far as my life goes, it's none of your business, Phil."

"I remember a time when fat broads knew their place," he sneered.

"And I remember a time when a male dis-sing my looks would've hurt my feelings, but then I had my ninth birthday, and I've been badass ever since."

"You're pretty much all ass."

"And yet the fact I won't give you the time of day eats away at your fragile ego. Stop hating on women, Phil. This is not 1930. Women are part of the workplace. Not only are women discovering they can be anything, they're also discovering they can say no to all kinds of things, including antiquated paradigms of femininity and your

advances. Sucks to be you in the modern era, doesn't it?" I asked.

"It doesn't matter how far in the future we are. A man is still a man, and women are made for us."

Though I couldn't see my own face, I was pretty sure my eyebrows had disappeared somewhere up in my hairline. Phil was fucking serious. His presence usually annoyed me; his prior conversation had made me want to vomit in my mouth; but his last statement made me want to break every rule of mathematics, physics, and the space-time continuum and throw him into a black hole in a galaxy farther away than far, far away.

I was busy daydreaming about ways to keep the human population safe from Phil when the unexpected happened. No, the earth didn't open up and swallow Phil like it did Korach and his cronies; nope, this time the earth was still. Then again, this wasn't the Book of Numbers. The earth may have been still, but Phil was not. Phil reached over and copped a feel of my ass. Oh, he was good. He was all Houdini about it. No one

else may've seen it, but I'd felt it, and touching my person uninvited was the number one 'Oh, hell no.'

Before I describe what went down, let me first say that Phil Grant was not only a shithead, but a wannabe member of Scandinavia. He had the looks, the wealth, the same disregard for everyone around him, and the same air of entitlement, but what he didn't have was any damn sense whatsoever. How that man found his way out of preschool still puzzles me, so you can understand I have no idea how he got a master's in engineering.

Some people name-dropped, but Phil university name-dropped. He went to all of these so-called top-ranked universities and yeah, whatever. As many times as he bored everyone with the story, it seems like I would remember what universities he attended, but alas, all I recall is that they had a 'tech' somewhere in their name. It wasn't that I didn't care; well, actually it was. I'm an Aggie, a Tarheel and a Yellow Jacket, and as far as I'm concerned, that trumped everything on Phil's C.V. And that's not merely my bias. After

listening to the man talk, it became increasingly obvious that Phil got into those prestigious universities on legacy, not academics.

Now back to him cupping my ass. Before I even had time to work out whether I was going to cut his hand off or his whole arm, my other hand was busy throwing my drink in his face. I might be a modern woman, but I don't like people touching me without an invitation.

After tossing my drink in his face, I was suddenly a lot calmer. I didn't feel the need to shout the room down or order down thunder and demand his termination (from the job, not from existence, although...no, seriously, just from the job). All I wanted to do was go to my room and cleanse myself from Phil cooties.

That was my plan, but on top of being stupid, Phil was drinking—probably had been for a hot minute. The liquor he was tossing back like it was going out of style must've robbed him of his last iota of sense, because he backhanded me. The blow rocked my head back and ushered in a silence that was deafening. I pulled the napkin out of my lap and carefully set it on the table as if any

sudden movement would shatter my good sense, or compromise my hold on my cool. Turning to Phil, I meant to ask if he'd lost his mind for a minute and mistaken me for one of his bitches. Really, that was my intent. Alas, it didn't go like that...at all.

Few things have the power to shake you out of your reverie or shut the world the fuck up like a sudden unexpected bit of violence. Violence is an effective and expedient device for begetting not only silence, but provocation and internal debate. Violence has power, not just physical power, but change-bringing power that affects not only individuals, but entire communities and whole worlds. Violence has the power to take you back, to transport you to pivotal moments in not only your own life but your life as a citizen of the world. After the moment, after the chorus of collective indrawn breaths, there is a tipping point. That is, there is a point in the aftermath where you either withdraw for reasons of physical safety (yours or that of the aggressor), or you retaliate. You can retaliate with moral authority and turn the other cheek, or you can retaliate with more

violence. The law generally understands equal violence (even if it doesn't necessarily condone it), but it definitely doesn't condone the kind of violent revenge I had bubbling beneath my WTF. The smoke hadn't even cleared. My rage hadn't even amped up to full strength, but the predominant thought racing through my veins was '*this motherfucker's fixin' to die.*'

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Let me just say, I've watched *Enter the Dragon*, *Rocky IV*, and *Tombstone*. I've played *Street Fighter*, *Mortal Kombat* and *Virtual Fighter*. I've taken kickboxing, even a little karate during my 'I want to be Bruce Lee' phase. I've had years of hand-to-hand combat training, being that I grew up in Patrale, GA, where the default setting for males is 'alpha' and the default setting for females is 'bad motherfucker' (and that's not an insult but a compliment).

I had the training, the confidence, the skill, but more than that, I had the blood of Nqobile Morehouse pumping through my veins, and it

had obviously merged with a strain of Southern, which in turn manifested itself into straight-up, undiluted crazy. I was like the perfect storm, but in human form.

Oblivious to my delicate, sleeveless, cream silk blouse, my surroundings, the law, and ramifications, I grabbed my plate and slammed it into Phil's face. And then I grabbed every damn plate I could get my hands on and launched a full-frontal assault on the motherfucker whp dared violate my personal space boundaries and put his grubby, *'couldn't math his way out of a fourth-grade EOG test if his life depended upon it'* hands on me. Plate of salad; threw it. Bowl of soup; flung it. Phil's surf and turf; chucked it. Glass of juice; hurled it. Carafe of coffee; slung it. Decorative centerpiece on the table; smashed it in his face. Cutlery; tossed it like ninja stars.

And then his buddies rocked up. And if Phil was a Scandinavia wannabe, those motherfuckers were *homo sapiens* wannabes. I stayed the fuck away from them. If I stepped onto an elevator and they were in it, I exited. If I walked into a room and they were present, I settled myself as

close as possible to Scandinavia. I might not like Scandinavia, but hanging with engineers, the pickings for alpha men were kind of slim. Besides, Scandinavia just made me want to establish myself as their ruler and make them my personal gofers, whereas Phil and Company gave me the heebie-jeebies.

I didn't know if they were there to help or hinder, but I took their presence as a threat and altered my attack. Having depleted my supply of shit to launch at him, I hefted a chair and wondered which one to take out first. But before I could finish that thought, I felt Roar's presence and instinctively knew everything would be okay. Shifting to shield him from Phil and the shitheads he rolled with, I felt Roar's hand on my hip. And even in the middle of battle, my body paused to revel in the feel of his hands on my body. Until that moment, Roar had never touched me. In fact, he'd always remained a respectable distance away, ensuring he didn't invade my personal space. Now he was not only touching me, he was all up on me. He was so close I could feel his leashed anger. I'd never seen Roar be anything

but calm. He had a serenity about him that I admired, but right now that serenity was gone. Seeing the rest of Scandinavia making their way over and knowing they weren't about to let anyone sucker punch Roar, I turned to look at him, to tell him it was okay...and stopped cold.

This was a Roar I'd never before seen. A Roar I would never have guessed existed. This Roar was the antithesis of calm, cool, and collected. This Roar was undiluted fury...and unbelievably fucking hot.

Though I was in his line of sight, I knew he didn't see me. His eyes were locked onto Phil and company, and for a fraction of a nanosecond, I felt sorry for them. Scandinavia might not exactly be the evil empire, but right now it was pretty fucking threatening, with Roar as its commander and the "-sons" his hardened soldiers ready to follow him into battle. In this moment, the coating of privilege they wore with pride was nowhere to be seen. In its place was straight-up Viking warrior. Mapmakers were about to get paid, because Roar had the 'getting-ready-to-lay-waste-to-your-country-kill-your-men-and-demand-

your-land-as-a-spoil-of-war-for-daring-to-piss-me-off' look about him.

Mesmerized by the sight of Roar, it was a moment before I realized he'd relieved me of my chair. Before I could object, he had me pushed behind him and had Phil's throat comfortably within his hand. I didn't see much, being pinned behind Roar's back, but I clearly heard Phil's gasps. *Mercy, Roar felt good...and smelled good...and felt good.* That was the last thought I remember.

Chapter 1c

STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

Njarðar did not want to be here. He had made that perfectly clear to his friends...and right now, he was using the term ‘friends’ lightly. Sigtrygg Diðriksson, Falkor Sigfússon, Torsven Óðinsson, Yngvi Aðalmondsson, and Tage Kristjánsson might be his business partners, but right now he was trying to remember why they were his best friends. Oh yes, because they wouldn’t go away and allow him to be the hermit he longed to be. They said being alone all of the time wasn’t good for him, so they dragged him out, hoping he’d be more like them. Sighing, he knew his friends meant well, but womanizing, drinking, and clubbing had long ago lost their appeal. Actually, those activities had never appealed to him. He much preferred libraries, museums, and the company of his beloved texts to that of human beings.

He wasn’t a misanthrope; he simply couldn’t stand most people. They bored him, and it wasn’t

simply because he had an IQ in excess of a hundred and ninety. It was because despite millennia of evolution, the majority of humanity could be summed up as ‘blah, blah, blah, look pretty, accumulate stuff, be like everyone else, blah, blah, blah.’ And in between they had constant quarrels and made never-ending noise. He was a man who enjoyed his quiet. He didn’t mind conversation, but he found that most people had little to say...or rather what they said, he didn’t want to hear.

Excusing himself and slipping away from his friends, he found a deserted corner that had his name all over it. Grabbing a bottle of water, he slowly sipped it as he glanced across the room. Though he pretended to scan the room, in reality he was looking for one person in particular—Dr. Isoke Morehouse. Isoke was brilliant, even without all of those letters behind her name. She had a most impressive CV. Currently, she had more credentials than all of his partners. Oh, every employee had the obligatory MS in Engineering; however on top of her MS in Environmental Engineering, she also had an MS in City and Re-

gional Planning. Just this year, she'd completed her doctorate—not that she'd told anyone.

If her colleagues had such impressive CVs, they'd throw a parade, post banns, and hire a village crier to announce their accomplishments to all and sundry. Not Isoke—she simply went about her business as if obtaining that much education was par for the course. Having done an extensive background check on her, like he did for all employees, he knew that in her family it was. Her father held a MS in Mathematics, her mother held a Ph.D. in Mathematics, and her brother held a MS in Electrical Engineering.

Isoke may have had the brain of an engineer, but she had the personality of Carnival. Damn near everybody's best friend, she held rock star status in their building. Whenever she walked into a room, everyone from the mailroom staff to the lead engineers shouted greetings. And Isoke smiled back. She had a ready smile, an unbelievable sense of humor, and an infectious laugh...and a tempting ass, and those eyes—he wanted to know just what percentage they darkened when she was feeling passionate.

Though she didn't brook interruptions when she worked, when it was time to go, there was always a bevy of people standing outside her door to walk out to her vehicle with her. She was like the Pied Piper, albeit without the rats and revenge plot. And she was better-dressed.

Isoke might be an engineer, but he'd bet cold hard cash that she didn't have a cotton button-down shirt anywhere in her closet. She dressed like she was on the verge of taking over something. Her style of dress was as original as she was. She was a woman who didn't need New York, LA, Milan or Paris to validate her. Her demeanor proclaimed: 'I'm the shit and I know it.'

Despite not wearing any noticeable name brands, Isoke not only looked like a high-powered businesswoman, she looked like she owned the company. And that was saying something, considering that his partners damn near wore out every high-priced designer in existence, especially if the designer had an Italian name.

Despite the intellect, the popularity, the aura of confidence, and her burning desire to invade an entire block of countries, Isoke was genuinely

nice. You had to work to get on her nerves, but when you did, not even the lake of fire could thaw the freeze she put on you. He knew, because he'd seen it. Though Isoke was nice enough to him, whenever she was in the company of his partners, it felt as if an ice age were looming. His partners grumbled that Isoke didn't like them, and he could understand that, because she didn't like them...at all. They couldn't fault her work; they simply found it difficult to accept that there was a woman on earth who didn't give a damn about them. And that made him smile...and keep her close to him. It was fun watching his partners get shot down, especially when they had no idea they were engaged in battle.

His partners accused him of having a spot soft for her...and maybe he did. She treated him like he was anybody else, meaning she didn't kowtow to him because he was her boss. Nor did she fuss over him like other females were wont to do. Not once did she bring him coffee or adjust his tie in an attempt to touch his person. He laughed thinking of Isoke's reaction if he even suggested she should fix his coffee. He'd seen her

with her best friend Karlo, and after hearing Karlo put people in their place, he was sure he didn't want any part of that kind of telling off.

If anything, Isoke treated him like...a friend. She simply accepted him as he was. That was a new experience. Usually people attempted to spruce him up, make him better, and encourage him to be like other guys. Isoke simply let him be.

The consummate extrovert, Isoke didn't let the fact he was the paradigm for introverts prevent her from including him in her good time. Though she respected his need for space, she didn't hesitate to nick his name or tease him about everything from his voracious sweet tooth to his lady company (what little of it there was). *Did you check that woman for STDs/psychotic baby daddies/the correct genitalia?* Though he was glad Isoke didn't look at him with the disgust she reserved for his partners, he did sometimes wonder what it would be like to have her look at him and recognize that he was a prime male.

He truly liked Isoke. Not only was she brilliant, but she had a bone-deep integrity that was evident in the way she went about her work,

treated people, and approached life. Under her rock-star veneer was a scholar. The written word was her vice and the bookstore her strip club. She had VIP status at the eclectic bookstore Jeanie's Lounge and was admitted before opening hours to get her daily fix of reading material. She often tossed out stimulating subjects that the whole office inevitably ended up debating. Though they didn't do a lot of face-to-face, since he always holed up in his office, they debated via email. Even when they were on opposing sides of an issue (which they inevitably were), she didn't simply dismiss his position, but gave it due diligence. And when she had the stronger argument (which she did at least half the time, which was a first for him), she didn't use it as a mechanism for indoctrination; instead, she handed it to him as another option.

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Seating himself at one of the many tables in the banquet hall, Njarðar was contemplating a topic for debate when he saw Phil strike Isoke.

Njarðar was a mild man. He rarely raised his voice, and though he was well-versed in martial arts, he'd never engaged in a fight. But then, there had been little reason to do so. No one bothered him, and in return, he didn't bother them. At six foot three and two hundred thirty-five pounds, he wasn't the biggest man, but he was a man, and Isoke, despite her solid five foot ten, one hundred seventy pound frame, was still a woman. And no man would ever put his hands on her with impunity. Rising from his chair, he made his way to the other side of the banquet hall.

He'd never forget the sight of Isoke's anger. Ever. And, he was sure, neither would anyone else present. If Phil's slap had startled the room into silence, Isoke's defense of that slap spurred the room into getting the hell out of Dodge (or getting the Dodge out of hell, because he'd never felt heat like the heat here in Phoenix). She'd already cleared the table of all of its contents—most of which Phil was now wearing—and when she ran out of stuff to throw, she picked up the chair and hefted it like a shield while using the

leg she'd broken off as a sword. Though she looked confident, he recognized the fear under her anger. And that was simply unacceptable, as Isoke was...*hvaðeina, sérhvað*...he finally admitted. Isoke had always been *hvaðeina, sérhvað*—everything.

Coming up behind her, he relieved her of the chair with one hand and grabbed Phil's fist within his free hand. Slowly crushing the hand that had dared touch Isoke, he stared the man down as he pushed Isoke behind him. He held her in place, knowing that she'd try and help him. He appreciated that, but what she didn't know was that it was currently taking every ounce of control within him not to outright kill Phil. If she helped him and suffered further injury, he would not only kill the man, he would also kill the men with him. She didn't know it, but Sigtrygg, Falkor, Torsven, Yngvi, and Tage did. He saw them approach from the corner of his eye. Though they were men who enjoyed the perks of their privilege, they were, first and foremost, *men*. They didn't speak; they allowed their presence to speak for them. Emitting a grunt of gratitude, Njarðar continued ap-

plying pressure until he felt the bones of Phil's hand give.

He would've continued until he'd crushed the bones to dust, but he felt Isoke tremble. Realizing her adrenaline rush was wearing off, he turned and caught her before she hit the floor in a dead faint. Cradling her to his chest, he handed her to Torsven, along with a look that demanded he protect her or suffer the consequences. Turning back to Phil and his group, Njarðar smiled. And, noting the fear that bloomed over their faces, he loosed a round of booming laughter right before he gave them the fight they'd been looking for.

Chapter 1d

SYSTEM DYNAMICS

Njarðar didn't recall much of the battle. He simply knew that it was short. It had to be, for he had to see to Isoke. Only when the last man lay on the floor writhing in agony did his anger diminish enough to allow him to do something other than deliver pain. Before he could shake off the last remnants of rage, Torsven handed him back Isoke and a directive to see to her while he dealt with the fallout. He needed no further urging. Though bordering on dangerously adventurous, Torsven was the most levelheaded of his partners.

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Handing over Isoke, Torsven sent Njarðar to see to his woman. Turning to Sigtrygg, Tage and Falkor, he indicated that they should follow Njarðar, knowing that at the moment, Njarðar's sole focus was on the future he was cradling in his arms. Grabbing a fistful of Yngvi's shirt before he

could find some new shit to get into, Torsven went to see about the garbage that was littering the floor of the banquet room. Phil and company might be damn fine engineers, but they'd crossed the fucking line when they put their hands on the one person Njarðar lost his fucking mind over.

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Njarðar couldn't help but look at Isoke. Isoke was beautiful. The slight bruise that had begun to form on the left side of her face prevented his anger from completely dissipating. Feeling the emotion rise up, he had to force himself to hold her gently instead of crushing her to him like he wanted to do. He handed his partners his keycard, and they unlocked the door but knew not to step foot in the room, being that he had Isoke there.

“Do we need to call a doctor?” Tage asked.

“Have one on standby. I'll call you when I need you,” he said as he shut the door.

Disregarding the food residue stuck to her clothes, he laid her on the bed. Going to the bath-

room, he fetched a cloth and ran it under warm water. Shucking out of his jacket, he tossed it and made his way back to Isoke. Gently he wiped her face and hands. Her clothes were a mess, but there was nothing he could do about that. He dared not undress her, knowing how vulnerable she was while unconscious and how violated she'd feel if she woke undressed. When she was cleaned up to his satisfaction, he tossed the cloth to the floor and pulled up a chair and watched her sleep.

There was no doubt that she was descended from Nubians. She had prominent features of which she was proud, and hell, she should be. Isoke did nothing to diminish the woman who she was. She wore her Senegalese twists pulled back in an intricate chignon, which allowed others to see the beauty of her face. Having Nordic features himself, even though he had dark brown hair and green eyes, he was fascinated with Isoke's features. Her round forehead, flatter nose, and thick lips were beautiful.

He smiled, considering the scores of beautiful women he knew who didn't step foot out of

the house without full face coverage. All of them wanted to conceal, play up, or diminish their features. Isoke, on the other hand, wore very little makeup, choosing to present herself to the world on her own terms. After a discussion about the fashion industry, he'd asked her why she wore only a minimum of makeup. Instead of getting angry at him and accusing him of meanness, she'd smiled and answered, knowing that he meant no insult.

“Whenever I see my image, I see my history. I see my mother when I look at the shape of my body, my grandmother when I look at my cheekbones, my father when I look at the color of my eyes, my great-grandmamma when I look at the shape of my nose, and the shell of my ear. I see my ancestors when I look at the shape of my face and the color of my complexion. Whenever I see myself, I see my history. And knowing my history, why would I put something on my face to conceal or diminish who and what I am?”

She was proud of her features not because she knew she was striking, but because her face was a living genealogy. He liked the way she

viewed life and her place in it. If he was being completely honest, he'd admit that he liked damn near everything about her.

His quiet was interrupted by a disoriented Isoke waking up.

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Tage had never seen Njarðar anything but calm...until tonight. After seeing Njarðar angry, he was sure of a few things. One, he never wanted to see Njarðar angry again. It wasn't a normal anger he'd witnessed tonight. It was a soul-searing anger that incinerated everything it touched. Two, Njarðar was deeply in love with Isoke Morehouse. Tage had always suspected Njarðar held a soft spot for the contrary woman, but now he knew it for what it was—love, and not simply any kind of love, but the walk-to-the-ends-of-the-earth kind.

Regardless of how much Isoke despised the engineers, something in him twisted at the thought of her being hurt. And something dangerous reared its head as he recalled it was a man

who'd hurt her. He didn't abide men striking women...period, ever, or under any circumstances. That thought brought him to point number three. Phil and his pals had to go, unless they wanted to have their teeth kicked in...every time he saw them.

Having used his good looks and name to sweet-talk the desk clerk into giving him the names of doctors on the premises, he quickly scanned the room for the first one on his extremely short list. The pickings were somewhat slim, being that most of the rooms were reserved by engineers, but as luck would have it there was one here tonight—a Dr. Snapdragon Rice. A damn odd name for anyone, but he wasn't interested in anything but the 'doctor' in front of his name. Tage hoped the doctor didn't have any plans; then again, he didn't really care. Njarðar's woman needed a doctor—therefore, Dr. Snapdragon Rice was simply going to have to rearrange his evening.

Isoke woke in a panic. Not knowing where she was, she gasped, frantically trying to get her bearings. Before she could jump from the bed, Roar's calming voice slid over her.

"Isoke, you're okay."

"Roar?" she questioned.

"Yes, Isoke," he replied as he helped her to a sitting position.

"What happened? Where am I? What—?" she began.

"You're in my suite."

Glancing at the bedside clock, she noted the time. Only a few minutes had passed. She was fully dressed, albeit covered in remnants of food, and she was with Roar. Closing her eyes, she exhaled, thankful she was okay.

"Why am I here?" she finally asked.

"You fainted. I thought it best I not leave you on the floor of the banquet hall."

"I never faint, although I admit I might've fallen asleep whilst standing up. Nothing hurts, so obviously I didn't hit the floor."

"Well, I had my reputation to protect as a man and all," he joked.

“Oh, yeah, that,” she joked back.

“Tage has a doctor waiting. Are you ready to see him?”

“You were with me the whole time? You didn’t leave me after I fell asleep standing up?” she asked.

“I didn’t leave you, Isoke.”

“Well, then I don’t need the doctor. Thank you for asking and thank you for looking after me, Roar,” she said as she reached out and hugged him.

“You’re welcome, but you’re seeing a doctor...just to be on the safe side,” he said as he called Tage on his cellular phone.

Isoke wanted to protest, but it was obvious Roar was so not listening to her at the moment. Fine, then. To appease Roar, she’d allow the doctor in, but that didn’t mean she was going to let him do more than check the basics.

Watching the doctor enter the quarters, she noticed his handsomeness straight away. Hell, how could she not, as she’d been noticing the trait all her life? The good doctor was fine with a capital F. Standing about an inch taller than

Roar, he had a severe haircut that only served to highlight his many beautiful features. *He should go home right now and hug his momma*, she thought, *because damn, he got some good-ass genes*. As good a doctor as she was, Raisa Álvaro Rice made the shit out of some fine-ass sons. Standing to greet her dear friend, she noticed that Roar seemed agitated by the doctor's presence.

"I'm going to be in the sitting room. If she screams or makes any sound of distress, you'll die," Roar growled.

"If she screams, I assure you it won't be distress," Snap said.

"You'd better," Roar began.

"I'd better what?"

Oh fuck, Isoke thought. Roar was acting so caveman it wasn't funny. Well, actually it was, because standing there in his tailored clothes with his five-thousand dollar watch and half a million dollar education, he was the antithesis of a caveman. Though Roar was due a good telling off, first, she'd have to insure that the doctor and Roar didn't come to blows. Roar didn't hide the fact he was angry, and she didn't have to know

Snapdragon Rice to note he was good and worked up over something. Dollars to doughnuts the something he was angry about had to do with fucking Scandanavia. Bastards.

“Roar,” she purred. “Let the doctor do his thing so he can go. Okay?”

“Fine,” he said as he made his way to the door. “But I’ll be in the sitting room if you need me.”

“We won’t need you,” Snap said, further irritating Roar.

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Snap was an easygoing man, a patient man, a nice man, but right now he was about yay close to being a man on death row. If any one of the merry little band of lunatic engineers threatened him just once more, it was on. He didn’t want to be at this convention in the first place, but Zoysia had whined and pleaded and given him the big puppy-dog eyes before finally telling their mom-mas on him, so he was in Phoenix whether or not he wanted to be. And now he was here, did he get

to golf and chill and indulge in the first-class activities for which the resort was renowned? No. Instead he'd had to attend seminars on shit he would've been perfectly content to go the whole of his life not knowing.

On top of his absolute annoyance, it was fucking hot. A Southerner born and bred, he was accustomed to the heat, but this was beyond ridiculous. And being kidnapped by a crazed Scandinavian engineer didn't sweeten his mood one bit. If it wasn't for the bit of desperation in the engineer's eyes, he would've put up more of a fight. He should've brained the engineer and called the police, but *noooooooooooooooooo*, he had a conscience. Dammit all to hell. But none of that mattered at the present. Zoysia's conference had been scheduled to end an hour ago, and being that they'd wrecked his phone, she wouldn't be able to reach him. She was probably worrying herself sick right now. If she shed one tear, if one fucking frown crossed her face, he was maiming those motherfuckers, and he didn't care what kind of laws were in place to prevent that sort of thing. Tage what-

ever-the-fuck his last name was had a beat down coming, but that would have to come later.

“You know Zuberi’s going to kill them, which means I have to get in my ass whipping first while there’s something left of those fuckers.”

“I don’t give a shit if y’all beat the shit out of the rest of Scandanavia, but nobody touches Roar.”

“Roar, the pretty boy?” he asked.

“No, Roar, the nice man who is my boss.”

“And probably your little pet project.”

“No, he’s not.”

“Is too—you have a soft spot for the underdog.”

“Who says he’s the underdog?”

“With you there to challenge him, he’s definitely the underdog.” Snap laughed.

“You are so bad. Just because everyone’s not all ‘let’s fuck shit up’ like you are doesn’t mean they’re weak.”

“No, it doesn’t, but little man out there is too weak for you.”

“Who says I want him?”

“Your eyes say it. They go all soft when you look at him.”

“They do not go soft!”

“Okay, well, you don’t look at him like you do the rest of his homies.”

“The rest of his homies are fucking morons, but Roar is different.”

“He wants you.”

“Would that be so bad if he did?”

“It wouldn’t be if he manned up. Do you think any of the guys from home would allow someone as handsome and brilliant as me to be alone anywhere in the vicinity of a bed with their woman?”

“You can’t judge all males by the ones in Patrle.”

“Yes, I can, and truth be told, you and every other female there judge males against us.”

“I will neither confirm nor deny your words,” she said.

“You don’t have to. If he’s not in here in sixty seconds, I’m beating his ass because he’s not good enough for you.”

“No wonder Zoysia doesn’t have a boyfriend—you’re so damn particular, you probably don’t think any man is good enough for her.”

“It’s not my fault no man’s good enough for her, so don’t blame me. Forty-five seconds, Isoke.”

“Snap,” she pleaded. “Don’t make me think so hard right now—I’m going through food withdrawal,” she admitted.

“Me too. For me, it’s biscuits and gravy,” he said.

“Fatback,” she laughed, “though I don’t need any more of either.”

“I bet little man out there doesn’t think you have too much of either. In fact, I bet he spends a disproportionate amount of time watching your back. And he has thirty seconds.”

Reaching out to her, he gently touched her cheek. “You know Zuberi’s going to kill whoever did this?”

“I know you’re going to talk him out of a multiple homicide.”

“Why would I do that? Zuberi is so good at fucking people up and not getting caught.”

“You’ll do it, or I’ll tell Zoysia just how many people you’ve fucked up behind her.”

“Like she’d believe I’m anything other than a gentleman. She helps me shine my halo each morning.” He smiled.

“I can see the family resemblance now—you’re both fucking nuts.”

“That may well be. Twenty seconds.”

“Snap, let it go.”

“No. Pretty Boy needs to man up. Perhaps I should help him man up.”

“Okay, you ‘helping’ Roar scares me.”

“Don’t be scared. Cousin Snap loves you. However, I’m itching for a fight, and I’m sure he’ll give it to me, especially when he sees his woman in my arms,” he said as he pulled her in close for a hug. Isoke had always been one of his favorite people, and not simply because Zuberi was one of his best friends. Though Isoke was a striking woman, he wasn’t attracted to her. He couldn’t be, being that he considered her family. Hugging her was as natural as hugging Zoysia, but not as hard on his back.

“You better be glad I like you, Snap,” she said.

“You can’t help but like me—after all, I’m me.” Smiling, he counted down. “Five, four, three...”

Hearing the door burst open, he smiled, noting the angry male bursting in. He couldn’t help but be happy to know he was going to get his brawl. Thrusting Isoke behind him, Snap turned and gave Pretty Boy a shit-eating grin right before he walked into a right cross. Throwing back his head, he laughed aloud and countered with a left jab.

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Isoke had always admired Snap’s intellect, just as she’d enjoyed his sense of humor. He had to have a sense of humor, being that Zoysia was his sister, and eighty percent of the people in his immediate family were named for poisonous plants. Still, right now she detested both his intellect and humor. She didn’t like to be called out, and even though he’d done it in an easy, joking

manner, he'd still done it. And though she knew he was being a shit starter by hugging her, she'd participated, hoping like hell that Roar would bust in the room, scared as hell that he wouldn't. Either way, she was going to need a hug.

And just when she'd resigned herself to Roar not showing, the door burst open. Instead of letting her go, Snap hugged her closer and kissed the top of his head.

"Maybe he's not such a pussy after all," he whispered as he turned and walked straight into a fight.

She could've stopped him. Okay, she could've tried. No one stopped a determined Rice male who was ready to mix it up, and if Snap was anything, it was a Rice male. And from the smile on his full lips and the gleam in his eyes, he was anticipating this fight like kids anticipated Christmas. Damn, that was one crazy, caring man. Watching them both get off a good punch, she cleared her throat. As much as she was tempted to try and break them up, she knew better than to get in the middle of that. All she needed was to get punched in the face. Zuberi

was already going to have to be talked out of committing several homicides; she didn't need to be responsible for him going on a mass murdering spree.

“Roar, meet Snap, one of the dearest members of my family. Snap, meet Roar, one of my dearest friends, even though he doesn't know it.”

Not giving Roar a chance to respond, she continued. “Roar, do you know what kind of doctor Snap is? Snap's a veterinarian. Perhaps the next time Scandinavia goes out to commit a felony, maybe they should take a moment to review their actions. It's just ridiculous to go down for being stupid on top of being criminally liable,” she stated.

Turning to Snap, she gave him a quick hug. “I'm so sorry you were disturbed. Please accept my apologies and tell your crazy-ass sister not to kick off the modern version of the Trojan War. I'm sure Mr. Valdason will compensate you for your time.”

Looking at Roar, she raised a brow and said, “Won't you, Roar?”

Roar didn't answer in the affirmative like she thought he would. Instead he said something in what she guessed was Icelandic. On second thought, it might've been man, as Snap responded to the gibberish like he knew what the hell Roar was saying.

"You hit like a bitch. How you think you're going to handle that much woman, being that you hit like a bitch?" he asked as he left the room.

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Njarðar didn't want to be in the sitting room while that man was in the bedroom with his Isoke. Why the hell couldn't Tage have found a decrepit old man who rivaled the Crypt Keeper in both looks and temperament? Trust his friends to find the only doctor who could've been a cover model for one of those calendars women drooled over. If that doctor so much as touched her inappropriately, he'd beat his ass. Scratch that, he was going to beat the doctor's ass anyway for his smart comment about Isoke screaming. Isoke might not like him, but damn if he was going to

allow her to take up with Dr. Country and Western.

He was contemplating ways to kill the man when he heard the doctor's rumbling laughter mixing with the unmistakable sound of Isoke's laughter. What the hell could be so funny? Screw propriety, he was going in there. Bursting into the room, he came face-to-face with a scene straight out of his nightmares: Isoke in some other man's arms. Fuck that. Tossing his fist into Mr. Cover Model's face, he took a jab to the jaw. Before he could retaliate, Isoke made her presence and her annoyance known.

She yelled something about a veterinarian and compensation, but all he cared about was getting that motherfucker as far away as possible from Isoke. Njarðar watched as the doctor threw him a smirk. If Isoke hadn't been standing between them, he would've answered his smirk with another right cross. But seeing Isoke drew his attention away from the man—which wasn't particularly difficult, when he had all that beautiful woman standing before him. He could've looked at her all day, but then the doctor went and

ruined his good mood with another snide remark before quitting the room. He would've given the doctor a little something to leave with (like a thrashing), but Isoke's hand on his shoulder stopped him. That was alright, though, because he had a long memory, and she wouldn't be there to protect the doctor all the time.

He might not be one of those big, corn-fed Southern boys, but he was a big, corn-fed Icelandic boy, and Isoke was his. Damn, he hated that man who was a dear member of Isoke's family. When he killed him, he wondered how close to the front pew they'd be sitting at the doctor's funeral.

Njarðar clearly heard the doctor level some extremely unpleasant insults at his partners through the closed door. The curses, coupled with the fact the doctor had slammed the door so hard he wondered if it was still hanging on the hinges, implied that the doctor was not in a good mood. Oh well, at least he wasn't in a room with Isoke. Maybe his friends would give the doctor the thrashing that time and circumstance prevented him from delivering.

He debated whether he should apologize to Isoke or go help Tage beat the doctor's ass. And then he met Isoke's eyes, and all thoughts of the doctor flew from his head. A veterinarian? Only his friends would a) procure a doctor via kidnapping; and b) procure an animal doctor. They truly were idiots, he thought as laughter spilled from his mouth.

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Isoke couldn't help but be fascinated by Roar and Snap's interaction. And then she watched that motherfucker crack up. His laughter flowed from him like the molten lava flowed from Vesuvius. And while it didn't incinerate everything in its path, it did warm her. Walking over to him, she hugged him. There was no reason to be angry anymore, although she so wasn't letting this go, she thought as she snuggled into Roar.

She was surprised with the ferocity with which he returned her hug. Not even bothering to question herself, she burrowed in closer. Right now, she needed to feel his arms around her.

Smiling as the last remnants of their combined laughter faded, she couldn't help but sigh when Roar picked her up and walked through the suite to the bedroom with her in his arms. She didn't even bother to protest; she simply indulged in the feel of Roar holding her.

Though she should be concerned about soiling his pristine clothes or the opulent comforter that covered the king-sized bed, at that moment she couldn't be bothered. Right now, she needed comforting, and Roar was doing a damn fine job of it. And it didn't hurt that he felt so good. She didn't know how long they stayed like that, but when she next woke she was alone.

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When Isoke hugged him and snuggled into him, he couldn't hold back his instincts. Sighing, he hugged her back. Easily lifting her voluptuous form in his arms, he sat on the bed and gathered her close to him. For the first time, he gave free reign to his emotions and opened himself up to Isoke and everything that she caused him to feel.

Isoke felt good in his arms. No, she felt perfect in his arms, he thought as his eyes swept over her.

When Isoke fell asleep still in his hold, he knew he had to take a metaphorical step back. Though she didn't say it aloud, her actions fairly screamed it. Isoke trusted him. And he would do nothing to violate that trust, even if it meant denying everything he felt. He held her tighter, resigned that this was the last time that he'd have this opportunity. He had to savor this moment, because it had to last him for the rest of his life. Isoke was the one woman he wanted above all others, but she also represented the future that was off limits to him. She only saw him as some guy, while he saw her as his *hvaðeina*.

He loved Isoke. He loved her with everything he had, everything he was, everything he'd ever be in this lifetime...in all lifetimes combined. For him there would be no other woman. No other woman could fulfill his needs—any of them. Not physical, not emotional, not spiritual. To try and find what he felt for Isoke with another woman would not only be adultery, but blasphemy to the truth, to his spirit, to his very life, to the

God to whom he prayed and who gave him the gift of life. No, there would be no other women, for Isoke took up all of the room in his heart, and God took up all of the space within his soul.

Njarðar held her for hours. Before the sun broke the horizon, he resettled her on the bed. Taking a few minutes, he gathered his clothes and toiletries, repacked them and with one last glance at Isoke, let himself out of the room. Calling the front desk, he transferred the room to her name since he could not step foot in there again. Not only did every space in the room serve as a reminder of her presence, the room now smelled like her. How could he lie on that bed where she had lain, where they had lain together, and not want for that which he could never have? Forcing his eyes away from her, he turned and left the room.

Having nowhere else to go, he made the short trek down the hall to Torsven's room. Of all of his friends, Torsven was the closest to him. Regardless of the inconvenience, Torsven would open his door to him and ask no questions. Right now he needed space, and Torsven would grant

him that. Once Torsven opened the door, he merely shoved his bags in the room before turning and walking away.

He wandered the grounds of the upscale resort before settling himself at one of the outdoor tables, but his tears blinded him from the beauty of his surroundings. So deep into his despair, he didn't hear his partners' approach. In fact, he didn't notice them until Torsven set a plate of food in front of him.

"Eat, brother," was all that Torsven demanded.

He ate but tasted nothing but the bitterness of his situation. *Was he enough man for a woman like Isoke?* His heart said yes, his body said yes, but his mind wondered if she'd get bored with him. Nothing about him was flash. Women like Isoke didn't get hot over nerds like him. When was the last time a romance novel featured a male librarian? Women wanted cowboys and highlanders and special ops soldiers. They didn't want mathematicians. Despite his money and degrees, and even the few fancy clothes in his

closet, at the core he was a simple man, a boring man...and Isoke deserved so much more.

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Torsven didn't know when Njarðar was going to show up; he simply made himself available for when he did show up. Though he'd had plans that involved a delicious-looking redhead, he'd called and offered her his apologies, and sweetened them with a vase of roses. Njarðar was going to need him, and his friendship with Njarðar took precedence not only over the business, but also over his own pleasure. There'd be more women; he had only one best friend.

When Njarðar showed up, Torsven was prepared for everything except for what the brief glimpse of Njarðar revealed. It was rumored that Njarðar only had two emotions, but that wasn't true; Njarðar was a man of deep passions, and Torsven had seen them all—except for this one. For the first time in his life, Njarðar looked...defeated.

Kicking the bags further into the room, Torsven got on the phone and roused Falkor, Sigtrygg, Yngvi, and Tage. He didn't care that they might be between the thighs of beautiful and willing women. They'd get their asses down here and with the quickness, or he'd give them an ass-whipping to go along with their annoyance at having their good times interrupted. They'd give Njarðar space, but they wouldn't leave him unprotected.

INTERLUDE I

Zoysia—The Pesky Little Sister

While she could've had her pick of engineering firms to work at, Zoysia Livingstone didn't work for any of them and never had...and that was the way she liked it. In spite of having a BS in both Computer Science and Mechanical Engineering, Zoysia didn't care much for math, or khaki pants or protractors. What she did care for was toys and cartoons and the fun things in life, which was why she was an inventor of toys.

Zoysia couldn't help but be amped after seeing the new gizmos in the area of computer science. Rubbing her hands together in glee, she smiled as she considered how much cooler comic books and cartoons were going to be with the new software on the horizon. Though the convention was scheduled to go on for a few more days, she was officially through. She'd seen what she came to see; now all she had to do was grab Snap and go see what Phoenix had to offer besides hellfire-type heat.

As always, she smiled thinking about her big brother. Biologically, he might not be her brother, but she didn't give a shit. Snap was her brother and had been since that first day her family had moved into a little town that wasn't listed on any map she'd seen. Though it'd been over twenty-five years, she remembered it like it was yesterday.

Having wandered out in the massive expanse of grass that was their yard, she'd kept wandering until she was on Rice property. There among the wildflowers and pine trees and grass, she saw a little blond boy...being picked on by some older boys. Though he was bigger than her and older, she'd been drawn to him. The look in his eyes was one that would've made her cry if she'd been like other girls. But she'd never been like other girls. Dropping Dolly (her favoritest teddy bear), she'd emitted a battle cry and ran over and attacked the boys picking on her new best friend. Doing just like her big brothers had taught her, she'd kicked Lion and Hemlock in their boy parts as hard as she could with her Pro-Keds shoes. It must've been pretty hard, because

they'd immediately dropped to their knees, and when they did, she'd jumped on them and pounded their faces as hard as she could with her little fists. She'd pounded and kicked until her momma came running up yelling at her to stop. She didn't stop until her momma snatched her up, though.

Apologizing profusely to Ms. Raisa, her momma had pointed at Lion and Hemlock's bloodied noses and black eyes and asked her why she would do something like that.

"They were being mean to him," she said as she'd run to Snap and put her arms around him.

She probably would've gotten a spanking on the spot if Snap hadn't put his arms around her and hugged her to him. And if Dr. Sumac hadn't come out and smoothed things over with her momma. Turned out that Dr. Sumac and her daddy had been old Army buddies, and it'd been Snap's daddy who'd convinced her daddy to move their family to Patrale. She was glad for that because Snapdragon Rice was in Patrale, and like it or not he was her big brother. Speaking of which, where the hell was he? They had a city to light up.

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After searching for over an hour and still coming up empty-handed, Zoysia began to get worried. It wasn't like Snap to go deep cover mode on her, regardless of how put out he was with her or what he was doing. He could be knee deep in pussy and if she called, he'd answer. He might grumble a whole lot about it, but Snap loved her, looked out for her and protected her. She smiled, recalling him going to community college for a year until she graduated so he could go to college with her and keep her out of trouble.

She'd teased him for being a worrier, but right now it was she who was worrying. Going back to her room, she shimmied out of her dress slacks and shirt and shimmied into cargo jeans and a T-shirt. She was hot, but she needed the pocket space for her weapons. Tucking a few knives, a marker, and a roll of duct tape into her pants, she grabbed Snap's nine iron and left the room. Snap was missing, and whoever was responsible was going to be hurt real bad.

Having spent the last twenty minutes scoping the place, she'd learned some valuable information. One, a smack down had gone down. Two, Isoke was in the middle of it, which explained the wrecked state of the banquet hall. Being that her big brother Zuberi was supposed to be flying in to meet her, another smack down was imminent. Zuberi was right particular about his little sister, which explained why so many males within spitting distance of Isoke came to bad ends. When Zuberi discovered that his little sister was involved in a smack down, someone was going to be real fucked up by the end of the day. She shivered, scared for that person or persons, and then she smiled. She might not be able to find Snap, but she sure as shit could find Zuberi—it was kind of hard to miss a big six foot seven bald black man with forest green eyes and a body that promised you a bad end if you fucked with him. And one thing Zuberi was good at was finding stuff.

Ten minutes later, her mission was accomplished. Spotting Zuberi, she ran up to him and jumped in his arms, knowing he'd catch her.

“Hi, Zu!” she shouted.

“Hi, Little Bit,” he said as he hugged her tight.

She could’ve hugged him all day, and she might’ve if Snap hadn’t been missing and Zu didn’t notice things.

Holding her back, he looked down in her eyes and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t find Snap,” she said.

“Not to worry, Little Bit, I’ve already found him...and my sister.”

“Are they okay, or do we need to chloroform people? Because I got some from Teijana before I left,” she began.

Smiling, he hugged her close before answering. “No, we don’t need to chloroform people, and later tonight I’ll be by your room to confiscate that item from you. However, I’m going to have to teach some people some manners—after they get out of the ER.”

“Can I help?”

“That’d be a ‘no,’ but thanks for asking.”

“I can help. I want to go on a beating spree,” she said.

"I know you do, but wouldn't you rather take Snap out to have fun?"

"This is true. Where is he?"

"Two halls over."

"Then why are we waiting here? Let's go get him," she pleaded.

"Settle down. He's not in there of his own free will."

"What do you mean '*not of his own free will*'? Did some woman drug him and drag him off to have her way with him before she sells him into sexual slavery? I'm fucking her up," she said.

"Not a woman. Some men, so stand down and just wait."

"I'm not standing down while some men have drugged him and are trying to have their way with him before selling him into sexual slavery."

"I don't think they want him for sex. They want him for his doctoring skills."

"He's not going to be a doctor for some illegal cartel either. I'm going to bust him out, and you can stand here looking all crazy or help me," she whispered loudly.

“He’s got it handled, Little Bit, or I would’ve already been in there giving the Phoenix Forensics Department guaranteed overtime. Snap can handle himself. He’s from Patrale.”

“I know where he’s from, but Snap’s all gentle and stuff.”

“Okay, Little Bit, I didn’t want to be the one to have to tell you this, but Snap’s only gentle with you. With everybody else he’s one step away from all out mean.”

“I’m not going to allow you to besmirch my brother.”

“You actually used the word ‘besmirch’ in a sentence. I bet you also use the word ‘henceforth’ a lot too.”

She answered that with a punch to his gut, which didn’t do shit but cause him to laugh.

“Asshole.”

“You hit me, and I’m the one who’s an asshole?”

“Yep—you’re talking bad about my brother.”

“I’m just telling the truth. When you get back home, ask people.”

“I’m not asking shit. I know Snap. The only thing I’m doing right now is going to rescue him.”

Picking up her golf club, she ran down the hall and took the corner full speed and stumbled smack dab in the middle of Snap and a whole bunch of blond dudes.

“Snap!” she yelled. “I was so worried. Did they touch you?” she asked as she frantically looked him over. “Did they hurt you?” she asked.

“I’m okay, Zoysia, just tired.”

“I don’t believe you,” she said as she turned to the men. “What did you do to my brother?” she asked, and before they could answer, she knee-capped two of them and kicked two more in the crotch before slamming her nine iron into the fifth one’s back. Being they were now on the ground, she followed her kicks and hits up with some fists to the eye, jaw and anywhere else she could reach.

“Don’t fuck with my brother!” she screamed, oblivious of the scene she was causing.

She might’ve caused more of a scene if Snap hadn’t grabbed her.

“I’m not finished,” she said as he hefted her over his shoulder.

“Yes, you are. I’m hungry, and you owe me dinner.”

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Snap was through. Not only had he been kidnapped, he’d been falsely imprisoned...by a bunch of idiots. Seeing said idiots when he walked out of the room, he let out a sound of disgust and flipped them off.

“I hate each of you,” he said as he walked towards the elevator.

Well, that was what he intended to do, but then he saw a flash of brown and silver, and before he knew it he had an armful of baby sister.

Having known her for damn near all of their lives, he knew Zoysia had been worried. That was what had him riled up even more than the kidnapping. He’d only sanctioned two moods for Zoysia: happy and happier, and anything or anyone that fucked with that was on his list.

So caught up in Zoysia's relief, he momentarily forgot about Zoysia's crusade. Since that fateful day when she'd avenged him, she'd taken up the role of his protector, which was laughable being that she was five foot three on a good day—in stilettos. Still, what she lacked in height, she more than made up for in all out determination. Many a day, he was thankful for her small stature because if she'd had any kind of size to her, she would've had half a dozen felony assault convictions. Zoysia didn't care how big, her skilled, how crazy a threat was, because she was just a little bit crazier and a whole lot more determined and way more skilled than most people gave her credit for.

While he knew the blonds didn't know that, he also knew that in a few seconds, they were going to be on the floor in various states of fucked up. And he was going to laugh. And kill them if they thought to put their hands on his little sister. He could take them on and win by himself, but being that Zuberi was there, he wouldn't have to. From the look in Zuberi's eyes, they were going to take a second ass whipping this day whether they wanted to or not.

Watching them fall to the floor, he waited until Zoysia stopped swinging his nine iron, which was good and truly fucked now that she'd gotten her hands on it, before scooping her up. Of course she complained that she wasn't finished, and of course being her big brother he ignored her. Settling her over his shoulder, he looked at Zuberi.

"Isoke's fine. Despite bearing a scarlet DY [damn yankee], her boss isn't half bad. Decent right cross, even though he's probably the type of man to wear silk boxers."

"Actually, he's the type of man who goes commando. And to go along with his decent right cross, he's got a pretty good left hook too. And most importantly, he knows his math."

"Okay, creepy, overprotective older brother, I don't even want to know how you know all of that."

"I know a whole lot more about every man in close proximity to my little sister. And I know you of all people aren't talking about somebody being an overprotective older brother."

“Whatever. Rough him up if you have to, but don’t kill him. She likes him, and he damn sure likes her.”

“I gathered that. Just surprised it took him so long to make a move.”

“Whatever your move is going to be, it can’t include killing anyone else. Isoke was pretty adamant about that. So do whatever non-felony revenge you’re going to do and meet us downstairs in half an hour. I’m hungry.”

INTERLUDE ii

Zuberi—Bad MF & Big Brother

Zuberi was proud of the way he listened to Snap all nonchalant like, as if he wasn't going to have a word of prayer with Mr. Njarðar Valdason. It was obvious the man had a thing for his sister, but that wasn't good enough. He had to love his sister with everything he had. He'd better come big or stay at home, because while Zuberi could forgive a man some things, he wouldn't forgive a man for trifling with his sister's heart.

Of all the men who'd liked Isoke, only this one had potential. He wouldn't end him—just yet. He'd see what this man was made of. So far, he was impressed. Dude had given Phoenix ER a shitload of business, and his hair hadn't even come loose from his ponytail. Though his sister hadn't seen him, he'd entered the banquet hall just in time to see her boss open up a can of whoop-ass the likes of which he hadn't seen since the last time he and Snap had to fuck some peeps up.

It was a good showing, but if Phil thought he was through paying for his fuckup, he was so, so misguided. It was a good thing he was back. He could keep an eye on these sorts of things. After Phil and his boys recovered, they were going to discover all manner of unpleasantries waiting for them. But before he could get to that, he had to find the rest of the partners. They were going to apologize to his sister. They could do it on their own accords, or they could do it while he choked off their air supplies. Their choice.

Not known for his patience, he hurried about his task. He had to get himself dressed and downstairs so he could eat with Snap and Zoysia. Blowing out a breath, he knew it was going to take all of his energy and then some to get through anything involving Zoysia.

He needed to reserve some strength because after dinner, he was going to have to deal with Isoke, whom he was sure would be contrary. Already having scoped out her boss, he'd bet that Valdason was too honorable to put the moves on his sister (like they both so desperately wanted) after the events in the banquet hall. He'd be a

gentleman to the very end, even if that meant letting go of the only woman. A man of few words, his eyes always sought out his sister, and once locked in on her, they made themselves at home. Trust his sister to be completely oblivious of how tightly she had Valdason wrapped around her finger.

Unlike many males, he wasn't grossed out by the thought of some man touching his sister. Okay, that was a damn lie, the thought made him want to vomit in his mouth—several times. Still, as much as the thought disturbed him, he wanted all of the best things for his sister. She already had the education, the devastatingly handsome big brother, the money, and the car; it'd be nice for her to find a man who was as crazy in love with her as their daddy was in love with their momma. Of course, he'd never admit this to anyone...especially his sister. Isoke might think he had a heart, and he enjoyed cultivating his reputation for being a heartless son of a bitch.

INTERLUDE iii

Big Brotherly Advice

The absence of heat woke her. She didn't have to check the bed to confirm that it was empty. She instinctively knew it was. She'd thought Roar had felt something for her, but obviously she'd been wrong. Sighing, she was in the process of pulling herself up when she felt another presence in the room.

"Roar?"

"He's not here, Isoke."

Exhaling, she leaned against the headboard. "You didn't kill him, did you?"

"Not yet, but my schedule's flexible—I can always pencil it in."

"You're not allowed to kill him. Plus if you do, you're going to make Snap look bad, as I specifically told Snap to stop you from doing that sort of thing."

"Snap's crazier than I am. Chances are he'd off your boss before I even got a chance."

“Well, then maybe I should thank Roar for leaving—at least neither you nor Snap will have to move to a country without extradition treaties with the US.”

“Did you consider that he might be coming back?”

“Why would he?”

“Oh, I don’t know, perhaps because on top of being brilliant, having a way with cars, and sharing my good looks, my sister is also one badass woman?”

“You are so conceited. Only you would shout out your own good looks while trying to cheer someone up.”

“I’m just telling the truth.”

“And I appreciate that, but regardless of how true all of that is, Roar’s absence proves none of it is enough for a man like him.”

“Did you ever stop to consider that maybe it’s too much for him? We just can’t club you women over the head and drag you back to our caves like we used to, or drag dead animals to your doorsteps to prove our worthiness. A man

has to be secure in his manhood to even attempt approaching you with any kind of seriousness.”

“Zu, you don’t have to try and make me feel better. Roar doesn’t want me. I simply have to accept it. It’s all good,” she said.

“No, Isoke, it’s not ‘all good.’ You care for that man, and he cares for you. Lots of men are attracted to your looks, to your earning potential. How many are attracted to your brain? Your boss is attracted to everything about you—even the things that overpower him.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re a shining star, and a man can feel dull and boring in your presence, especially if he’s dull and boring.”

“Roar’s not dull or boring.”

“You’re right; he’s actually dull *and* boring.”

“That is so mean, Zu, and not at all true. He’s just not fucking nuts like the dudes you’re used to rolling with.”

“Whatever; so what are you going to do?”

“Get over it. Roar doesn’t want me, and I’ll simply have to accept the fact I’m not what he wants in a woman. I get that. As much as I like

Roar, I can't be anyone different than who I am. I'm not going to tone down my personality or downplay my brains."

"I'm glad you weren't considering any such nonsense like changing for a man."

"Angelina Morehouse is my momma, Fiery Winters Morehouse is my grandmomma, Nqobile Mandla Morehouse is my great-grandmomma. We don't change for the world; we make the world change for us."

"Morehouse women are indeed strong, the strongest, so tell me why you're about to do the one thing I thought I'd never see a Morehouse woman do."

"And what would that be?"

"Run from a challenge."

"Roar's the one who left."

"Well, then go get his ass. It's the twenty-first century; there's nothing to say you can't club a man over the head and drag him back to your cave. And while you're at it, go kill something and throw it on his doorstep. Elk season ain't till October, but rattlesnake season's almost upon us,"

he said before rising from his seat and letting himself out of the room.

Chapter 1e

INTRODUCTION TO DIFFERENTIAL EQUATIONS

The last twenty-four hours had wiped Isoke clean out. Snap had caused her to confront feelings she wasn't ready to confront, and then Zuberi showed up being all advice-column expert. She wanted Roar, but what if he really didn't want her back? She'd be the laughing stock of Sons Engineering. *Yeah, but if you don't find out, you'll have to live with being a coward*, her mind reminded her. Before she could stop herself, she picked up the phone and called Zuberi.

"If he turns me down, you'd better be prepared to move all my shit to your house in Colorado, because there'll be no way I can show my face in Atlanta again."

"If he turns you down, they'll be too busy talking about his unexpected disappearance to have time to talk about you."

"Love you, Zuberi," she said.

"Of course you do."

"You're supposed to say it back," she said.

“Well, since you’re twisting my arm,” he hedged.

“You know I’m going to have to take lessons from Zoysia. She has her brother wrapped around her little finger.”

“She has Snap wrapped around all ten of her fingers and all ten of her toes.”

“True, and after I take lessons from her, you’ll be in the same boat.”

“Okay, no need to resort to threats. I love you too,” he said.

“Zuberi?”

“Yes?”

“Stop acting like you don’t like Zoysia. You have to like her—she’s your best friend’s little sister.”

“Invoking my fifth amendment rights,” he said before he hung up.

Interesting, she thought as she made her way to the shower.

Slipping into some capri pants and a lightweight T-shirt, she headed to the elevators. She needed food before she embarked on her mission. Passing a few of her colleagues, she

waved. Though she had a lot on her mind, she was surprised when they, for lack of a better phrase, scurried off with the quickness.

Isoke wasn't an attention whore, but she was used to bantering with her colleagues about any and everything. Yet, as soon as she'd stepped out of her room, everyone she'd passed had been acting all hinky around her. For that matter, even the other engineers and hotel staff acted hinky. While they threw waves in her direction, they all kept their distance. Damn, she wished she could remember all of the details from the other night. Maybe she'd committed some hideous *faux pas* in the midst of her attack. Perhaps she'd screamed out something totally inappropriate like, *'Pythagoras and Newton were wack jobs, the quadratic equation is totally overrated and calculus isn't shit.'*

Oh well, she couldn't worry about it now. What was done was done. But could it be undone? she wondered as she noticed one of the "—sons" lurking nearby...again.

Ever since being introduced to Scandinavia, Isoke had kept a good bit of distance between

them and herself. It wasn't that she feared them; it was simply that she was allergic to them. Whenever she was within a ten-foot range of them, she broke off into a bad case of 'want to beat their asses.'

Since first contact, she'd spent the majority of her time keeping interaction between them down to a bare minimum. It was a plan that had worked well for the past two years, but now it was as if some world leader had directed Scandinavia to tear down the wall. Not only had they torn down the wall, they were fully attempting to establish diplomatic ties instead of simply enjoying the unobstructed view. Establishing diplomatic ties meant they had to talk to her. *Ewww*.

However, they didn't approach her—at least, none of those motherfuckers who'd been within eyesight from the moment she stepped foot into the lobby did. She hoped they weren't trying to be stealthy or anything, because if they were, they were fucking that up royally. Someone should've told them stealth required, well, something other than a perimeter of platinum blond that was dressed to the nines.

The first time she'd spotted all five of them, she'd chalked it up to bad karma—penance for fucking up the resort's banquet hall. The second time she'd attributed to coincidence, but by the third time, she couldn't discount their presence. They had some fucking nerve being in her presence after all they'd done.

If not for them, she could be back in her beloved Atlanta, doing something fun like riding Roar's tempting mouth and hearing him recite derivative math. But *nooooooooo*, she was here in Phoenix. Though a beautiful area, it seemed to have only three temperatures: inferno, blazing inferno, and OMG you're actually in hellfire. Now, not only did she want to beat them, she also wanted to go back in time and trek to Antiquity, where she'd toss them into the Cretan Labyrinth. If they found their way out without being eaten by the Minotaur, then she'd banish them to the same island the British exiled Napoleon to.

Quashing her need to go on a walk-by smacking, she simply marched up to them and demanded to know what the hell they wanted.

“Tell me why I’m being followed by wall-to-wall blond,” she demanded.

“We just wanted to say that we’re sorry,” Tage said.

Ah, so Zuberi had also gotten to them. She’d bet an apology had never passed their lips before today. They probably spent a half a day on the proper pronunciation of that word.

“Yes, you are, but not to worry—I’m used to it.” She smiled, feeling all magnanimous knowing Zuberi had probably given them all kinds of hell.

“How long are you going to be mad at us, Isoke?” Yngvi asked.

“Oh, you ask that as if there was a time I wasn’t mad at you. And even if I wasn’t mad, after the vet incident, I would be.”

“We were just concerned,” they admitted.

Dammit, they had to go and be halfway nice, which meant she couldn’t be as mad at them. “I appreciate your concern and all, but are you sure that y’all don’t need to see a doctor?” she asked, looking pointedly at the group. Though stylishly dressed, they sported a medley of bruises. Tage sported a black eye, as did Falkor; Torsven had a

split lip; Sigtrygg had a knot on his head; and, joy of joys, Yngvi was limping...a lot.

“Isoke, despite the looks of things, I assure you we can handle ourselves. And even if, hypothetically, there were some men who could take us on and win—” Torsven stated.

“Well, let me give you this one piece of advice: Don’t hypothetically take yourselves to any bar in the South, because you’ll find a whole heap of men who could take you on and win. You’ll also find a whole heap of women who could do the same.”

“You are so mean,” Yngvi whined.

“Just to people I don’t like.”

“I bet that list is about the same length as the Book of Life,” he bemoaned.

“Yeah, but you guys are at the top of my list.” She smiled.

She turned to embark on her mission of finding some decent eats when she noticed them stil standing there, looking all crazy and blond.

“Are y’all stalking me?”

“We’re just trying to make sure you’re okay,” Tage said.

“I am, thanks.”

“What he means to say is that we’re trying to ensure that you remain okay,” Torsven said.

“Why, did Phil and his cronies put a hit out on me or something?”

“Phil’s mouth doesn’t work well enough to form words at the moment,” Falkor said.

“And even if it did, neither of his hands work enough to hold a phone,” Tage remarked.

“I want to go on record saying I didn’t do that,” she said even as she smiled on the inside at Phil’s state.

“No, Roar did that,” Torsven sighed.

“Get out! Tell me in great detail how he fucked Phil’s shit up, and I promise not to get too hot and bothered about it,” she demanded.

“Perhaps we should go someplace with more privacy,” Torsven said.

Agreeing, she followed him to one of the meeting rooms.

“Okay, dish,” Isoke demanded once she got her bearings. Scandinavia responded with a collective deer-in-the-headlights look. Expecting to receive a better reaction, she frowned at them.

This was one of the reasons Scandinavia drove her nuts. If the conversation was about big titties, fast cars, or about them, you couldn't get them to shut the fuck up. Now that she needed them to talk, they just sat there looking annoying.

“Do you remember much of what happened after you smashed that plate into Phil's face?” Tage asked.

“Nope, it was all one big-ass smack down from where I was standing.”

“It was a smack down from where Phil was standing too,” Sigtrygg said. “And not in a good way.”

“Well, he should've kept his damn hands to himself,” was all Isoke could think of to say.

“Isoke, what did Phil do to you?” Torsven asked.

Isoke paused at Torsven's question. Phil had been at Sons Engineering a lot longer than she had. He ran in the same engineering circles as the partners, had the same interests. Pulling her face into a look she'd seen her momma wear many a day whilst getting her told, she turned the tables and asked her own question.

“You’re so sure Phil did something to me?” she asked.

“Yes,” they all answered.

She was taken aback at their confidence in her. “Why?”

“In spite of you overlooking our handsomeness, our intelligence, and our fine, Nordic ancestry, you’re a first-rate lady, Dr. Morehouse,” Yngvi said.

Isoke was rarely stunned into silence, but dammit if she wasn’t in that moment. First, Yngvi had paid her a compliment. Second through ten million, had Yngvi paid her a compliment. Ten million and one: he meant it. Ten million and two: he a) knew about her doctorate even though she hadn’t said anything about it; and b) said her title with all kinds of respect. Damn.

“Thank you for that,” she said, humbled by their words.

“You’re the one who earned the title, Isoke,” Tage said.

“Not the props on me successfully defending my doctoral dissertation; the trust in me. That means a lot.”

“You’ve never done anything for us not to trust you, Isoke,” Sigtrygg answered.

“What happened?” Torsven asked again.

“Phil grabbed my ass,” she stated plainly.

Though none of the partners said anything, the looks on their faces said more than enough.

“I apologize, Isoke. Before this day is out, we will insure that every employee knows the consequences of such inappropriate behavior. Has he touched you before?”

“No, which is why he had all of his fingers,” she said.

“I don’t know about anyone else, but I for one am glad Njarðar didn’t see Phil touch Isoke so intimately. Can you imagine the damage he would’ve done?”

“We don’t have to imagine it—we saw it,” Tage said. “And the resort is not happy about it.”

“I’ll pay for the damages,” she offered.

“No. Phil will pay for the damages. After all, it was Phil’s ass and dignity that soiled the room.”

“Yes, but Njarðar was the one who beat his dignity out of him. Now that was a good and

proper battle,” Falkor decreed. “One of the best I’ve ever seen.”

“Well, I didn’t see it, so tell me about it,” she demanded.

“When you fainted, Njarðar caught you before you fell to the ground,” Torsven said.

“I did not faint—fell asleep standing up,” she cut in.

“Okay then, after you fai—uh, fell asleep standing up, Njarðar tucked you safely away and proceeded to beat Phil to within an inch of his sorry life. Now he has a broken arm, elbow, and clavicle to go along with his broken hand. And his friends didn’t fare any better.”

“Guess he’ll have to use the other hand to jerk off now,” she said even while she was trying not to get all hot and bothered over the image of Roar wilding out.

“You really hate Phil,” Falkor stated.

“Yep, and that’s grading on a curve.”

“Why didn’t you tell us there was a problem?”

“Because before I dress, I put on my big girl panties.”

“Njarðar’s going to have a thing or three to say about that.”

“My panties?” she asked.

“Not touching the ‘panties’ comment with a ten-foot pole,” Torsven said. “Njarðar is going to have a lot to say about you not telling him that Phil was bothering you. Njarðar is a quiet, reserved man in everything...except for you. That man has no sense when it comes to you—and that’s giving him some.”

“After his spirited defense of you, I doubt anyone will give you any more problems,” Tage said.

“Especially if they want to keep their jobs, their dignity, and their wellbeing,” Sigtrygg said.

“You guys are starting to sound like my brother,” she said.

“Just getting in practice for when you and Njarðar both stop acting like you don’t want each other.”

“Roar doesn’t want me,” she said, taken aback by the depth they were displaying. *Were her and Roar the only ones who didn’t realize they wanted each other?*

Her thoughts were interrupted by their laughter. “If Roar wanted you any more, you’d be birthing his twelfth child,” Yngvi said.

Okay, she officially hated Yngvi again. “On that, I’ll take my leave. A sister needs to find some real food.”

Chapter 1f

HEAT TRANSFER

Having a belly full of decent food—that her brother paid for—Isoke was ready to take on the world. Well, after she had a nap. After being in the company of Scandinavia, Isoke needed a nap. Even though their conversation proved to be enlightening, it still took a lot of energy to talk herself down from taking them out. Even when being helpful, they had that little something-something that just made you want to end them with all due expediency. It was bad enough when they were back home in the ATL, but it was even worse now that they'd set themselves up as her impromptu bodyguards.

Walking into the luxurious suite, she closed the door and leaned against it. She took a moment and looked around the suite. Though every room at the resort was beautiful, only four rooms surpassed this one in opulence, and they were presidential suites. This was a luxury suite, and it was also Roar's. When she'd awoken, she'd at-

tempted to return to her own room only to be informed that this room was hers for the duration of her stay. At the time she'd wondered why Roar had made the change, but after her lengthy talk with Scandinavia, she was pretty sure she knew.

Slowly exhaling, she breathed in the silence. She needed the physical silence because after processing the information to which Scandinavia had entrusted her, her heart and brain had teamed up and were brainstorming. Her head was their dry erase board, and right now they were going full throttle. Eyeing the king-sized bed, she wondered how long they'd be planning. She was tired. She was needy. And after talking with Scandinavia, she knew she was loved. Collapsing onto the bed, she went to sleep with a smile in her heart.

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Njarðar stretched. He didn't need to look at the clock to know he'd slept late. After almost two days of sleeplessness, his body had told him in no uncertain terms that it was tired. Stretching, he

rolled his neck and shrugged his shoulders to relieve the taut muscles. Pushing his hair out of his eyes, he was contemplating brunch when his phone rang. Flipping it open, he answered.

“Valdason,” he greeted.

“Njarðar, drag your ass out of bed and get dressed,” Yngvi instructed.

“And I should listen to you why?” he asked, tired of accommodating them even though they were his partners and best friends.

“Because we have a staff meeting in an hour.”

“It’s not like you cannot handle that sort of thing,” he replied.

“True, but you need to be there,” Yngvi insisted.

“And if I choose not to be?”

“Well then, the rest of us will exercise our power and vote to dismiss Isoke and give her a negative reference,” Yngvi threatened.

Njarðar couldn’t stop the growl that made its way past the outrage that had settled itself in his gut. *Finally, they had gone too far. No one threatened his woman.*

“I’ll be there, Yngvi, and you should make certain that none of you is within my physical reach,” he said as he slammed down the phone.

Calling room service and ordering brunch, he headed for the shower. Twenty minutes later he felt almost human again, but the beast was nearby. Finishing his lunch, he dressed in his usual attire: dark, cuffed trousers, crisp white shirt, stainless steel watch. This time, however, he added a tie. Though it was too hot for a jacket, he still wanted to look nice...in case he had to get dragged off to jail. There was simply no reason for a bad mug shot. Records could be expunged, but mug shots were forever, he thought as he made his way to the conference room they’d reserved for their meetings.

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“So did you call him?” Tage asked as soon as he walked into the conference room.

“Yeah.”

“And?” Sigtrygg asked.

“And I had to play our trump card, and he’s understandably pissed,” Yngvi responded.

“What trump card might that be?” Torsven asked, thoroughly concerned.

“I intimidated that we’d gang up against him and fire Isoke...and give her a bad reference.”

“Do you not understand how mental he is over that woman?” Tage shook his head.

“Look, just because you got beat up by a girl—” Yngvi began.

“That’s because I don’t hit girls back. You, however, are not a girl. Well, maybe you are. You are rather...puny,” Tage mocked.

“Your last girlfriend didn’t have any complaints,” Yngvi returned.

“No, but her brother said you were a bad lay,” Tage answered.

“While you boys are busy sniping at each other, Yngvi, have you forgotten about Njarðar’s passion for Isoke? He’s been in love with her since day one. He’s going to kill you,” Torsven barked out.

“It’s all good, Torsven. Njarðar’s my friend first and my partner last. At the most he’ll give

me a sound beating. He likes my mother,” Yngvi responded.

“You are so dead,” Sigtrygg tsked.

“What did he say to that?” Falkor inquired.

“Let’s just say I’m not sitting next to Njarðar today.”

“Just to be on the safe side, you probably shouldn’t sit next to him ever again,” Torsven said.

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Torsven shook his head in complete amazement. No wonder Isoke couldn’t stand Yngvi. He was a moron. Truth be told, she couldn’t stand any of them, but she had a handcrafted, limited edition kind of hate for Yngvi. Being that she was likely to be Njarðar’s wife, they’d better make an effort to win her over. If it came down to a choice between them or Isoke, than it was no choice. Njarðar would pick Isoke (and he didn’t blame him). Torsven could handle losing Njarðar as a partner, but not losing him as a friend.

Despite being privileged—well, perhaps because of it—they'd spent the majority of their life indulging...in everything. They had women, but that was primarily because they possessed wealth and a willingness to spend it. Subsequently, they always had women. It didn't matter what the women did as long as they swallowed; it didn't matter if they had a thought in their heads as long as they screamed out their names when they came. Their women were shallow, and the engineers had never given a damn as long as they met their stringent requirements of big titties, small waist, and long hair.

Not so Njarðar. Njarðar had always had standards. And now it was paying off. Isoke wasn't a size six, and she didn't give a damn. He didn't know what she took into her mouth, but what came out of it was wisdom. She didn't care about a man's wealth; she cared about his integrity. Isoke was a good woman. Njarðar couldn't have picked a better woman with whom to fall in love. He'd be all kinds of lucky bastards if Isoke let him in her life.

Njarðar had better make his move, but first, he was going to need some help. Actually, Njarðar was going to need all of the help he could get. Picking up the phone, Torsven called their personal physician. Living in the same area, they all shared the same doctor. It made things easier when one of them had a medical emergency, and being a bunch of privileged males who liked to drink and womanize, they had their doctor on speed dial. What Torsven was doing was presumptuous, but later Njarðar would thank him for it...or kill him. It was a good thing medical practices were connected, fax machines were prevalent, and courier services open twenty-four seven.

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Isoke stood under the massaging jets and sighed as she lathered herself with her favorite body wash. The cool water felt good after her long soak in the opulent tub. She didn't really need another bath; she simply indulged so she would feel extra fresh when she got all up on Roar. And

make no mistake about it—she planned to be all up on him. Massaging shea body butter into her skin, she dressed in a royal purple lingerie set. Pulling on crisp jeans and a v-neck black sleeveless shirt, she stuck her feet into her handcrafted black iguana lizard leather cowboy boots that sported a studded harness and a steel toe rand. Covering her lips with vanilla birthday cake lip gloss, she shoved her black Stetson on her head, grabbed the bag holding her laptop, and walked out of the door whistling the theme song from *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*.

Scandinavia had told her there was a meeting at two p.m. They had assured her they would do whatever it took to ensure Roar's attendance, so she should be there. If she chose not to, they would spend the rest of the week throwing big-titted blondes Roar's way. She scoffed. She might not be blonde, but she had titties for days and an intellect that surpassed her E cups. A stickler for promptness, she got to the conference room just as the clock turned to two p.m.

The meeting was at two, but Njarðar arrived half an hour early, knowing his partners would already be assembled. He had a thing or two to say to his partners. Walking up to Yngvi, he greeted him with a right to the jaw.

“Don’t ever threaten Isoke again...not even in jest,” he said as he took his seat. “*Doctor Morehouse* has the most impressive C.V. in this organization. She not only does her job, she exceeds all expectations. She will leave this company only when she feels like it. I hope I’ve made myself clear, and if I haven’t, you can have my resignation and stake in this company right now.”

Checking to see that his jaw was still in place, Yngvi pointed to Torsven to indicate he should attempt to talk Njarðar down.

“Yngvi is an idiot at times, but he meant well, Njarðar.”

“And Yngvi is a dead man if he ever again fucks with Isoke.”

“Agreed, but I’m sure he will never again attempt such a foolish thing,” Torsven said as he

threw a warning at the rest of the men in the group.

“We just wanted to ensure that you’d show yourself,” Torsven continued.

“And why is that?” Njarðar asked.

“We have someone coming to the meeting you’d be interested in,” he said.

“Torsven...” Njarðar began.

“Look, if you’re not interested, you can leave, and we won’t bother you for the entirety of the next month. In fact, take it off. Hell, take the whole summer off. But for right now, can you just sit there and pretend to be interested in the plebes? Is that too much to ask?”

“Fine,” he said.

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Isoke took the nearest empty seat, which just so happened to give her an unobstructed view of Roar. And damn, what a view. He was as impeccable as ever, but there was something different about him. She couldn’t quite put her

finger on it, but she racked her brain trying to name it.

Being that Scandinavia was a whore for parliamentary procedure, they had a long way to go before they got to new business. Grabbing her red pen, she quickly scanned through the minutes of the last meeting. Noting that there was nothing to dispute, she uncapped her pen and corrected grammatical and spelling errors while she listened with a half-ear to the reports of officers, boards and committees. That finished, she absently doodled and peeked at Roar while old business was discussed.

Damn, she hated meetings, but she was about to piss herself laughing at the attire of her colleagues. Just as engineers should be banned from getting jiggy, like four-year olds, they should also be banned from picking out their own clothes. Though none of them rocked red galoshes, they were mighty close. Being that this was the last official business event for the day, Scandinavia had let it be known that employees could dress as they wanted. She wondered if they'd known their decree would result in a wardrobe

free-for-all. And being that there was a sudden cold front—it was a frigid eighty-four degrees instead of ninety-seven—people had lost their ever-loving minds.

Scandinavia was as stylish as ever, and though Roar wore his customary outfit of white dress shirt and dark dress pants, he'd gone buck wild and added a tie. And then there was everyone else. She'd never seen so many Hawaiian shirts per cubic foot since...ever. The sad thing was, that wasn't the worst fashion statement in the room. There was the Randy "Macho-Man" Savage-style T-shirt that featured fringe on the sleeves; there was the T-shirt James rocked that said 'T-shirt'; there was the smattering of throwback jerseys...and not the jerseys-of-the-old-school-players throwbacks, but the I-was-doing-mathematics-with-an-abacus throwbacks.

And then there were the shoes. Wow, just wow. Sure, there was the smattering of Crocs, flip-flops, and Birkenstocks, but it wasn't so much the shoes as it was the feet. She wouldn't be a foot model at any point in this lifetime, but when your feet looked like you'd been stopping

your car with them or made people wonder if one of your parents was Predator, then yeah, you needed to keep them dogs covered.

She was just about to have an internal conversation about the headwear of her colleagues when she locked in on Roar...and figured out what was different about him. It wasn't the tie. It was his aura. Roar looked...gangsta, and it looked good.

One of Scandinavia had just called for new business when her pussy decided to put in its two cents.

Roar doesn't just look good; he looks damn good, and he'd look good with his head between our legs. We should fuck him...right now.

Shut up, you whore, she told it.

You shut up. We haven't had a man in so long, it's stealing from your healthcare company for the OB/GYN to even conduct the STD screening part of your physical, it complained.

You know what? You can just kiss my whole, entire ass, she spat. *I've been busy.*

Whatever, it sing-songed.

She was about to hurl a comeback, but then she glimpsed Roar, who was mid-exhale. Seeing that wide chest expand had her pussy shouting *damn, damn, damns*. Apparently her brain sided with her pussy, because before she could protest, it seized control of her body. Two seconds later, she was out of her seat and heading towards the front of the conference room...towards Roar...via the top of the conference table...on her hands and knees.

“Roar,” she purred. “Why are you avoiding me?”

“I’m not avoiding you, Isoke,” he answered.

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Njarðar was having a difficult time concentrating on the meeting, and it was all Isoke’s fault. He didn’t want to be there, and he’d been contemplating leaving the meeting when Isoke strolled in looking like all of his fantasies and smelling like a come-on. His whole body had gone immediately hard. Damn her for being so striking, so intelligent, so tempting. Damn her for

being oblivious to what she did to him physically and emotionally. Damn him for not having the courage to tell her how he felt.

He had to call upon all of his willpower to remain seated once he saw and smelled Isoke. Isoke sat before him, and his damn conscience sat in judgment of him like the sword of Damocles hovering over kings. How he sat through a single minute of the meeting, he'd never know. Not only was he hard, he was fighting himself. The modern man wanted to be noble, but the primitive man wanted to smash everything that stood between him and Isoke. The primitive man wanted to do whatever it took to make her his.

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He was contemplating leaving when he saw Isoke rise. He didn't know what she was about, but damn she looked good in those jeans...those tight, ass-hugging jeans she would be banned from wearing again if he was her man. And then she got up on that table, and he lost all of his mind. Gone was his fluency in higher-level ma-

thematics; gone was his grasp of physics; gone was his common sense; gone was everything, and in its place was Isoke.

His eyes were filled with her curves. His mouth was filled with chants of her name. *Isoke, hvaðeina, Isoke, hvaðeina, Isoke*. His body responded to the challenge she issued, and when she was close enough, he snatched her up and crushed her to his chest. Once he had Isoke in his arms, he simply held her. For long moments, he didn't do anything except breathe in her scent and try to control the shaking of his hands, the beating of his heart, and the beast within him that demanded he take her.

Finally he gathered himself enough to respond to her question.

"I'm not avoiding you," he responded.

"Then why did I wake up alone after falling asleep in your arms?"

"Because if I hadn't left, I wouldn't have let you go," he admitted.

Torsven, Sigtrygg, Yngvi, Falkor and Tage noticed the look of determination in Isoke's eyes a moment before she rose from her seat. And Torsven, being closest to Njarðar, noticed his erection. Making eye contact with the rest of his partners, he decided to table the rest of the meeting until a time after Njarðar and Isoke finished...talking. Standing, they managed to hustle everyone out of the conference room just as Isoke locked onto Njarðar and rose from her seat.

By the time she'd climbed onto the table, the employees, who didn't give a damn why they were being excused early, were on their way to find their own good times. In fact, they'd fled from the room so fast you would've thought they were being chased by an axe-wielding psychopath. Damn, maybe they needed to liven up their meetings. Oh well, at least the employees had cleared out. It wasn't that he thought what Isoke and Njarðar were doing was wrong—hell, he was actively encouraging it—he just thought it was private and not fodder for gossip. Isoke was a

first-class woman, and she should be talked about for her brilliance, not her sexuality.

He had to admit Isoke was impressive, and it wasn't just the cowgirl boots and the Stetson. It was the woman wearing them. Damn, an ass like that and the best brain in the company. Njarðar was a lucky man, he thought as he walked to the exit.

Right before exiting the room, he turned and cleared his throat...several times. When that didn't work, he yelled Njarðar's name. Loudly.

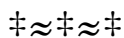
“Njarðar!”

“What the fuck do you want, Torsven?”

“To wish you luck, and to give you this,” he said as he tossed the envelope the courier had delivered onto the table.

He tossed it because he wasn't about to get anywhere near Njarðar's woman at this time. Right now Njarðar was dangerous—more animal than man—and Torsven wasn't trying to die.

“I'm calling dibs on being the godfather,” he said before he closed the door to the conference room and stood sentry in front of it.



Growling, Njarðar resettled Isoke in his arms and snatched the envelope Torsven had tossed to him. Tearing it open, he smiled. He owed Torsven, and if he could get Isoke to have him, he might indeed make him the godfather of their children.

Chapter 1g

THERMODYNAMICS

Isoke moaned at the feel of Roar's body. Though she wasn't a light woman by any means, Roar seemed to be handling her hundred seventy pounds just fine. Locking her legs around him, she indulged in the feel of that much man between her thighs. Though he was holding her close, she sought to get closer, wanting, needing to be nearer to him. Right now, nothing else mattered but the feel of Roar's hands on her, the scent of him in her nostrils, the protection she felt in his arms.

Glancing around when Torsven called Roar's name, she noticed her colleagues were gone. Only Torsven remained in the room, babbling about who the hell cared what. Roar smelled so good and tasted even better as she ran her tongue down his neck and kissed her way back up and over to his tempting lips. She'd been looking at those lips for a minute, and she wanted to taste them—and she would if Torsven would shut the

fuck up and get out. For some reason, Torsven was still talking and subsequently fucking up her flow. She didn't know what he was saying, nor did she give a damn.

Grinding herself harder against Roar, she heard his gasp and dove in to sample the treat she craved. He might've still been talking, but she simply swallowed his words and took her time tasting his mouth. Damn, the man tasted better than the Teuscher champagne truffles that were her favorites. Oh goodness, she wondered if they could make the Njarðar Valdason truffle.

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“Roar,” she moaned his name when she had to come up for air. “Roar.”

“Isoke,” he rasped back. “You have to stop while I’m still able to,” he said.

“No,” she challenged.

She wasn't going to stop, and he could simply shut the fuck up and fuck her.

“Isoke,” he groaned again.

She responded by unbuttoning his shirt and raking her hands across his flat nipples. She couldn't help the smile that slipped out when she heard Roar groan and felt him shake. Right now, she needed his full attention on her. Taking the paper from his hands, she scanned it quickly. Noting it was the results of his most recent physical, she smiled and tossed it behind her. Being on oral contraceptives, and now knowing she didn't have to worry about disease, she kicked her seduction into high gear.

Stepping back, she grabbed the hem of her shirt and lifted it over her head. She didn't know if Torsven had left the room, and truth be told, she didn't really give a flying fuck. Taking advantage of Roar's surprise, she grabbed the mechanism that held back his hair and tore it out. Raking her hands through his locks, she gasped, noting that Roar's sable hair was thick and fell to the middle of his back. Damn. She hadn't known hair was a turn-on, but apparently, it was.

Eliminating the few millimeters between them, she stepped between his legs and forced him back. She didn't stop until his back hit the

wall. Grabbing a fistful of hair, she dug the fingers of her other hand into the hard muscle of his bicep, surprised at how big he was, how hard he was. Thankful for the extra two inches of height her cowboy boots gave her, she forced his head down and took his lips.

“Isoke, you have to stop.”

“If I don’t, would it be rape?” she asked.

“No, but...” he began.

“Then get on your fucking back,” she demanded as she pulled the condoms out of her pocket.

Hooking her leg behind him in order to take him down, she was surprised when Roar took the condoms from her hands and hurled them across the room before sitting her on the edge of the conference table.

“I’ve been dreaming of having you in my bed for too long to even think about having anything separate me from your fiery heat.”

Smiling at Roar’s admission, she asked. “I know you don’t have anything, but you don’t know if I—” she began.

“Yes, I do know. I know you haven’t had a man in the two years I’ve known you.”

“And you know that how?” she asked with a quirk of her brow.

“You always arrive promptly at nine; you leave promptly at five. You take lunch in the office. There have been no flower deliveries for you, even on the important days such as Valentine’s Day, your birthday, your graduation.”

“So I like being prompt, and maybe I don’t like flowers,” she interjected.

“If you’d had a man and he hadn’t done those things, I would’ve told you he wasn’t worth your time, but it’s not just those things, Isoke. I know men. There’s no way a man would allow you to leave his bed without putting his mark on you, his scent on you. There’s no way a man could have you as a woman and not make his presence in your life known.”

“A shower takes care of the scent, and a high collar takes care of the markings,” she tossed out.

Roar laughed...a deep, rich sound that stroked her. He mumbled something, but all she caught was something about being proper.

“And you consider yourself a proper lover?” she asked.

“Oh, Isoke, please don’t mistake me for those foolish men with whom you’ve had the misfortune of wasting your time. I desire you too much and have waited for you too long to engage in ‘proper’ lovemaking,” he said as he located her shirt and redressed her in it.

What was Roar doing? She didn’t realize she’d said that aloud until he answered.

“I’m dressing you so we can go to my room, where I can love you most improperly,” he said as he pulled her to her feet.

Dammit, this was her seduction. He couldn’t simply come in and bogart it. “What if I don’t want to wait?” she asked as she stroked his cock that was straining against his pants.

She was surprised when he bent her over the table, but she liked it. Thinking he was going to take what she offered, she smiled and ground her ass into his erection. She was totally surprised when she felt the hard smack that landed on her ass.

“What the fuck?”

She was going to get up and get in his face when she found herself pinned under his strength.

“Isoke, I might be a quiet man, but don’t let that lull you into a false sense of security. And though you tempt me with that delicious body, we are going to wait until we get to the room, because I plan to have you every way I imagined. I need space and privacy,” he said.

“Oh, because you’re kinky?” she smart-mouthed.

“Especially because I’m kinky, but also because when I spank your ass and pound into your cunt like I need to, I don’t want your keening to alarm anyone. I also don’t want to have to blind anyone for accidentally walking in and seeing my woman in a compromising position. And I plan to have you in compromising positions for the rest of the week. You’re going to take my cock every way and everywhere,” he promised as he scooped her up and strolled out of the conference room, nearly running down a surprised Torsven in the process.

“Is all well, brother?”

“It will be. Neither Isoke or I will be available for the remainder of the week,” Roar stated in passing.

Oh damn. Her pussy was weeping in anticipation. Where did Roar get this gangsta side?

She didn’t speak again until Roar stepped through the door of his room and tossed her on the bed. She watched in awe as he tore off his clothes. Not being able to help herself, she cupped her breasts as she watched him.

“Get your hands off of my stuff,” he said.

“Make me,” she challenged.

“Gladly,” he said as he stalked her.

“Okay, Roar, before you get completely out of control, we have to have the pregnancy talk.”

“No, we don’t. The reason I’ve been celibate for so long is because any woman I take to my bed is not only intellectually stimulating, she is also good wife material.”

Oh damn. “I’m—” she began.

“Going to enjoy this week,” he finished.

“Yeah, whatever, but... Hey,” she said as he pulled her up and stripped her of her shirt and

bra. Before she could stop him, he had her jeans and panties off and had her back on the bed.

“Okay, that was so unnecessary,” she complained as she looked at the remnants of her lingerie.

“Isoke, if you aren’t sure you want this, tell me now. Otherwise, accept that I’m the man in this relationship. I control your pleasure, and it is my pleasure to do so.”

“And that benefits me how?”

“I’m taking your continued presence as an unconditional yes. Is it?”

“It is, but you still haven’t answered my question, Roar.”

“And I’m not going to. Instead I will show you.”

“When?”

“Now, but first let me give you something better to do with your mouth besides run it,” he said as he grabbed her twists and shoved his cock into her mouth.

Waiting while she adjusted to his girth, he began to talk shit. “Suck me. You’re going to take all of this cock, in your mouth, in your cunt; any-

where I want to put it. You're going to take it for tempting me with that sweet cunt, with that impressive intellect, with that voluptuous ass."

She wanted to tell him to go to hell, but her mouth was filled with a thick cock. All she could do was relax her throat as Roar fed it to her inch by inch. Damn, Roar was...so damn hot right now. Though she was tempted to close her eyes, there was something about the ferocity with which Roar looked at her that didn't allow her that option. A classically handsome man, right now Roar was hotness personified. Gone was the reserved engineer who had a passion for books and a preference for solitude. Right now, Roar was undiluted passion—fiery, blazing, and scorching.

Moaning around him, she dug her nails into his powerful thighs for leverage. Where the hell did her engineer get muscles like this? Finally closing her eyes, she took him all the way into her mouth and hummed out her pleasure at her accomplishment. She smiled inside upon feeling Roar inhale and hearing his ragged exhale. Before

she could bask in her victory, Roar pulled out and pushed her to her back.

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Njarðar was through pretending. He was through pretending Isoke was simply another woman. He was through pretending he could be around her and appreciate just her mind. He was through pretending he could be reasonable when it came to her. Every time she walked into his line of vision, he had to force himself not to pin her against the wall and slide into her cunt. Every time another male looked at her, he had to remember why he just couldn't up and kill the man for simply existing in the same plane as his woman.

Like he'd said, he was through pretending. Isoke was every damn thing he'd ever wanted, wished for, dreamed. Isoke had it all. She wasn't just a few of his favorite things; she was all of his favorite things. Like he'd said, he was through pretending. She enticed him with her responses; she lured him with her integrity; she tempted him

with her openness; and, with her acceptance of him as he was...she'd slain him.

He was hers, and the first thing he had to make clear to her was that though he might be a quiet man, he was *all* man. She was a take-charge woman accustomed to directing people. Her demeanor got things accomplished, and while he didn't fault her for that, he didn't like the way she pushed aside her needs as a woman. As her man, he wouldn't allow her to neglect herself. And neither would he allow her to think she could punk him like she did his partners. He was going to be her man, not her bitch.

Taking a deep breath and turning her over, he smacked her ass—hard. And his cock got even harder. After letting a little bit of his beast slip out, he grabbed her up and marched to the door. Barking a decree at Torsven, he marched to his room.

Kicking the door closed, he strode across the room and threw her on the bed. Stripping off his clothes, he bared a little of his soul and gave her one last chance to say no before he made her his. The beast was fully unleashed. Hell, it had been

unleashed once she'd asked that ridiculous question about rape. Would it be rape? What the fuck was wrong with her? Did she not realize what she did to him...every time he saw her? She must not have, but after today, she would know. Everyone would know. The soreness of her muscles would tell her; his marks on her, his ring on her would tell others.

He planned to hold nothing back. Physically, he'd fuck her hard. And though he'd ensure that her orgasms rolled through her justice and rivers, he wouldn't make his testimony with his cock. He'd make it with his heart.

Rasping her name, he waited for her to look into his eyes. When she did, he crawled between her voluptuous thighs. He went slowly, so as to savor the unique feeling of being caressed by her softness even as she wrapped him within her strength. She felt so good in his arms. She felt like everything, and he could not stop the chants of her name that filled his head.

*Hvaðeina. Hvaðeina. Hvaðeina. Hvaðeina.
Hvaðeina. Hvaðeina.*

He chanted it as he slid into her heat. He chanted it as she closed around him and locked her legs around him. He chanted it as he grabbed her hip to hold her in place. Forcing himself to stop thrusting, he threw his head back, closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. Forcing air through his teeth, he opened his eyes and looked down at Isoke.

Unable to conceal the shaking in his voice, he spoke, forcing the words past his lips. "Isoke, I can't. I can't."

‡≈‡≈‡

Isoke loved being loved by Roar. He felt so right. She could feel his passion. His body practically vibrated with it. Even his voice resonated with it. She didn't know what he was saying, but that motherfucker meant every syllable, just as he meant every touch. When he grabbed her hip, she felt his strength as well as his love.

Arching into him to prod him on, she was surprised when he stilled within her and admit-

ted that he couldn't. Though reserved, Roar was not afraid of anything as far as she knew.

"You can't what, baby?" she asked.

"I can't hold back," he admitted.

"I don't need you to," she answered as she pulled him down to her.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"If you hold back any part of yourself, you will be hurting me. I don't want part of you, Roar; I want all of you," she said.

"Are you sure?"

"I'd rather you fuck me with honesty than make love to me with deception."

‡~‡~‡

Njarðar heard her words and fell deeper. Isoke's body made him hard; her perception pushed him over the edge. Pushing her thighs further apart, he plunged back into her heat. Relentlessly he powered into her, giving her no quarter. Her gasps made him crazy; the frantic way she pulled at him, spurred him with her

nails, thrust her hips into his pushed him into a frenzy.

“Mine, Isoke. Mine. For two years you’ve tempted me. Every day I learned to deny myself the one thing I craved above everything else. I spent damn near all of my time watching you,” he admitted as he thrust into her on odd words and pulled out on even ones.

“You turned me into a voyeur. I spent eight-hour increments watching you. Watching every fucking male in the building flock to you roused the beast, but watching you keep them at a distance kept them safe. Watching you break down problems to their basic elements and solve them caused my cock to get hard. Watching you look at my partners with barely disguised contempt made me laugh, and knowing you preferred my boring over their flash made me yours,” he panted as he slammed into her.

“Every day.” He clenched his teeth as he bottomed out. “Every day,” he repeated as he repositioned her legs on his shoulders. “Every day,” he began as he roughly palmed her breasts. “I came to work and was your slave. And every night, I

went home tense from wanting you, hard from not having you, and disgusted at my cowardice for not telling you.”

“Roar,” she moaned.

“That’s right, Isoke, moan for me. Scream your pleasure. Work my cock with your tight cunt. Dig divots into my back with the heel of your cowgirl boots; dig grooves into my biceps with your nails; take chunks out of my flesh with your teeth. Brand my body, Isoke, like you’ve branded my mind. Tempt me with your sultry cries, caress me with your intellect, open for me so I might pour myself into you,” he whispered as he pulled her to him so they were breast-to-chest.

“Do you know how much I want this, need this? Do—” he said as he used his thighs to open her legs wider. “—you know—” he rasped as he dredged up every remaining ounce of strength and slammed into her. “—who you are to me?” he finished on a roar as he poured himself into her.

Oh my, damn, fuck, fuck, oh damn. Roar was working her. He was hurting her pussy so good, so good, so fucking good. His big cock rocked up to her pussy like gangbusters and demanded entrance. He thrust into her and made her back arch. He pulled out and had her following. He thrust back in and had her convulsing. Again and again he thrust, and again and again she answered him like the wanton slut he'd made her.

And when he stroked her spot—you know, the spot that made her legs shake so bad she could no longer circle his waist—yeah, when Roar stroked her spot, she let her legs fall to the side and laid there and took it because she could do nothing else. For that matter, Roar's rhythm was the only thing keeping her breathing. She inhaled when he thrust in and exhaled when he withdrew. And all the while she looked at him, amazed at his passion and wondering if it would consume them.

He was candy, so she bit into him for a better taste. He was water, so she licked him to quench her thirst. He was shelter, so she snug-

gled into him so close he would've had better luck trying to shake his shadow.

Roar was working her out. He took up so much room that she felt like she'd been in a permanent split since jump. Her thighs were sore; her muscles were burning from exertion. Her hair was flung out all over the bed, her pussy was purring in pleasure, her heart and brain were exchanging 'oh damns.' She'd come so many times she'd lost count.

She had no more cream, no more energy, no more voice, and above all, she had no desire to leave the protection of Roar's embrace. She was a hot mess...and she'd never felt better. And then Roar came, and pleasure shot throughout her body. Like mini lightning strikes, the pleasure sparked and her body crackled in response. He roared out his release and flooded her womb, and her pussy screamed out yeses and led the rest of her body in a cheer. Counting off by twos, it asked who it appreciated, and her body screamed out Roar's name.

Damn, he'd worked her good. She didn't even have the energy to roll over. Sighing out her

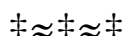
pleasure, she didn't move until Roar lifted her and laid her on his chest. She smiled at the gentleness he used to arrange her.

She only had enough energy to moan out his name. Lucky it was only one syllable. "Roar."

"Yes, *Hvaðeina*?" he answered as he lightly stroked her back.

"So good, so good," she said as she succumbed to sleep.

"The best, the only," he said as he held her tighter.



Njarðar could've spent the whole of his life waiting for this one moment...waiting for this one woman, and it would have been worth it. Isoke was his, and as the man, it was his duty to protect her...and the children he planned to have with her. Rousing her, he smiled, noting the mutinous expression she gave him.

"You have to get up."

"No," she pouted.

"Yes," he insisted.

“Wanna stay here.”

“In the bedroom?” he asked.

“In your arms. Now leave me alone.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why?”

“Because you are *hvaðeina*.”

“What is *hvaðeina*?”

“Everything. You are everything, Isoke. You are everything. Marry me and be my future.”

‡~‡~‡

Did Roar just tell her she was his everything? Roar had called her that for a while now. She doubted he even realized how long he’d called her thusly. And now that she knew what it meant, there was no way in hell she was going to say no to him.

Wrapping her arms around him, she dropped a passionate kiss on his lips and breathed her yes into his mouth.

‡~‡~‡ J&J ‡~‡~‡

*This concludes Book I in the Engineered IV
Love (E4L) series.*

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:
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About the Authors

Besides being intelligent divas who pen kickass prose, Jeanie (the shagalicious wordslinger) and her momma, Jayha (the ninja master of prose) are dessert-eating, take-no-shit, tell-it-like-they-feel instead of tell-it-like-people-want-to-hear-it women. They are women who have brains and aren't afraid to use them; feelings and aren't afraid to express them; and middle fingers which they'll happily use to salute out of line peeps. Independently, both are forces of nature that leave you begging for mercy or begging for more.

A kickass tag team duo bound together by the pen, they plan on ruling the world side-by-side. Jeanie will be ruling in her favorite hoodie and her Chuck Taylors; Jayha will be wearing her Crocs and a blue T-shirt along with her halo. Of course, all ruling will be done swiftly, as Jeanie is always out getting into sh*t and Jayha is busy indulging in her torrid affair with ESPN.

See people, this is the kind of praise you get when you have Yvonne as your MMFIC and Rolanda as MNWIC. Thanks Von and Rolanda.