

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



Succulent

Berry Bliss
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An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Berry Bliss

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BERRY BLISS

Kat Alexis

Dedication

This is dedicated to the men and women of the United States police force. You put your lives on the line each day and ask for nothing in return. We owe you our freedom and eternal gratitude. I sleep easily each night because of your protection and dedication. Thank you will never be enough, but know it comes from the bottom of my heart.

—Allie

To my partner—nothing in my world would ever get done without you! You're the best friend and best writing partner. More than I deserve.

—Eve

Author Note

Lexovia is a completely fictional country. Any resemblance to any real country is purely coincidental.

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Frogger: Konami Corporation

Chapter One

This is a Joke, Right?

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, we are now making our final approach to Chachova airport. On behalf of myself and the crew I welcome you to Lexovia and hope you enjoy your stay.”

Nicola Luder woke with a jolt at the flight attendant’s voice. It took several moments to orient herself. On a plane, in her wedding dress...what the hell had she done?

The answer came in flashes. Walking in on Jeremy and her wedding planner Ryan, both sans clothes. She watched as the two men moved in perfect precision, a feeling of sensual ease surrounding the panting pair. Feeling a numbing cold wash through her body, she calmly walked over to Ryan’s folder where all the wedding and honeymoon documents were saved. In a daze she watched her hand reach out and grab the plane tickets. Without a word to either man, she grabbed her suitcase, waved the tickets in their general direction and walked out the door. Every inch the lady her mother raised her to be.

Not like being a lady had ever gotten her anywhere.

So now here she sat in the plush first class seat she’d exchanged the coach tickets for, in a place she’d been dreaming of visiting again since the age of twelve, when her family had the “Feud”. It still looked like the perfect place for her perfect honeymoon.

Too bad she didn’t have a husband.

She didn’t even have a place anymore.

Jeremy had convinced her to give up her apartment and move in with him to save money for the wedding. Even though both of them had well-paying careers and

comfortable enough nest eggs, to her regret, Nicola dispensed with her common sense and gave up her place. All to please a man who could never be appeased.

Schmuck.

"Ms. Luder, we're deplaning all first-class passengers now." The kind voice of the flight attendant forced her to open her eyes and get back to the present.

"Oh right." Nicola fumbled with her safety belt among the layers of silk and satin bunched in her lap. "Thank you. I'll be on my way in just a minute," she assured the other woman.

The heat of a hand warmed her arm. "Is there...will there...are you going to be all right?" the kind woman finally managed to ask.

"Ah...Olga," she read the woman's name tag. "I'll be fine, I'm sure." Blood rose to her cheeks in embarrassment. "Thank you though."

She gasped when the belt finally gave away. She dug through layers of the frothy material to the seat underneath and stood. As soon as her legs were straight, the dress poofed out all around her and Nicola wanted to laugh at the incredible sight she must have made.

A bride, complete with white wedding gown and train, standing like a fool in the middle of a plane aisle while the airline personnel looked at her with pity.

"Really," she tried to put a happy note in her voice. "I'll be fine."

Olga looked doubtful in her bright white and red suit. She raised one perfectly tweezed blonde eyebrow in disbelief but didn't make a comment as she reached above Nicola's head to pull down her carry-on luggage. "*Do svidaniya*. Take care of yourself, Ms. Luder. I hope you find what you're looking for," Olga said, handed Nicola the small suitcase then strode down the aisle and disappeared behind the curtain separating coach from first class.

She wasn't looking for anything. Was she? Growling at her indecisiveness, Nicola grabbed the strap of her case, clutched her purse in the other hand and walked off plane.

Lexovia lay tucked in the mountains between Estonia and the Russian border. The people eked out a living with fishing and farming and had just now started to develop their tourist industry. Skiing and hiking for the sports enthusiast. Hot thermal springs for those looking for a more relaxed type of adventure. Museums and historical sites for those looking to increase their knowledge.

But Lexovia had become world renowned for one thing and one thing only. The very rare and very, very expensive lusteberry. According to local legend and the Board of Tourism, the lusteberry, which only grew in certain areas of the country, had the ability to turn on sexual desire and turn off inhibitions. Not that it made a person unable to say no, but it made them acknowledge their true desires.

The locals made everything from bread to chocolates to a special liqueur from the small purple berry. It was said that to eat one straight from the bush was to invite the gods' wrath and the body's every desire.

With her single piece of luggage strapped across her body, Nicola made her way quickly through customs and sighed at the taste of cold Russian air. The scents came to her from everywhere and opened a floodgate of childhood memories she'd kept locked away.

With a sigh of regret she turned away from the memories and instead focused on the cabs vying for her money.

An hour later, Nicola shut the door to her hotel room and laughed in relief. "I made it," she told the empty room, not quite able to believe she stood in the land of her ancestors again. Tomorrow she'd call her grandfather but that would be tomorrow. Tonight Nicola intended to take something back for herself.

The hotel was luxurious and designed to capitalize on the blossoming tourist industry. The building mimicked the old world architecture of the area but contained

all the amenities of the modern world inside. A tall king-size bed stood close to the entrance to the bathroom. The billowy snow-white down comforter looked inviting. Thank God for first class seats. They lay all the way down and afforded a very restful sleep. No need for a nap before putting her plan into motion.

A small stone hearth was the focal point of the sitting area off to the left. A woven rug lay before the hearth and gave Nicola images of roaring fires, glasses of wine and soft kisses.

She sighed after catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Oh God. She looked awful. Her hair was full of bobby pins that no longer even pretended to control the curls which had escaped when she'd torn her veil off. Her makeup was yesterday's news and the pearl choker she wore had left strange impressions on her neck. Leper anyone?

Is it any wonder he preferred someone else?

Since catching her worthless, no-longer-soon-to-be husband in Ryan's arms yesterday morning, Nicola had blamed herself. Questions plagued her mind and attacked her confidence. She hadn't been woman enough to satisfy him. Maybe she could have tried harder, done more, worked less, been open to playing more bedroom games.

Ryan was certainly open to games in bed judging by the whipped cream that had coated Jeremy's groin when she'd walked in on them.

But no matter what question she asked herself, there were never any answers. Nicola needed to find her sex appeal. To bring the pieces of herself together again.

To hell with the toad and his boytoy.

Tonight was all about her. Nicola intended to put on her vamp red dress that showcased her assets in the best light, slide into her four inch fuck-me heels and then make one man's night the stuff of his dreams.

* * * * *

At ten o'clock that night the elevator doors parted and Nicola stepped out feeling like sex on a stick. The past two hours, she'd shaved, buffed and polished every inch of her skin. She'd never looked better or felt more ready for sex. With a deep breath for courage, Nicola made her way past the concierge desk into the hotel bar, saying a prayer for wisdom and a very hot man who knew exactly what to do with a woman in bed.

Holding her head high, she nodded to the bartender as she took one of three empty chairs left at the bar. The room was smoky and filled with a strong tobacco scent. Rich polished woods glowed in the soft lighting and a slow Russian ballad soared through hidden speakers.

Though she didn't want to begin this night blitzed, Nicola figured one drink couldn't hurt and when in Rome, or Lexovia and all that.

"Your pleasure, Madam?" the bartender asked in a thick accent, while giving her a nice ego-stroking once over.

"I'd like a lusteberry cocktail," Nicola requested, pleased her voice came out sounding matter of fact to the point of bored.

"I'm afraid the new crop of lusteberries has not been brought in. I do not have the liqueur."

Disappointment filled her. "Do you have anything with the berry in it?"

Instead of answering, the man sent her a wink from his dark eyes and left the bar area.

"Hey," she cried out. "Where are you going?"

"He must go into the back and ask his manager for the key to the cabinet where they keep the item you requested."

The voice had a light trace of Russian and filled her mind with pictures of silk sheets and moonlit mountains. Slowly turning on the chair, Nicola prayed the body would match the voice.

Icy hot blue eyes met her own. They looked out from a face framed with heavy black brows, chiseled cheekbones and full lips that made her own ache for a taste. Wide shoulders covered in a dark blue sweater tapered into a tight stomach and dark blue jeans molded a very impressive bulge.

The stranger leaned against the bar next to her and smiled.

His straight white teeth lit up the room.

She swallowed. "Ahh, that makes more sense then running out on a paying customer," she returned, locked in the heat of his eyes. Could he be the one?

"More than a customer. Kirill Danilav would never leave a beautiful woman alone," the man returned as he settled his very fine ass into the empty bar chair next to her.

She didn't know what to say to that. The man had a beauty all his own that would stop most women in their tracks. He would be the perfect thing to resurrect her flagging self confidence but still something about him niggled at her conscience. Maybe it was the way his blue eyes danced with the reflected flames of the bar candles. Or the strong clean line of his jaw. Whatever this man had made her dormant body sit up and beg.

Danilav came back with a long box encrusted with gems and opened the lid. The inside was filled with candies. Biting her lip, she selected one and sniffed the delicate aroma of chocolate and something she couldn't quite identify. Nicola lifted the candy in a salute to the delicious stranger, put it in her mouth and bit.

Tart juices filled her mouth and seemed to warm her from the inside out like alcohol as she swallowed the candy. Yet there were no obvious side effects. Her throat didn't burn, she felt no desire to cough out a lung or two and her vision didn't waver, all of which she'd expected.

It also made her wonder what she'd been worried about. If the stranger turned her down... Not that she expected him to—what else would an attractive guy be doing in a bar? But if he did, Danilav looked like he'd be more than happy to fulfill her desires.

But first she had to find out if Mr. Sexy would be the one.

Swiveling the chair so they sat face to face, Nicola stared at her chosen man for her one and only one-night stand. A quick check of his hand showed no ring but these days it paid to ask.

"Are you married?" Nicola opted for blunt over playing games.

A small laugh escaped those perfect lips. "No, I am unattached in all ways."

"Good," she returned seriously. "Are you gay?" *Please, please don't be gay.* Not that she had a problem with a person being gay. But one more man preferring men over her, might just send her to the nunnery. And she really wanted to get naked with this man for good old fashioned sex, not to have him critique her bikini wax.

Once again, he muffled a laugh, "No, I am not a lover of men."

"That's great. Would you like to be a lover of this woman?" The question should have come out sounding crude. Instead Nicola felt a strange power filling her. She wanted this man and no one else.

The man, she really would have to get his name or at least make up one for him, gave a soft laugh that sent chills up her spine and wetness pooling between her legs.

"You are very blunt, even for an American," he stated without saying yes or no to her proposition.

"I've learned to speak my mind quickly to avoid confusion later. So will you come upstairs with me tonight?" Nicola repeated her offer, this time placing her palms on the man's jeans and rubbed the solid thighs underneath lightly. The corded muscles bunched beneath her touch and desire heated her body once more.

"Would you at least like to know my name?" he asked instead. His blue eyes twinkled with mirth. He was definitely interested, even if she was completely objectifying him.

Damn it, what would it take to get a yes out of this man? She fumed for all of two seconds before remembering how badly she wanted him. "It'll be Alexi. Almost

everyone I've met today is Alex or some form of it. How 'bout you be Alexi for me tonight?"

He caught her hands as they traveled up his jeans-covered thighs toward his enlarged cock and brought them to his mouth. After placing a tender kiss on each of her fingers, he looked into Nicola's eyes. "Tell me your name and I'll be Alexi for you."

Her name? Ahh, she had a name right? *Think, think*, she ordered her lust-glazed brain.

"N-Nicola," she finally managed to stammer out.

Those icy hot blue eyes froze the moment she spoke her name but then Alexi seemed to catch himself. "It is my sincere pleasure to meet you, Nicola."

"I hope we both enjoy some pleasure tonight," she teased him and slid off the chair. "Shall we go?"

Nicola offered her hand to the man with midnight black hair and Siberian blue eyes and prayed "Alexi" would be the one to break Jeremy's damning hold on her.

* * * * *

The second floor room was on the small side and furniture was the last thing on his mind as Kirill quietly closed the door behind him and tossed a condom on the nightstand. Thank God he'd had one in his wallet.

A short ride in the elevator had done nothing to alleviate the ache in his cock or ease the tightness in his belly. Nicola hadn't touched him at all on the way to her room. Was she having second thoughts? Surely not. The gleam in her green eyes was hotter than a laser. Her long curly brown hair swirled around her voluptuous body as she turned and pulled the straps of her unholy red dress down her arms.

Kirill pounced, dragged her against his body and grasped her full breasts in his hands. She was tall, and in heels her firm ass cradled his cock through the tight confines of his jeans. He kneaded the luscious breasts, pinching the already tight nipples peaking under the material.

She ground her backside into his groin as she reached around to get a handful of his ass.

Nicola pinched him. *What a hellcat*, he thought and bit her neck in retaliation.

Her soft hair ticked his nose as she lifted it out of his way, a soft moan escaped her luscious lips and he couldn't wait to taste them. He turned her, pushed lightly and followed her onto the down comforter of the bed.

Nicola gasped as he covered her lips in a forceful, demanding kiss. He plunged his tongue into her mouth. He didn't waste time in dancing around the passion that burned through both of them. Hers dueled with his in a fervent dance. She tasted of the chocolate berry from earlier. Sweet, a little tart and possibly addicting.

Biting and nibbling his way from her mouth to her neck, he moaned and scraped his short nails up the length of her perfectly smooth leg as he ground his steel-hard groin against her.

Kirill's hands wanted to be all over her skin.

"Hey, I want in on this too." But her protest sounded weak as she bit the corded muscles of his neck and ran her hands down his back.

"All in good time." Kirill braced his weight on one arm and stretched the neckline down to expose one of her large breasts. He plumped her breast up in his hand and bent his head, firmly sucking a peaked nipple. His tongue lapped and his teeth bit lightly. She wore no bra. A good thing, since the penalty for concealing those beauties would have to be death.

He shifted his hold and licked his way to her other breast. They were warm and delicious. Kirill could have feasted on them all day. He loved breasts and hers were exquisite—large and firm.

Her moans went straight to his cock. "More." Nicola's hands fisted in his hair as she held him tighter. Sexy panting sounded softly in his ears.

Kirill slanted his mouth over hers, forcing his tongue deep in her mouth. With a final nip of her full bottom lip, he rose and, standing at the end of the bed, peeled off her dress and panties. With one quick toss the garments landed somewhere behind him.

Spiky black heels showed off her long legs. He reached for the straps but thought better of it. This gorgeous woman, wearing nothing but stilettos and his for the taking, made a fantasy come to life.

"You are such a beauty, Nicola."

She leaned up on her elbows as a blush flushed over her olive skin. "You are the sexiest fucking thing I've ever seen, Alexi. Come here. I want to taste you."

Another man's name on her lips wasn't the best way to get him heated but she was the one who wanted an anonymous night of passion.

He could do that. For now.

Kirill pulled his t-shirt and sweater over his head and dropped them. Her gaze locked onto his. Tiny shivers skated over his skin as she gave him a thorough once over. "That all you got for me?"

Nicola sat up and reached a hand for his belt buckle. "I want you inside me. I want to suck your cock. I want everything. Now." Her voice came out in a desperate plea.

"Please," she added.

He held her hands away from him. "Not yet. I want to taste more of you." He didn't believe his self control could take much more but he had to taste her sweetness.

Kissing his way down her body, Kirill knelt on the edge of the bed. Gently, he kissed her thighs on either side of her nether lips. She trembled as he licked a path slowly up her pussy.

Nicola cried out. "Oh, yes!"

Kirill barely heard, concentrating only on her pleasure. Pre-cum spotted his jeans as he flicked her clit and set up a rhythm. He skimmed his hand up her thigh and pushed

a finger into her dripping channel. Cream eased his way in and her vagina gripped his finger like a vise.

Her juices flowed as he sucked her clit into his mouth. She tossed her head against the bed and gripped the comforter. Her knees hooked over his shoulders, the cold leather of her shoes teasing his back. Nicola's moans were a jumble of words and sounds, making no sense to him other than she was thoroughly enjoying his talents and was about to come.

"Ahh. Just like that. Don't stop," she panted. "Don't stop."

Kirill never let up, licking and massaging her through her climax. Reaching up, he grabbed hold of a nipple and pinched it while he bit her clit.

Nicola came again with a wave of convulsions, screaming her pleasure while shoving her hips closer to his face and grabbing his hair tightly in her fingers.

Pulling his finger out of her and licking her clit one last time, Kirill slowly stood up while disentangling himself from her passionate grasp.

A wicked grin lit his mouth as he looked at her. She stretched languidly and glowed with the sheen of perspiration and a good orgasm.

Lust-filled green eyes met his as she took hold of his jeans, yanked and sprawled him on the bed next to her. With a dexterity he couldn't believe, Nicola had his jeans undone, off and on the floor. He never wore underwear and a gleam lit her eyes as she saw he was bare.

"Oh damn, I knew you were going to be big," she whispered while her eyes praised his cock.

"All the better to fuck you with, my dear," he taunted her, wondering if he might have pushed the love play too far.

Instead of reacting in fear or repulsion, Kirill's words thrilled Nicola and set her into a flurry of motion.

Her soft hand grasped his dripping cock and caressed with a firm stroke.

He closed his eyes and groaned not able to bear both the visual and tactile sensations.

Sharp teeth nipping him sent lightning through his body, tightening his sac and forcing more blood to his already engorged cock.

His hips jerked towards her.

She smiled. "Not so fast, hot stuff. We have all night."

"You will kill me," he moaned but didn't try to wrest control away from her. If a man had to die could there really be a better way to go?

"But you'll die happy," she chuckled and bent over him again, her hair hiding her face.

Kirill couldn't agree more.

Her cool hands on his overheated flesh brought stars to his eyes. He'd never had a woman like Nicola so bold and passionate. She took him down her throat with ease even though his size beat out the average man. The muscles of her neck massaged him as she swallowed around his cock. Nicola's glorious hair stroked his thighs. A tactile man in all ways, the sensation of this hidden woman sucking his cock overwhelmed his brain.

He fisted his large hands in her hair. "*Da*. Just like that."

She kept up a punishing rhythm drawing every ounce of pleasure from his body.

His balls tightened in her soft palm while he grew harder. He wasn't going to last much longer and wanted to feel her pussy milking his cock as they came together.

With a groan of regret he pulled his lover's head up. His cock left the hot heat of her mouth with an audible pop.

Kirill pulled her across his body and kissed her deeply, plunging his tongue into her mouth, tangling with hers.

Nicola gasped as he pulled her flush to his moisture covered body.

His cock pulsed against her soft belly, the slick pre-cum and her saliva coating it. "I want to be inside you," he whispered against her ear.

She straddled his hips, grabbed the condom from the nightstand and sheathed him. The feel of her sure hands rolling the latex on his cock was almost more than he could bear.

Instead, he gritted his teeth, thought of Siberia and prayed for the fortitude to last through Nicola's lovemaking without embarrassing himself.

Kirill slid his hand between them and she gasped as he touched her.

Holding her green gaze with his, he guided himself to her moist entrance and plunged into her with one swift sure motion.

Nicola screamed as he entered her channel. Tight muscles clutched his cock as the creamy walls parted for his invasion.

It was so incredibly, impossibly tight, wet and as erotic as hell.

Grabbing her hips, he pushed all the way in. He ground against her body with each thrust.

"Fuck me! Fuck me!" she cried out.

Nicola rode him hard. Long, fast, strong strokes. His cock pulsed as it slid through her honey slick flesh. His nerves were on fire. Electricity sizzled through his blood.

Her full breasts bounced with her rhythm and he held them, flicking her nipples with every moan coming from her throat. Her nails dug into his chest, making each thrust a pleasure/pain that had his balls tightening.

"Let me hear you, Nicola. Feel me deep inside you." He thrust harder, meeting each of her downward pushes. She clamped her muscles around him, milking him, bringing him closer to orgasm. Her nails gripped his biceps. The pain heightening his pleasure.

"*Da, Nika.* One more time."

Just like that, she exploded, shaking wildly with the force of her orgasm, shuddering and crying, pulsing wildly around him.

Kirill broke free, his control gone and pounded into her. He held her hips steady in his hands and thrust hard. The climax started in his balls and grew in his body. With one final shove, he came with her. The explosion went on for what seemed like forever and with a shout Kirill spilled into the condom.

Panting as though she'd run a marathon, Nicola collapsed onto his chest.

Tremors pulsed through him as she squeezed her vaginal muscles. Each one was a mini-orgasm robbing his brain of any thoughts that might linger.

"Oh my God. That was wonderful."

Kirill wrapped her in his arms and held her to him. "Yes, incredible, my beautiful Nika."

"What did you call me?" Unease filtered through her eyes as she leaned up to stare at him.

Nicola looked at her new and superb lover suspiciously.

Alexi raised one eyebrow, a trick she'd love to learn and answered in a mildly bored tone. "My lover? Sex goddess? Wanton?"

He winked at her over the last and slung an arm around her waist to pull her snug into his body. He disposed of the condom then wrapped her tightly in his embrace. "For you are all that and more. You are like fire in the tundra, life giving and capable of bringing a man to the brink of death and back again."

The words sounded great but Nicola didn't believe in the value of spoken statement. Proof would be in the pudding, as her grandmother Gail, her Dad's beloved mother, had often said. She'd believe a man after she'd found the truth of his words and not a minute before.

Thank you, Jeremy, she thought sarcastically, *for this very unwanted and undeserved life lesson.*

"Come, *milaya*, what puts a deep frown on such a beautiful face?" his husky voice whispered into her hair, followed by a quick nip along her shoulder. Alexi scooted

down and rested his head against her breast. The silk of his hair caressed and tickled her nipple.

"I thought I heard you call me something," she answered as vaguely as possible.

"And this makes you upset?" Alexi didn't sound bothered by the possibility as he busied himself licking and sucking her breast. "It was such a bad thing, this word you thought I said?" asked his muffled voice.

Torn between laughter at his persistence and the desire throbbing through her body once more, Nicola fought to regain her voice. "No not...a...mmmmm yes...bad thing," she managed when one of his talented fingers found its way between her wet thighs and began to play.

"You become so wet to my touch, yes?" he asked, stroking one, then two, fingers deep inside her. "If it is not a bad thing then why do you get upset thinking I said it?"

Her body burning, Nicola didn't know what the man said. Her whole awareness centered on those magical fingers and that talented mouth. "I thought you...ahhh...I...heard a nickname...harder, right...there... from when I was younger. Long...ah...ah...time ago. Please yes..."

"So you heard a whisper of the past and panicked?" His voice sounded amused as his tongue traveled around her nipple in circles, never quite making it to the straining peak.

"Can we please forget what I thought I heard and just fuck me again?" Really this man wasted more time talking than... The thought petered out. The only other men she'd been with had all fallen asleep after the deed, so really, how did she know if this was right or not?

"More than anything else I'd like to bury myself inside your tight heat but alas I had only one condom with me. I won't risk either of us for momentary pleasure no matter how great it is." He shifted his hardness to rub against her thigh, proving that his need has risen again as strongly as her own. "Besides we'll have plenty of time to

fuck each other's brain out tomorrow and the following days. I promise to have at least a dozen with me from now on."

She heard the teasing in his voice but his comment about future encounters chilled her heated blood. "I've got a box in the drawer, Alexi, but this is it for us. After tonight I can't see you again." However forceful she'd wanted the words to come out, Nicola knew they sounded weary and apologetic.

Ice blue eyes met hers. "You want to fuck me then walk away?" While his voice came out smoothly, there were undertones of anger buried beneath the easy question.

Nicola struggled to pull away from him but his grip tightened refusing to allow her release. "Stop it, Alexi, I didn't meant to insult you but I'm only here for one night. Then I've made a promise to see my grandfather. He's the only reason I'm back in this country."

"Then if your wish is one night of passionate lovingmaking from a stranger I'd best give you something to keep me in your mind." There was steel overlaying his tone but Nicola didn't protest or pull away. She'd gotten her way in this, why fight over the small stuff?

Alexi would leave in the morning and she'd get on with her promise to see her dying grandfather and settle her mother's nerves.

"If this is to be our only night together may I ask for a favor?" His tone drifted back to husky as his fingers again played her body.

"Mhhh, what would that favor be?" Unless it involved whips, chains and third parties, Nicola didn't have a protest in mind.

"I want to take you my way. In every way until light floods the room and you make me walk away." Soft lips trailed from her breast to her stomach, nipping and laving their way down her body.

"Does it involve a significant amount of pain?" she forced herself to ask through the pleasure spearing her body.

"Pain can be pleasure when it's done right," he answered from somewhere past her hipbone. "But tonight I want to dominate you, to show your body exactly what pleasure it is meant for. I want to take you beyond what any past lovers have shown you. Trust me. I promise you no pain. If at anytime you wish to stop, all you need do is say the word."

Trust him? Was it possible? Wouldn't she be stupid if she didn't? Nicola had already given him her body once tonight. Did it really matter if she did it again *his way*? Even thinking of it his way, made her clit throb. *What the hell*, she finally capitulated, it wasn't as if she was trusting him with her heart.

Chilly air swept over Nicola's body when Alexi left the bed and picked up his jeans. The *whoosh* his leather belt made as he snapped it from the belt loops thrilled her. Nipples hardened with anticipation of what he planned to do, Nicola stared at his elegant hands stroking the brown leather. A spanking? Tying her wrists to the bedpost?

Awesome.

The thigh melting blue gaze of his eyes held her in thrall as he crooked a finger beckoning her forward. Excitement pulsed through her but a flash of annoyance came with it.

"I'm not a dog to be called at your command," she bristled.

"I never said you were. I simply want you to come here." His tone was low and controlled. Smooth as whiskey and just as intoxicating.

Ever so slowly, Nicola crawled her way to the end of the down comforter, her eyes never leaving his. "What if I don't want to?" Which was ridiculous of course, as she'd willingly followed his command.

"Too late."

Faster than lightning his hand shot out, grabbed her waist and hauled her close. Warm, firm lips closed over hers and his tongue speared into her mouth. The sweet hot taste of him sent tingles to her toes. Back and forth, their tongues danced, gasps and moans disrupting the warm air of the room.

The silk of his black hair proved too much temptation as she thrust her hands into the cool mass to hold him tighter.

Alexi pulled back. "Nicola, you are not in charge."

She pouted and stroked the thick cock rising from a nest of crisp hair. "Oh yeah? This tells me different."

"No, this tells *me* different."

Cold leather circled her wrists as he bound them. She'd never thought about any type of bondage. The leather wasn't tight against her flesh. Nicola could've pulled her hands out if she'd wanted.

She didn't want to.

Alexi told her she had only to say stop and he would. She believed him.

Foolish?

Perhaps.

But it was also incredibly exciting. And that's what she needed. Wanted. Something exciting. Her life had gotten downright dull. She was only thirty-two for heaven's sake. High time she started living.

A deep breath later, she set her chin and looked him straight in the eye. "I'm ready."

"Stand up and take off your shoes."

Nicola bent over and slid the straps off her heels and tossed the shoes off her feet.

The carpet was plush and cool against her feet. The end of winter had finally arrived and even though there was snow on the ground, the days were warming up. The nights, however, were frigid, and not even central heating could stop the goose bumps appearing on her flesh.

Alexi led her via his belt to the stone hearth where he quickly laid a roaring fire. The flames sent warmth and color across the beautiful woven rug he knelt on.

"Sit with me, Nicola. Tonight, sensation will be yours."

His words thrilled her. Nicola sat cross-legged facing the fire, the heat soaking into her flesh. The cooler air on her back made her uneasy.

“Close your eyes. Feel what I do to you and do not touch me. If at any time you are frightened or just want to stop, say so. This is all about pleasure.”

He kissed her shoulder while trailing his fingers up her thigh. The calluses on his hands abraded her skin and felt wonderful.

She bent her neck and gave him access to her throat. Alexi’s beard scraped across her flesh and little bolts of electricity zinged through her.

Her back was still cold even though his body radiated as much heat as the fire. “Come closer. I’m cold.”

“Not for long.”

Despite her request, she didn’t feel him moving closer but his breath fanned across her neck, teasing her.

Without her sight, Nicola’s other senses heightened. Every wave of heat from the fire caressed her skin, every nip of Alexi’s teeth made her clit throb.

She was suspended in time waiting for the next sensation, the next experience.

Alexi finally moved behind her, cradling her hips between his muscular thighs. His hands massaged the tight muscles of her shoulders. Nicola rolled her neck as those talented fingers kneaded the cords of her neck. “Relax. It’s all about pleasure.”

“No one’s ever given me a massage before.”

“A crime to be sure. Your skin is soft and pliant. Soon my hands will be all over you,” he whispered before taking a nip of her earlobe.

She laughed nervously. What was wrong with her? She’d practically attacked him earlier but now he wanted to be in charge, she was a nervous Nelly? Absolutely not! “I don’t know about pliant, but the softness comes from an obsession with body butter. Oh yeah, right there.”

The thick hair of his arms caressed her already aching nipples as he wrapped her in his strength and leaned her back against him. The heat of the fire was nothing compared to the flames licking inside her body. Slow caresses and touching were all fine and good but she drew the line at his turtle pace of torture. *Touch me*, she thought. *Anything!*

As though he'd read her mind, Alexi drew his hands down her abdomen and focused on her center. She was already wet and aching just from his touches alone.

"Alexi, I—"

"I've changed my mind. No talking."

"Tyrant," she mumbled but did as she was told. A thoroughly new experience for someone who hardly ever obeyed the rules.

She leaned her head against his shoulder and let the exciting touch of one hand on her breast and the other fondling her clit steal her mind. His sure fingers caressed the nub, drawing more cream from her pulsing channel. His other hand, busy kneading her breast and pinching her nipple, started a slow burn in her core.

As though his hands were linked to her brain, he sensed when she wanted more pressure and when it became too much to bear. She'd always been very sensitive. Her breasts were triggers for an orgasm by themselves. Add in the sweet torture he gave her pussy and she'd go off like a rocket any time now. Panting gasps escaped her throat.

His cock was a steel bar against the small of her back. The moisture leaking from its tip scalded her flesh. With a swift motion, Alexi plunged two fingers into her. *Oh God*. The pressure was incredible. He continued to work her nipples. The lightning shooting through her body from them sent goose bumps across her flesh. She squirmed against him wanting more bodily contact.

"All in good time, darling."

Good time was about to be ten seconds from now. Her pussy clenched around his plunging fingers and wept cream to ease his way. A strong thumb flicked at her clit not

once letting up no matter how much she panted and writhed. Her body was on fire. The heat incinerating her from the inside out. *More. Faster.*

His fingers played her like a concert musician. Every stroke, every flick was a masterpiece and brought her closer to the precipice. A cliff she was more than willing to go over.

No sooner had she thought it then he stopped. "Noooo!" The anguished wail tore from her throat. "You can't stop. I was so close."

"And you will be close again."

Cold air was once again on her back as he moved away. "Roll over to your stomach. Your backside is too much temptation for me."

Her eyes flew open. "Oh no. I didn't sign up for that," she said and stubbornly stayed put, clenching her butt cheeks for good measure.

He laughed. "While I have never tried that particular pleasure, I was merely going to massage your back."

"Oh." With clumsy movements, she rolled to her stomach and placed her bound hands under the pillow he'd considerately placed for her head.

Nicola couldn't help but close her eyes and moan as his fiery hands rubbed every muscle in her back, buttocks and legs. "You're hired," she sighed.

"Even in pleasure you are tense."

"I haven't exactly had the easiest couple of days. My fiancé—"

"No. No words."

"Again with the 'no words'," she huffed without heat. His hands were far too good to argue the point and risk him stopping again. Especially since the slow burn in her core had started again. Surely a simple massage wouldn't bring her close to orgasm.

But it certainly could.

His fingers were magic on her muscles. Any bad tension she had floated away on a languid sigh.

“Roll over. Keep your arms above your head. Eyes closed.”

She did as he asked, loving the feeling of being pampered by him. He was bossy and dominant but Alexi was also tender and loving. His hands continually touched and caressed her.

Alexi's ministrations took on a more forceful feel when Nicola landed on her back. His nails scraped along her sides, teasing her breasts and nipples.

He kissed her. Plunging his tongue into her mouth, tasting her like a starving man would water.

His cock pulsed against her thigh.

He trailed kisses down her breastbone, pausing to pay lavish attention to her nipples before continuing his descent.

She'd never thought her belly button was an erogenous zone but with this man, her whole body was one.

Alexi laved her navel and nipped the flesh below it. She wished she weren't so fleshy, but he seemed to have no problem at all with her curves. Nicola knew she didn't have the body of an anorexic cover model. Her tummy wasn't flat and her hips weren't boyishly slim. But in this man's embrace, she forgot about everything she wasn't. He made her feel like the most sensual and desirable woman in the world.

The infuriating man disappeared again. A soft whisper invaded her thoughts. “Open your mouth.”

The soft tip of his cock touched her lips. She gulped him in greedily, sucking and moaning around his penis. He was big, and flat on her back wasn't the best way to take him into her throat without gagging so she concentrated on the supple tip and sensitive shaft just below.

He played with her breasts and the low groans coming from above her told her he enjoyed her talents. The angle changed and she gasped as his tongue gave her pussy a long slow lick. Yes. To have him licking her while she sucked him was fantastic.

With no sight and her hands bound, Nicola concentrated on using her tongue and teeth to maximum effect. Letting him slide from her mouth with a soft pop, she nuzzled his tight balls with her nose and inhaled the masculine musky scent of him.

His hum of pleasure rocketed through her pussy. He used his fingers to spread her and lightly bit her clit and lapped at the cream pouring from her.

The pre-cum dripping on her tongue tasted salty and delicious when she took him in again, sucking and nipping what she could of his large shaft. Her inability to touch him only heightened her sense of his cock. It filled her with vulnerability but gave her power to have the most sensitive part of this powerful man in her mouth.

Two fingers slid into her channel and he curled them to hit the soft spot guaranteed to drive her right over the edge.

Fire flickered behind her eyelids as the sensations built in her core. She kept rhythm with him. The sixty-nine growing more animalistic by the lick. He tortured her with licks and nips on her clit. His fingers, harsh in her pussy, drove everything forward. Faster. More powerful than ever.

Nicola didn't think she'd ever come hard without a cock actually inside her but the tremors washing through her body were more intense than anything she'd ever felt.

"Oh God. Yes. Right there. Don't stop. Please don't stop," she begged.

He didn't.

With one last motion, he covered her clit with firm lips and sucked while licking with just the tip of his tongue.

Orgasm finally washed over her. Wave after wave of pleasure started in her pussy and soared out to her fingers and toes. "Yes, Alexi. Yes. Yes. Ahhhhhh..." Nicola couldn't have held back her scream if she tried.

When sense finally returned, she sucked the delicious cock back into her throat and laved his pulsing shaft. He hardened even more and despite her protest, pulled from her mouth.

A harsh deep groan filled the room as he came over her breasts.

Chapter Two

When in Lexovia...

Gray light weakly trickled out of the rain-clouded sky as Nicola slowly made her way through the mountains to her grandfather's home nestled deep in the valley between the timeless peaks of rock jutting out on either side of her. The old bumpy road curved and twisted throughout the mountains, sometimes obliterating the sky altogether. Her small rental was alone on the road once she'd left the main freeway or whatever they called the main highway in this country. A sleek black helicopter streaked through the sky above her head but she had the road to herself.

She forced her mind to concentrate on the passing scenery instead of the wild night of unbearable pleasure that left her body deliciously sore but happily sated. Since she'd slunk out of the sexually aromatic hotel room two hours earlier, Nicola had forced her mind away from the black-haired stranger who had done more to rock her world in a few hours time than any other lover had in all her combined experiences.

As much as she'd enjoyed letting Alexi take over and dominate her body, she didn't have the luxury of doing mini-replays of all their sexual positions. Given the task ahead of her, Nicola thought she deserved to take a few of her favorite memories. Meeting her grandfather after so many years estranged shouldn't have her nerves playing Frogger with her insides but logic didn't dictate emotions.

Natalia Luder had asked little of her only daughter except for this one thing. To meet with her dying father, Nicola's grandfather, before he passed away from whatever disease ravaged his eighty-three-year-old body. "Of course" she'd told her mother, whatever the older woman wanted, Nicola would do her best to accomplish.

Finding Jeremy in the arms of another man had merely pushed her plans ahead of schedule. She'd do her family duty, talk to the old man, explain her own mother's

recovering health and do whatever it was he needed a member of the family to do then finish out her solo honeymoon. Maybe if she got lucky she'd run into Alexi again. After all, with four weeks until her return flight to the U.S., what else would a woman have to do in here in Lexovia? There were only so many museums and historical sites she could handle before cultural overload happened.

Then again this area was known for growing the lusteberry. After last night maybe she should make time to find out about this adventurous fruit. She owed the little berry for all the pleasure of last night.

Spying the small sign for her turn, Nicola flipped her signal out of habit more than necessity and slowed the car to a crawl in order to avoid the more rough parts of the road. Adjusting her speed once the worst spots passed, she finally allowed herself to appreciate and enjoy the timeless beauty of her surroundings.

The mountains fell back to allow the trees to dominate this part of the country. Weak sunlight filtered through the clouds and sparkled off the rain-dampened trees bursting with green life. Birds called to each other from the shelter of the branches. Nicola smiled at the sound from her slightly opened window. While being a nature lover hadn't been included in her DNA, she could appreciate the whimsical harmony that existed outside her vehicle so long as she wasn't required to commune with it.

Without warning, Nicola found herself in the village. Cheery puffs of smoke came from gray houses. Several dozen houses or cottages were strung up and down the main road like a picture-perfect Christmas card. Since the village, Neja, was several hours from the capital and higher in the mountains, it had received several inches of snow last night. The ground, trees and buildings were all covered in the fluffy stuff.

She became charmed in spite of herself and found a smile curving her lips without conscious effort on her part. The smile died a quick death as a man stepped off the sidewalk and directly in the path of her car.

Screeching like a banshee, Nicola slammed her foot on the brake and jerked the wheel to the right to avoid the brain-dead foreigner who'd been born without the sense God gave a rabid squirrel.

Before the small compact could come to a wheezing halt, Nicola had the door open and shot out of the car ready to bring American common sense to the witless wonder and probably a whole slew of new American curse words.

But the heat died out of her once she'd viewed the hapless pedestrian. The man had to be older than the mountains that surrounded them, with storm gray eyes that matched the sky.

"Gun dun bout runz me olver," the man told her with a cheerful tone and a smile that lacked nothing but his teeth. A black cap barely covered his wiry hair and his clothes had seen better days. They were torn and patched but clean.

"I'm sorry. I'm American. I don't speak the local language," she tried telling him, while reminding herself not to shout. For some reason she could never understand when someone didn't understand a language, most Americans raised their voices at the poor stranger, like that would help in crossing the language barrier.

"He is speaking English," another voice piped in from behind her.

With a quick twist, Nicola turned to face the newcomer. The woman appeared to be in her early sixties with a short cap of black hair run through with a few strands of silver and sparkling blue eyes framed with laugh lines that made her face all the more interesting. A wide cupid's bow mouth grinned and showed off gleaming teeth. She was covered neck to calf in a bright magenta down coat.

"I'm sorry but you said he's speaking English?" she asked warily, eyeing the man still grinning at her sans teeth.

The pretty woman smiled again. "His version of English. My husband watches too much satellite TV and forgets the translation when he's speaking," she explained as she walked closer to Nicola and the car. "We're so happy to be the first in Neja to welcome you back home. My husband, Alextrov, saw you drive in and couldn't wait for you to

stop the vehicle like a normal man. I apologize for his rudeness and the scare he gave you. We aren't all so lacking in manners." With the last words she shot a sharp look at the no longer smiling man. "Alextrov, you've forgotten your teeth again."

When she translated the words, Alextrov's hand jumped to cover his mouth and heat crept up his cheeks. Without another word, he disappeared into one of the charming shops lining the road. The same old world architecture of the hotel was here as well. Stone buildings with slate roofs lined the main road ending in a beautiful white limestone church with gothic spires.

It was a postcard picture. Too perfect to be alone in such a wonderful and romantic place.

A low cough from the woman brought Nicola back.

Feeling bad in the face of the man's embarrassment, Nicola started to apologize but stopped herself because really what could she say she was sorry for? She hadn't stolen the old man's teeth and forced him to jump out in the road in front of her car.

"Please, Miss Luder, allow me to buy you a cup of tea. Or coffee, if that is your preference, and formally introduce myself to you." The older woman came up and grasped Nicola's elbow and gently pulled her to the building where her husband had disappeared.

"How do you know my name?" Nicola asked and disentangled her arm from the other woman. "For that matter, why did your husband rush out to meet me? I didn't even know what time I would arrive." A sinking feeling crept over her. Had she just drove into the Lexovian version of Amityville?

"Ahh, it's good that you ask." Her persistent, yet kind, would-be kidnapper once again linked their arms and walked with surefooted steps across the snow-slicked ground. "You are Nicola Luder, granddaughter of Danill Fedor of Xela estate, yes?"

"Ah, yes I am." What else did this woman know and how? She'd only written her grandfather last month. The letter had been short and to the point. In it she explained

she'd be traveling here on her honeymoon and that she and her new husband would be coming to visit with him. "What about my car?" she finally remembered to ask.

"Ahh, not to worry, we'll have it parked outside whenever you're ready to leave." The assurance came in a cheery voice.

When she and her mother had discussed her grandfather's mysterious summons, they both agreed it had to do with his will and who would get what after the old man passed away.

When she'd received no reply, Nicola hadn't been too worried. She'd been of two minds. Either the old man had died before receiving her letter or shortly thereafter or he'd taken care of whatever problem he'd wanted her recovering mother to handle himself.

Still, for a local villager to know exactly who she was kind of spooked her no matter how charming a smile the woman had.

"It is good you've come home. Your *dedushka*..." she stopped at Nicola's blank stare and quickly translated the word. "Your...ah...papa. This is the right word for your parent's father, yes?"

They stepped on the snow swept steps and her strange guide quickly opened the door and ushered her into the warmth.

The small café turned out to be warm and inviting. Black maple wooden tables and chairs gleamed in the firelight from a stone hearth her new lover would've had no problem standing upright in. Deep jewel-toned drapes were pulled back at the windows to let in the watery light of day. In the deep winter, Nicola knew they'd be a great help in keeping out the harsh winter cold.

Rich scents of stew and bread floated on the air along with the acrid tang of vodka and made Nicola's stomach rumble. Sneaking out of a hotel early in the morning didn't leave a lot of time for breakfast.

Alexi had looked so perfect sleeping next to her in the large feather bed. It scared the hell out of her. She'd packed as quickly and silently as possible, left a note with "thank you" next to the bed and fled like a thief.

"Yes, your papa is so pleased to have you come here. He's been hiring women from the village to make the house sparkle in time for your arrival. He's most anxious to see you again as are we all."

Gently maneuvered into a well-worn leather chair by the hearth, Nicola found herself the object of intense scrutiny from the room's occupants—a few elderly men smoking pipes and telling tales, a table of women whom she was sure were measuring her for their sons and a young woman serving them all bowls of soup and steaming loaves of bread. Even with the delicious looking food set before them, the locals still stared. Worried about smeared lipstick or something worse out of place on her face, she discreetly and quickly wiped a hand up and over her face. Finding nothing that shouldn't be there, she mentally shrugged and assumed the locals didn't get many visitors from the U.S. Either that or they were easily entertained like her best friend back home. Flash a shiny object in her face and Kaye could amuse herself for hours.

"Please forgive their stares. Many of them knew you when you were just a child," her hostess-slash-kidnapper explained. "Where are my manners, I am Vera Ivanova and once upon a time I worked as your nanny." She stated the last proudly and with a hint of expectation in her blue eyes.

"I'm happy to meet you...again." Nicola faltered, not sure what else to say. While she did have some memories of being here as a child they mostly centered on a young boy three years older than her. Kee.

Her nannies had only lasted until she reached six or seven. The women's faces blurred and changed with each trip. Never the same nanny two years in a row. The only face that remained the same had been Kee.

At least that's what she called him. He was her playmate, hero and cohort in all crime. He'd been the reason she'd cried when told there would be no more trips to visit Papa.

What would her friend do without her for those three months she'd normally be there? Eventually she'd recovered from her childhood trauma and found other activities to occupy her summers but she never quite got over her crush on Kee. From time to time she'd wonder what ever happened to the green-eyed, black-haired boy she'd played with. Her best and favorite memories of childhood had all taken place with Kee.

Probably bald, married with seven kids and makes love to his wife once a week on Sunday after the kids are asleep and maybe on his birthday, Nicola thought with an unkind smirk. Not that she had all that much to brag about. She still worked for her parents at the ripe old age of thirty-two. At least she didn't live at home. She didn't live anywhere anymore.

Feeling worse about herself and not wanting to sink any deeper into the pity pond, she focused her attention on the still-talking Vera.

"And so we've all waited for you to come. Some of us more anxiously than others."

A small twitter of laughter rang throughout the room. Nicola shrugged it off as Alextrov's earlier enthusiasm in the street. "I'm pleased so many of you remember my family and myself. I have wonderful memories of my time spent here."

"As we do of you," Vera said, patting her hand. "Now we will get something warm in you then send you on to your papa. I'm sure he's paced the rug clean through waiting on you."

Time drifted by as people came to say hello, asked about her family. Vera, who turned out to own the delightful cafe, plied her with bracing hot coffee and mountains of fruit flavored *babka*.

When she'd eaten everything her stomach could hold and then some, Nicola finally pleaded with her former nanny to stop. "If I eat one more bite you'll be able to use my

ass for a snowman,” she said pushing away the third plate of treats. Truly the food had been outstanding but she hadn’t been joking about rolling her out of here.

“I will wrap it up and you may take it with you for later.” Vera put words to action and took the goodies from the table.

Ten minutes later, Vera and Alextrov, teeth firmly in place, hugged her goodbye at her car. With the door closed and two large sacks of “just a little something”, Nicola drove the car through the village, past the church and to her grandfather’s estate. A place she hadn’t seen in twenty years.

How much had it changed? How much had he changed? Would this visit change her?

With a smile on her face, Nicola could already answer the last question. Indeed being here in the land of her ancestors had changed her already. She’d turned over a new leaf last night by giving her body to Alexi. A man she’d known less than an hour and now could find naked in the dark. Blindfolded. With no hands.

She laughed for the sheer joy of the knowledge that such a sexy dominant man had wanted her. Jeremy didn’t know what he’d missed out on and Nicola, for once, couldn’t be happier with the fact.

* * * * *

Kirill turned from the stained glass window and paced his way across the priceless Persian carpet uncaring if he wore tracks into the carefully woven fibers.

Where was she? Nicola should have arrived two hours ago and that was calculating her driving rate with that of his great Uncle Ivan. He should never have taken the helicopter back. Following her in a car would have allowed him to remain far enough behind to avoid detection but close enough at hand in case something happened.

“Boy, my family didn’t save that carpet from the Germans and the French just to have you wear a hole through it. Sit down, have a drink but for God’s sake relax,” a gruff voice spoke from behind him.

"She should have been here by now," Kirill said but he turned and threw himself in a butter-soft leather club chair and scowled at the fire glowing cheerfully back at him.

"Just like her mother, I'm sure. One thing turns into another and before she knows it, half the day's gone and they can't apologize enough." The older man took a seat in the matching chair opposite the fire. "If there had been an accident someone would have called us by now."

Kirill ran a weary hand over his face. He hadn't gotten more than an hour's sleep last night but it had been worth it. Remembering the silken feel of Nicola's body clasp and grasping his, sent warm shudders down his spine and blood rushing to his cock. Not at all the appropriate action while sitting in front of the woman's grandfather.

In his house.

Drinking his wine.

Kirill quickly cast about for some form of distraction. Instead all he could see were pictures of Nicola from last night. The heady perfume of her arousal lingered in his senses. The sweet gasps and moans she gave as she came. His fingers itched to play and caress all her smooth silky skin. His cock ached most of all to be buried back inside her sweet hot warmth.

Blood pooled in his groin and Kirill quickly pushed thoughts of Nicola's damp heat away. He forced himself to think about waking this morning alone.

He pictured her from her first shy smile to the lasting tempting taste of her lips before she fell asleep in his arms last night. Only to sneak out this morning while she thought he'd been asleep.

If he didn't love the woman so damn much it hurt, he'd never have tolerated her walking away from their bed. Still, he took silent comfort in the fact that she came to him with no knowledge of who he was or how sizeable his bank accounts were.

Little Nicola had grown up into a beautiful woman, but even as a child she'd shown promise of the woman she would become. He had been fifteen the last time Nicola's family had come for the summer. He'd been almost man enough to be aware of their

differences and find them intriguing but still enough of a child to enjoy their innocent time together.

He'd known he'd loved her then but could say nothing. In his mind he'd planned to wait until her sixteenth summer before he attempted to change their relationship but he'd never gotten the chance. Her mother had some falling out with the cranky old man sitting next to him and he'd never had the chance to confess his feelings.

At least not to Nicola. Everyone else in village seemed to have found out his secret feelings and made it their life's work to bring them back together. Now, twenty years later, Kirill would finally get the chance to tell the woman of his dreams what had grown in his heart.

Of course, he thought with a slight smile, Nicola being the independent woman she was, might be a bit angry over his mild deception but nothing Kirill thought he couldn't sweet-talk her out of.

He'd never intended to deceive her. In the bar he'd fully expected her eyes to widen with recognition any second, then she would open her arms, smile and say "Kee". But it had never happened. Nicola never guessed his identity even when he let his pet name for her slip out in an unguarded moment.

"Think she'll stay here?" the old man asked in a careless tone that Kirill knew hid his anxiety.

"Make her feel welcome. And make sure she sees her old room then give her space if she asks for it," Kirill dictated. He hadn't come this far in life just to have an old family misunderstanding ruin all his plans.

"I'm not going to beat and curse the girl," came the grumbled reply.

"I know, it's just..." His voice trailed off. He couldn't say what it was, only that if his nerves stretched any tighter he'd be able to use them as a bungee wire.

Her grandfather spoke again. "You seem to think she's over this Jeremy fellow. What if she's not? Nicola could be planning to go back with him. Women seem to be able to forgive bigger mistakes if they love someone enough."

The words struck fear into his heart and soul. As much as Kirill tried to reassure himself that Nicola couldn't have made love to him so passionately last night if she loved another man, the doubt lingered.

When news of her engagement had reached his little corner of the world Kirill had spent three days looking at the bottom of a vodka bottle. Then another three getting over the previous three. He'd been resigned to her engagement but not her marriage. He would have flown to the States if Danill hadn't assured him Nicola would be on her way here.

Kirill didn't ask and didn't want to know how Danill had managed that trick. He'd just been gloriously grateful her grandfather had. It had taken little effort on his part to find the hotel and reservation date. The only dark cloud in his silver lining was the name attached to the reservation. Nicola had been planning on coming with her husband. The weasel who didn't deserve her and didn't love her even a tenth of what Kirill did.

And to prove it, the jackass had slept with their wedding planner on the day before the actual event. Another man, no less. The night the news came, Kirill had bought everyone's dinner in the village restaurant and drinks at the tavern.

"She's here," Danill said. He stood, swept a hand through his head of thick silver hair, checked for creases in his pants and took a deep breath.

The slam of a car door narrowed Kirill's world to a very small black tunnel and then he remembered to breathe. Everything would be fine now. Nicola had arrived and soon she would be his.

Light gleamed off every surface of the house, from the two towers to the wide windows of the conservatory and every brick and pane of glass in between. Her grandfather must have kept the village women hopping to have so much done in such little time.

Reluctance wedged itself in her belly and climbed its way to her throat the closer Nicola drew to the solid wooden door. Why the hell had she come here? Her last memory of the old man had been his face purple with anger, screaming for her parents to never return. Fear of facing the old fart alone scattered her thoughts and buried her courage. But before she could give into her inner coward, the huge oak door swung open to reveal a short man in a nice suit with a wealth of silver hair and twinkling green eyes.

"Privet," she greeted the...butler?...in her stilted Russian. "I am Nicola Luder. I believe my grandfather is expecting me."

The little man said nothing, merely studied her. Feeling her face flame with embarrassment, Nicola was about to try again when the man gave a loud shout of joy and engulfed her in a strong embrace.

"My Nikta, you have come home."

His Nikta? Only her grandfather called her Nikta. This short cheerful, laughing man had her DNA? The same man who used to yell and scream over every small accident in his home? And hadn't he been ten feet tall all those years ago, with nightmare black hair and wickedly cold green eyes?

"Grandfather?" she hesitantly inquired while trying to gently break his superhuman embrace. The man might look like a feather could knock him out but he had a grip that would do a superhero proud.

"Da, it is me. Do I not look fine? I am a very handsome old fart, yes?" The green eyes invited her to laugh with him and so she did, not sure where this man's personality had come from but determined to enjoy it while it lasted.

"You are very handsome, indeed," she agreed while they walked into the great hall.

Nothing had changed in the twenty years Nicola had been away. Gray bricks of limestone quarried locally over two or three hundred years ago made up the walls of the twenty-five foot square room. The ceiling murals were as fanatically religious as she

remembered. With cherubs and warrior angels standing ready to defend Xela from her enemies.

Her heels echoed on the Italian marble and brought with them a flood of memories of happier times. Favorite memories of slipping and sliding over the floor with Kee in their socks or sliding down the banister after the maids had finished with their polishing. Happy and content with each other and their world.

"Come into the library, Nicola. There is a fire to warm your outside and brandy to take care of the inside."

"I'm surprised to see snow on the ground so late in the season," she said trying to fill the silence that grew louder with their passing.

"Last of the stuff until winter or so, the weather people would like you to believe. Me," he said and pointed to his shrunken chest, "I think there will be no more snow only if no more snow falls."

She laughed as expected, finding humor in her grandfather's off-handed way of looking at life.

"I have a guest I would like to you meet as well, granddaughter. A very old family friend who couldn't seem to stay away today of all days." Danill sounded both put out and delighted with the stranger.

Figuring some old crony of Danill's had stopped by to check out the American granddaughter, Nicola plastered a fake smile on her face and stepped into the library.

"Hello, I'm Nicola L—" The rest of the words froze in her throat. Sinful blue eyes caught her own with wicked eroticism.

"Ah my beautiful Nikta, I told you we would meet again." Alexi, her fabulous, well-hung and supposedly unknown lover from last night stepped out from beneath the shadow of her grandfather's artwork and started purposely toward her.

"Oh no! Not you!" Nicola's voice fairly screamed.

“Oh yes, me,” he replied calmly still headed straight for her. “I told you last night wouldn’t be the end of us.”

He looked fantastic. Black trousers encased his long legs. Dark gray sweater, cashmere this time if she guessed right, molded to his chest the way she had last night. He’d shaved this morning and the smooth curve of his strong jaw beckoned to her hand. She planted it firmly in her coat pocket.

“You have seen Nicola?” Danill’s voice broke through the sexual haze overcoming both of them. “You met last night? Why did you not tell me of this, Nicola?” Sharp green eyes questioned her.

“I...” What the hell did she tell her grandfather? That she had been so desperate to prove her worth as a sexual being, she’d jumped on the first hot man who had sat next to her in the hotel bar? Somehow she didn’t think that would put either of them in a favorable light.

“We didn’t get around to discussing last names.”

Alexi.

No. Kirill.

Kirill Simkov – the sneak, hastily spoke into the awkward silence. “She’d wanted to taste a little of our local fruit and I merely helped with her selection.”

“Ahh, this is good. My granddaughter appreciating her heritage, it is as it should be,” he stated proudly while pulling an old worn pipe from his coat pocket and filling it with the ease of years of practice. “This land has been in our family for hundreds of years. We grow our lusteberries with pride and care. We nurture them from tiny seeds until the moment they are gently separated from the vine. All the world knows our lusteberry. They ask for us by name. Our little fruit brings such pleasure to people. This is a good thing, *da?*”

Nicola opened her mouth to say what she didn’t know, but the Russian liar stopped her.

Kirill reached her and blocked Danill from her view. Expertly, he snatched her hands and placed gentle kisses on her knuckles. "I missed waking with you in my arms, Nika." He whispered the words softly, for her ears alone.

"You were supposed to stay in the hotel. Not follow me to my grandfather's house." She tried vainly to jerk her hands away, but Kirill only lifted one black brow at her attempts. "How did you get here so quickly? There were no other cars on the road once I reached —"

"I caught a ride in a helicopter. Saved me some time while I contemplated your punishment for running out on me." Sharp teeth nipped her skin, quickly followed by the heated soothing touch of his tongue to ease the sting.

"You had no right to follow me anywhere, much less to my grandfather's home. Why did he invite you here?" Questions swirled through her mind, images of Kirill giving her grandfather a blow by blow account of their time together.

Just memories of last night caused her cheeks to heat.

Kirill's deep voice from last night as he plunged into her faster and harder. Demanding she take all of him, accept all of him. To her morning-after embarrassment, Nicola had taken everything he had and demanded more.

"I said nothing to Danill of how we spent out time together. I merely mentioned that we had run into each other without a formal introduction." A sinful look darkened his blue eyes. "I could, of course, tell him that you took scandalous advantage of me and I'm here to plead my case."

Nicola huffed out a breath and finally managed to free her hands. "And what case would that be?" she bit out, trying to find a way around him and out of this mess without alerting her grandfather.

"Why, Nicola, I simply want you to make an honest man of me."

Later, she wouldn't be able to explain it but in that instant sending her fist straight into his unprotected stomach sent a thrill of pleasure through her even as her hand came into contact with the wall of his abs.

He didn't even flinch, dammit.

"Say one word and I promise you'll regret it."

"My only regret would be the time it would take me to talk you back into my bed," he whispered in her ear before gently licking the inside rim.

A shiver ran through her body and Nicola felt helpless to stop it or the look of knowledge that flared in Kirill's eyes.

"You could have told me exactly who you were last night." The nerve of the man, thinking she'd just jump right back in bed with him. Of course if he hadn't been the person he was, Nicola might have done just that but trust had become too important to just toss her standards out the window.

"When would I have done that, Nika? When you had your tongue in my mouth or my cock down your throat?" The heated words caressed her skin in oh so many pleasant ways.

"Just like when you were children, always together whispering, talking and making plans that no one could be included in." Danill's happy voice cut through their tension, releasing Nicola from Kirill's memorizing stare.

"Just telling Kirill that I came here to see you and not to catch up on childhood memories," Nicola informed her grandfather and stepped around the tight hard body of her once-upon-a-time playmate.

"Ahh, but what is a better time to reminisce than in the place of your childhood?" Danill asked while he settled into a comfortably worn leather armchair. "As much as I would like to monopolize all your time, Nicola, I am an old man now and I need my naps." He threw a charming smile her way. "Would you be terribly upset if Kirill took you around for the afternoon?"

Watching her grandfather hide a large yawn, she felt bad for taking him out of his normal daily routine but hell, the man had invited her here. Shouldn't he want to spend more time with her? "Grandfather —"

"No," the older man stirred himself enough to interrupt. "I am Papa. This is what you used to call me when you were a little girl. You remember?"

Nicola couldn't help but smile at the memory. "Yes, Papa, I remember."

The way he smiled made her glad she'd made the trip. No matter what the fight had been about, her grandfather's actions and words said that he was happy to see her.

"I don't need a guided tour. I remember more than I thought from all the summers we used to spend here. Besides I want to go upstairs, get settled, change and go exploring in the fruit fields, if that's okay with you?"

"*Da*, I would love for you to see the fruit in bloom. Such pride a man can take from working the land and seeing the fruits," he laughed lightly at his own pun, "of his labor. But you must take Kirill with you. He knows the fields better than anyone. Besides, you two used to spend so much time in the other's pockets. I am sure Kirill would enjoy seeing more of you."

"More of her is exactly what I'd like to see." Kirill agreed too quickly and loudly for Nicola's comfort.

"Make your Papa happy and say you'll spend the day with me." The devil shot her a million-watt smile no woman under eighty and over five would be able to resist.

"Fine," Nicola gave in less than graciously. "Grab my bag and point me in the direction of my room. I'll change and meet you down here in an hour." Maybe in that amount of time, she'd find a way to distance herself from Kirill's overwhelming sexuality and the memories his smell and touch invoked.

"You will stay in your old room." Danill informed her as his eyes drifted shut. "Kirill said it would be good to remind you how happy times were here."

"Thank you, Papa." Nicola said and crossed the room to press a kiss on the top of his head. "I'll see you when I get back."

"We'll see you when we get back," Kirill corrected before walking out of the room.

"Have a good nap, Papa." Nicola spoke softly then quickly followed her personal demon. She'd show him exactly how grown-up she'd become. No one ran over her and got away with it.

Any more.

The man had lied to her and used her all for some sick purpose of his own. He might think they were going to kiss and make up but Nicola had news for him. Last night had been a one-time thing or rather one-night thing.

It had done exactly what she'd needed. Reaffirmed her sexual desirability with the opposite sex. Case closed, mission accomplished. That's the only thing she needed Kirill for and now she was done with him. If only she could get her traitorous body to believe that as well.

Kirill's heavy step on the marble gave her a beacon to follow. She remembered exactly where her old room was of course. Up the stairs, second door on the right. Would the décor be the same? Her *babushka* had decorated it for her when she was little. Paintings of the wildflowers that grew on the mountains graced the gleaming white walls trimmed in the purple of the lusteberry. White lace curtains matched the canopy on a bed bigger than her apartment in the states. How she'd loved to bounce up and down on the bed with Kee when they'd been children. He'd always refused at first, telling her he was too grown up and mature to play a child's game. But in the end, Kee had jumped and bounced on the big bed with her, if only to make her happy.

He was no longer Kee the boy she'd played with so long ago.

Now he was Kirill in every sense of his name's meaning. He was a ruler. Ruler of her body. Her desires and quite possibly her heart if she'd let him.

No!

"What thoughts bring such a beautiful flush to your face?" He'd stopped at the bottom of the stairs her suitcase in his large hand.

"How I'm going to murder you for not telling me who you were last night."

"Would it have mattered? To you I was Alexi, dark mysterious lover. Now I am Kirill, the man who would have you again."

She scoffed. "Your arrogance is amazing. It wouldn't have mattered at all if I'd known who you were last night. I wanted a hot steamy stranger. I got what I wanted. What makes you possibly think I'm going to let it happen again?"

"This." With the gentleness of a dove, he tipped her chin up and kissed her. A soft brushing of his lips against hers. No tongue, no predatory animal. A kiss so sweet and tender it made her knees weak.

Nicola reached up and stroked his cheek as she ran her tongue over the seam of his lips asking for entrance.

He didn't give it but kept the kiss soft and slow.

No doubt about it, the man knew how to kiss. Nicola's brain took another vacation until a snoring sound echoing through the hall brought her back to reality. She pulled away with a jerk of her head.

"I'd hardly think my grandfather would appreciate your taking advantage of me on my first day here."

Kirill's deep laugh sent a thrill up her spine. "You'd be surprised. But you are correct, we should take this to a more private arena."

They continued up the steps to her door.

"I'm not some lion to be tamed by you, gladiator."

"We'll see, my kitten." He opened the door.

Nicola preceded him in and tossed her trench coat over the chair by the door. Her skirt and sweater were wool and kept her warm during the unpredictable early spring weather. Her knee-high leather boots did the same for her legs.

She gazed around her room. It was the same but there were differences. The white canopy bed and lace curtains were still there but instead of the white child-size furniture of her youth, light maple bureaux flanked the large hearth with a matching

dressing table near the double windows. She walked to them and looked out over the gardens her *babushka* had carefully tended during her life. *Baba* had died when Nicola was nine. Her grief was inconsolable. Kee had been the only one to reach her.

Speak of the devil.

She didn't need to run to know he stood behind her. His hands felt heavy on her shoulders as he nuzzled her hair.

"This is where you belong, Nika."

In his arms? In this land? Everything was a mess and she'd no idea how to fix her life.

"I'm not part of this world anymore, Kirill. I haven't been for a long time."

"What happened between your mother and grandfather?" He rubbed his thumbs up and down the back of her neck easing the tension there.

"I'm sure the town gossips have a few theories." The wind picked up outside and rattled the glass panes.

"They do but I want to hear it from you."

She moved to the end of the bed and sat. "It was about me. When my mother moved to the States and married my father she became completely anglicized. She didn't speak Russian anymore, which is why I can barely speak it. Didn't cook Lexovian foods anymore. Dressed as a Westerner. Even stopped going to church. When I was born, she was determined for me to be as American as possible. The three months during the summers was the only time she'd agree to let me come here."

Kirill sat next to her. "Go on."

"The summer I was twelve, Papa told my mother he wanted me to come and live with him. I'd shown interest in the family business and history. He wanted me to go to school here and learn about being Lexovian. To learn my heritage. Mom went through the roof. I was American and would not live in some backwoods country farming

berries for the rest of my life. How convenient for her not to remember that she'd lived a pretty good life in this palace for her first seventeen years.

"Papa told her she was betraying her heritage and blood by not allowing me to live here. He called her ungrateful for all the things he'd done to ensure she'd had a good life and told her to never return. She never did."

"I missed you a great deal when you didn't come back the next year." The sincerity in his eyes nearly undid her heart.

"It was a stupid petty feud. Both too stubborn to admit the other was partially right. I could be American and Lexovian."

"Wars have been fought for much less," he said.

"True. But at least there's peace now. When Papa sent for my mother asking her to visit to deal with a private family matter, she was more than willing to come. However, she'd just started recovering from a long illness and asked me if I'd come in her stead. So here I am."

"I am glad you're here, Nika."

She smiled. "Me too. Despite your treachery last night."

"You are not going to forget that are you?"

"Not likely."

"Perhaps I can help."

He leaned over her and brought them both down on the bed. His lips covered hers, his tongue licking her full bottom lip.

Oh God, this man was potent and completely dangerous to her mental health. Her arms wrapped around his neck and held him closer. Their tongues tangled in a deeply passionate kiss.

The hard length of his erection pressed against her hip. Even their clothes couldn't disguise the heat emanating from his body.

That heat soaked into her as he pushed his hand under her sweater and cupped a breast. He fondled her nipple, teasing it to a hard peak. His motions set fire to her core and moisture pooled readying her for him.

Nicola never stopped kissing him. Light teasing nips, long languorous strokes of her tongue and the intoxicating pressure of her lips on his made him drunk with need.

He was going to make love to her. Kirill rained kisses along her jaw and down her neck. Nuzzling the place where her pulse beat strong and fast in time with his.

Kirill pulled back, needing to look into her eyes, to see the passion in them, to know she wanted this as much as he. To know that, come tomorrow, it wouldn't be a mistake in her eyes.

Nicola opened her vibrant green eyes and whispered, "Please, Kirill, make love to me." She reached a hand behind his head, running her long fingers through his hair and gripping tightly so she could drag his lips down to meet her eager hot mouth.

He kissed Nicola until he couldn't breathe, then kissed her again. Leaving her mouth with a tiny nip on her plump bottom lip, he trailed kisses down her soft neck and lifted her sweater to reveal her generous breasts. He sucked one, taking the darkened nipple into the heat of his mouth drawing deep then gently biting down—hard enough to have her moaning from desire but not pain. He cradled the weight of one breast in his hand while nibbling on the sweetness of the other. Instinct guided him. He knew exactly how and where to touch her.

His hand smoothed down her tummy and hiked her skirt up. With unerring accuracy he found her clit and rubbed her through the silk of her soaked panties.

"You are wet for me, Nika."

He marveled at the silky texture of her skin.

Kirill brought his mouth back to Nicola's, his tongue insistently, demanding her compliance. His finger separated her dew-wet lips. She was ready and he simply couldn't wait any longer to be inside her, surrounded by her body's own honey.

Their clothes came off in a rush of passion and desire. Clothes flew across the room and the sound of material rending echoed over their heavy breathing.

Kirill continued to nibble along her neck, one hand stroking her breast as he carefully moved between her parted thighs. He thanked God for the spare condom kept handy in his wallet. Within seconds he'd covered himself and reached down to guide himself into Nicola's moist heat. His penis jerked at the first touch of her body. He wanted so badly to lose himself inside her and never stop but he couldn't. She was so damn tight and he didn't want to risk hurting her.

Gently, he eased the tip of his cock into her, whispering soothing words against her delicate ear.

She stiffened and she gasped. Her feet planted on the mattress canting her hips up to take him at the perfect angle. Kirill's body shuddered in pleasure when Nika's nails dug into his back.

He tried desperately to regain control before thrusting all the way inside. He counted to ten, then twenty and was on his way to thirty when he felt her inner walls relax and allow him entrance.

That was all it took.

"You can take me, Nicola. You took every last inch of me last night, remember? It felt so good. You wrapped around me like a tight wet fist. I wanted to come the minute I got inside you." He panted as he pushed himself into her, inch by inch. Once seated to the hilt, her muscles contracted and grasped him. Kirill pulled out slowly, enjoying the friction as her body resisted releasing him. His was ready to explode at the feel of her tightening around him.

Zings of sensation coursed through Nicola's blood as he played with her clit and continued to kiss and nip at her ears and neck.

Oh God. She'd never have enough of this man. "I want to touch you."

He stayed her hand. "No. This is for you. Let me love you."

Love? He wanted to love her?

As though a bucket of ice had been splashed over her, Nicola's passion went from sixty to zero in no time flat.

"I'm not here for love, Kirill. I've had enough of love and want nothing to do with it."

Pushing him off her, she stood and dragged her coat around her hiding her flushed body from his gaze. "I think you'd better go."

"What has frightened you?" He gathered his pants and hastily put them back on.

Spine straight, Nicola walked to the door and opened it. "Nothing frightens me any more. Please leave."

He walked to her. "Your grandfather entrusted you to my care this afternoon. Would you disappoint him?"

"Fine. Meet me outside in an hour. I find myself in need of a shower."

Kirill's chuckle only served to anger her. "A cold one?"

She slammed the door behind him and an unladylike snort escaped her. "Not fucking likely."

Before heading to the bathroom, Nicola swore she heard him say, "Gladiator one, lion zero."

Chapter Three

Lust in Translation

The sun had managed to break through the thick snow clouds so the ground sparkled like a jewel covered blanket.

Nicola took a deep breath of the fresh mountain air, shoved her hands in her jeans pockets and marveled over the quality difference from her home in Southern California. Everything here smelled fresh and new with none of the harsher smells she'd become accustomed to.

"You look right here," Kirill said to her. She glanced over at him. His dark hair shone with raven black highlights in the shining light, his blue eyes held hers in a calm steady way that had her heart racing.

After the incident in her bedroom, she expected to feel awkward in his presence instead she felt tranquil even with her blood running hot. No matter what else Kirill had done to her, Nicola knew her body would never be in any danger from him. Her mind and heart, on the other hand, were entirely a different matter.

"Why are you doing this?" Maybe she should have waited for a better time or at least until they were out of range from the house but now that the question had been asked she wanted, desperately, to hear the answer.

"I told you last night things weren't over between us. I meant it then just as much as I do now." Brownie points for him, she thought. He didn't pretend to not understand the question nor did he try to play at avoiding it. Still it hadn't answered the why of it all.

"Yes, I remember you saying something along those lines." The wind pushed a stand of hair into her eyes but before she could lift her own arm, his hand removed the hair and tucked it gently behind her ears. The gesture spoke so much of what kind of

man he was. Kind, gentle, passionate about things and people he cared about. The type of man she should have been engaged to.

Water under the bridge, she reminded herself and refocused on getting some answers from her stalwart guide. "But why do you want to be here? Is it for the sex? Because as amazing as last night was, there's really not a chance of it happening again." Good, her voice sounded firm and in control, not like her weak and shaky knees.

His palm cupped her cheek, bringing her eyes to meet his serious gaze. "I fully intend to make love with you again and soon. But no, you are right, it is not all about the sex. We are both attractive people and could find other partners to fulfill whatever bodily desires we might have. "

Just the thought of Kirill having another woman in his arms or worse taking his thick luscious perfect cock into her mouth made Nicola's fists clench. He must have noticed the action because he took her hands into his own callused grip and gave them a sweet kiss.

"However," he continued and tugged her down the lane all the while keeping a firm but gentle hold on one of her hands, "that doesn't mean the thought of another man touching the softness of your skin or tasting the sweetness of your breasts doesn't drive me insane with jealousy. I can't even allow my mind to form a picture of another man's cock sinking deep into the wet paradise of your body. I find I am quite a possessive man when it comes to you, Nicola. I've never felt so...like a caveman, I suppose. I want to drag you off to my lair and let no one or nothing come near you. I want to keep you dripping wet and panting in passion for me and me alone."

"Too bad kidnapping is illegal in all civilized countries," she said ignoring the thrill that raced through her veins at his admission. What would it be like to belong to a man as strong and passionate as Kirill? Some day some lucky unknown woman would find out and Nicola hoped she wouldn't be around to scratch the lucky paragon's eyes out.

"I suppose if a man were determined enough, he could find ways that did not involve the authorities. But that is neither here nor there. You've asked why I've come

here to the home of your Papa. To pursue you after you told me, plainly, that I wasn't worth more than a one-night stand. Is this correct?"

Had it sounded that cheap and demeaning when I said it? Nicola wondered, and cringed at the real possibility that it had.

"So here is your answer in just as plain language. I want you. I want you for more than one night, for more than one day, for more than even a year or two. I want the next eternity and possibly the one after that as well. I want to claim you in every way a man can claim a woman. My scent on your skin, my mark on your body and my ring on your finger."

Everything he said caught her by surprise but the last part truly shocked her. Nicola's feet stumbled as her mind repeated his softly spoken but determined words.

"Stunned you, have I?" Kirill said righting her before taking her hand once more and entwining their fingers. He pointed to the scenery she'd largely ignored since they'd started out. "You see how far and wide your Papa has grown his lusteberry bushes. His is the largest such farm in the country. He could export the fruit to various countries and make more money than he could spend in a dozen lifetimes yet he does not. He says for the fruit to remain true to itself and its flavor it must be tended to carefully in its home soil where everything is safe and familiar. Only when the fruit grows round and its coloring turns a deep silvery purple is it time to reap the rewards."

The conversation had drifted so far off her map Nicola needed a GPS to track it. What did her Papa's fruit have to do with Kirill and his declarations?

"You are wondering why I am babbling about fruit when I've just revealed my heart to you. But I see in you parts of this luscious yet rare fruit. I knew if I pursued you when we were younger you would never fully bloom to the woman you've become. So, when I came of age, I didn't follow you. You needed to ripen and age with grace and beauty but now you've come back. Here to this country and to me, and this time, Nicola, I don't intend to let you go." The last part came out rough—almost as rough and demanding as his lips as they swooped down to capture hers.

He didn't ask permission, he took what he wanted and led her wherever he wished. Nicola followed without question. She let her body rule and silenced her mind's objections. There would be time later to sort out Kirill's confusing words but for now his actions meshed perfectly with her own desires.

Kirill wanted to shout with possessive joy as Nicola's tongue tangled with his own. He heard her soft whimper of pleasure and pulled her body tightly to his aching groin. This is how it should have always been for them, her body wanting and needing his as desperately as he'd always needed hers.

Their childhood friendship had grown to a crush and if they'd stayed in contact, he was sure it would have blossomed into young love then passion. As it was, every time he saw a new photo of Nika as she grew into the beautiful woman she'd become, his feelings grew.

This was what he'd been praying for and waiting on for years and dreaming of. Nicola wrapped safely in his arms, wanting him with a passion that matched his own. He used one hand to pull her hips tighter against his, while the other tunneled into the sleek thick mass of her hair to change the angle of the kiss. Wanting to taste her deeper and harder, wanting to take the very essence of Nicola into his soul.

When one of her small hands snuck under his thick sweater, Kirill's mind raced for the quickest place to take them to. Damn, he needed to be in his woman now. He wanted to feel her hot wet walls squeezing around his cock as she milked the seed from his body.

The part of his mind not busy enjoying the flavor of Nicola's mouth and skin was engaged in plotting the quickest course to the drying shack located about a quarter of a mile from their current position.

Decision made, he lifted his head just in time to spot an intruder resting against a pole fifteen feet away. Swiftly Kirill broke their connection and shoved Nicola safely behind him.

"Who the hell are you?" he barked, pissed that his immediate plans with his future, albeit unknowing wife, had been postponed.

"I'm the lady's groom," the stranger announced without a hint of jealousy.

"Jeremy!" Nicola squeaked out from somewhere over his shoulder.

Jeremy sent her a lazy salute. "Hello, love. I see you've been busy sampling the local delights."

He felt, more than heard, Nicola's indrawn breath. When she tried to shove her way past him, Kirill simply hooked an arm around her waist and anchored her to him.

"I'm surprised to see you here. Last I heard, you were doing more than sampling the delights of the wedding planner. A male wedding planner if I remember correctly," Kirill tossed back at the other man. Might as well let him know two could play this word game. What the other man didn't know was that Kirill played for keeps. And nothing in his world was more important than Nicola.

He watched as Nicola's former husband-to-be turned red in the face. Tanned arms, from the summer months, clenched at his sides. Kirill prayed the fool would take a swing, anything to give him the chance to beat the living hell out of the idiot for hurting his woman.

Then again maybe he should thank the fool. If Jeremy hadn't gotten busy with the wedding planner, regardless of sexual orientation, then Nicola would have come here on her honeymoon rather than as a single traveler.

"Whatever happened in the past is none of your business," Jeremy stated haughtily. "It concerns Nicola and myself. Butt out."

"Whatever involves Nicola has my complete attention," Kirill shot back as the woman in question stomped down on his instep and jerked out of his hold.

"Both of you can quit talking about me like I'm not here." She stood firmly in the path between the two men, looking beautiful and furious. The sun shone down gleaming in her brown hair. She looked like a well satisfied woman. "Put your clubs

down and come out of the caves. This is a new century and a female has the right to speak her mind. Jeremy, shut up."

Kirill's laughter cut short when Hurricane Nicola turned on him. "Kirill, you stay out of this. Go back to the house. I'll meet you there and we can finish our discussion."

Every Y chromosome Kirill possessed screamed, shouted and yelled a big "Hell no!" but he knew his woman and he knew Nicola would handle this in her own way and her own time without his permission. To refuse her would simply allow the idiot who had been her groom more time with her. If Kirill gave in gracefully and bowed to her wishes, Nicola would hopefully see the difference between the two men.

The main difference being that Kirill would never deny Nicola anything she desired, even if it meant her spending time with the man she'd almost made the mistake of marrying.

"It wasn't much in the nature of a discussion," he said evenly as he closed the distance between them. "More like a very good game to play for the next fifty or sixty years."

"Kirill." Her green eyes shot daggers.

"Nicola."

Then he whipped his arms around her to remind her of one of the million ways he could and would love her. "Just remember," he whispered in her ear, "I'm here. I'll always be here for you. You have the power to set my body on fire with just a look. With a laugh you manage to ease my burdens and at the softest touch of your skin against mine, I know I belong I waited patiently for you until you were finally ready to come and claim me? You've had my heart and soul from the time I was thirteen, Nicola, all that's left is to claim my name."

He gave her another swift but satisfyingly deep kiss before releasing her and, whistling, made his way around Jeremy and back toward the house.

* * * * *

Nicola heard Kirill's happy tune and shook her head. The man didn't take anything seriously. He'd actually left her alone with the man who, up until two days ago she'd planned on spending the rest of her life with.

True, Kirill could always circle back around and eavesdrop but the boy she'd known, and the man she was just coming to know, would never do it. The gesture lacked honor and everything about Kirill shouted honor.

So here she was, standing ten feet away from Jeremy. The man who'd, if not broken her heart, at least destroyed her pride and self-confidence as a woman.

"Why are you here, Jeremy?" The question came out tired and impatient. Which was just as well because she felt both. Nicola wanted Jeremy gone and Kirill back.

The man had told her he loved her and wanted to marry her. That he'd loved her for years and had only been waiting for her to return. What did that mean? If she had come back last year, two years ago, even ten years ago would he have wanted her then? Would she have accepted him?

Her heart screamed, "Yes!" but her mind shied away from the commitment. After all, Kirill could have changed in the last twenty years. Then again, her heart chimed in, hadn't she changed, grown up and grown into herself? But at the core, she was still the same basic person she'd been as a child. She still held the same convictions and truths about right and wrong, good and bad. Maybe that's what Kirill had been talking about. By not giving into his feelings before now, Nicola had the chance to grow up and discover herself, limitations and all.

A fully grown adult female who knew who and what she wanted. Maybe twenty-four hours wasn't the best time limit to base a lifetime of commitment on but she'd known Jeremy three years and look how that had turned out. Besides, didn't she already know the core of Kirill? The boy she'd played with had held the same beliefs as she'd had.

The way he'd acted with her grandfather showed his compassion and respect for the elderly. The way the villagers spoke of him, for now she knew the mystery man

they'd all tried not to gossip about around her. A man who would not only take care of himself but everyone around with a smile, defiantly deserved a chance.

Fingers snapping in front of her face pulled Nicola away from her thoughts.

"Are you even listening to me, Nikki?"

She hated that nickname. Always had. Why had she ever let Jeremy get away with calling her that? For that matter why was she still here standing in the berry path with a man not good enough to clean shit off Kirill's boots?

"Go away, Jeremy. There's nothing left to say to each other. I think actions speak louder than words and your actions clearly screamed 'Not ready to commit'." She shoved away from him and started after Kirill and to her future.

"Damn it, Nikki, I didn't come all this way to be blown off by you and some local yokel." He stopped in front of her, arms spread wide. "At least let me explain, please."

Nicola stopped and looked into his eyes. Weak hazel eyes that always looked around for the next step or the next opportunity. Never satisfied with what he had, Jeremy always wanted more, better.

"Whatever excuse you've come up with I'm really not interested. I didn't ask you to fly halfway around the world. If you'd bothered to call, I would have told you to save yourself the trip. It's over. We're over. Now get out of my way. I've got a man to see about a name change."

Before she got around him, Jeremy grabbed her arm and swung her to face him again. "Nikki, I—"

"Stop calling me that. I've always hated that name yet you still use it. My name is Nicola. Use it if you ever want a chance of speaking with me again."

"Nicola, I'm sorry. Would you at least let me tell you that I'm so sorry for the pain I caused you. Ryan meant nothing to me. I smoked some weed to relax before the wedding then had a few drinks. Before I knew what had happened you were in the room and...." His voice trailed off as they both remembered the scene.

"What can I say?" she asked him in a cold voice. "I'm not into threesomes." And pushed past him.

"I don't want him. That was a mistake. It will never happen again, Nik—Nicola. I swear." His voice reached her as she put on a burst of speed anxious to see Kirill again.

"Don't you get it," she yelled over her shoulder, "I couldn't care less if you fucked the entire state of New Mexico, men and women. We are done. I don't love you and I have serious doubts that I ever did. I do, however, love the man waiting at that big house on the hill for me, so if you don't mind, I'd like to get back to him."

"You're dumping me for some local stud?" Amazement colored his voice. "What the hell do you expect to live on? Berries and love? Please, Nicola, be reasonable, he can't give you the life you've become accustomed to, the life I can provide for you with ease."

When she didn't reply and made no move to stop, he continued like a roach that wouldn't die after it had been stepped on. "What about your family, Nicola? Have you thought of them at all? Are you really willing to live here in the back of beyond, away from everyone who knows or loves you?"

"Nicola has family here. The ones in the States are more than welcome here anytime and they know that. Or at least they will as soon as Danill gets off the phone with Nicola's parents." Kirill's voice rang out ahead of her and Nicola put on a burst of speed.

She raced out of the path and straight into Kee's arms. He wrapped them tightly around her like he never wanted to let her go. The feeling was completely mutual.

"Papa is really calling Mom and Dad?" she asked amazed. Her grandfather had cut off all communication twenty years ago after their argument. For him to call now either meant he was dying or someone else close to her was.

"Relax, Nika, he merely called to apologize for a silly fight twenty years ago. He plans to ask them to fly over in the next few weeks to make amends in person."

Happiness filled her at his words. After twenty years her mother would finally speak to her father.

"Do you think they'll come?" she asked, almost afraid to hope.

"Your Papa is a wily old man. It was one of the reasons he invented the emergency for you to come here. He wanted to make his apologizes in person to at least one family member. Do you think your parents will accept?"

She shrugged her shoulders too happy to care if Jeremy had come up behind them. "As you said it was a silly fight, why would they care now? I bet they'll be on the first flight they can manage once Mother gets the okay from her doctors. Oh I can't wait for you to meet them again."

"Neither can I, as it is only proper I ask their permission to marry their beloved daughter." He kissed with such sincerity she felt her whole body soak up his love and passion.

"Shouldn't you ask me the question first before them? I might say no, you know?" she teased him while gently nipping at his lips.

"Ah, but you see I have only so much honor and found I could not leave you alone with such a person for too long. I'm afraid I heard a bit more on the path than you would have liked." His blue eyes blazed with love and desire making Nicola's knees weak and her thighs dampen.

"Heard all that did you?"

"Enough to know that man would never have made you happy."

"And you think you can?"

"Without a doubt and if ever I need any help I can always slip a few lusteberries in your food. We both know how you react to your ancestor's aphrodisiac." A slight tilt of her hips had Nicola's whole body panting with lust. The man calmly stood here and discussed family feuds and wedding plans all the while sporting a hard-on that would kill a lesser man.

"Think we can sneak past Papa for some pre-parental celebration?" she asked shifting her hips tighter against his erection.

Kirill sucked in a deep breath. "I'll ensure it."

"Good, let's go." She released her grip on his waist, grabbed his hand and turned to go but stopped in her tracks when Kirill failed to follow. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "Nothing, Nika, only a few things I must set straight with your previous suitor."

"Is it really worth it?" she demanded, not wanting to waste a second on Jeremy when they could already be in the house and that much closer to Kirill being inside her.

Seeming to read her thought, Kirill's eyes darkened with desire. "If nothing else, Nika, this man once cared for you. I would like to provide him with a measure of security on your behalf."

"So not necessary." Nicola protested again while her eyes couldn't help but drift to the very impressive bulge pushing out the zipper of his jeans.

"Temptress!" he teased before turning serious eyes on Jeremy who had stood quietly through their whole encounter. "You asked about Nicola's welfare in my care. While I can understand, and even to a point appreciate your concern, let me lay your fears to rest. I can and will provide Nicola with whatever she needs. Money, power and position are all hers for the asking. She has but to desire something and it will be given."

Nicola wanted to protest. Anything she needed or wanted could and had been provided by her. She didn't make millions working in the family company but she made enough to provide frills if she wanted them. One look on Kirill's face shut her mouth.

"How?" Jeremy demanded sounded firm but looking unsure. "How can you provide Nikk—Nicola with material wealth and everything else she may need? While tourism may be hot in some parts of this god-forsaken country, it's certainly not here."

"I am the Grand Duke Kirill Simkov. I have family money, money I've earned, titles and lands that go beyond what your mind could comprehend. If Nicola wanted to buy a house in the country and servants to furnish it, we would still be able to live a life of comfort."

Shit, Nicola had forgotten about the title and the money. Kirill's family had never made a production out of either so neither had she. Funny how something so important to most people had slipped to inconsequential in her own mind.

"Is he telling the truth?" Jeremy almost stammered the question.

"Yes, I guess he is. I forgot about that."

"How could you forget something like a royal title?" Jeremy demanded.

"When did your father die?" Nicola ignored the pest and asked Kirill, almost at once realizing what had happened.

"Three years ago, love, and yes I've learned to live with the loss. He was a great man and I miss him daily but I was lucky to have him as long as I did." Kirill used their joined hands to pull her close and they shared a tender kiss of understanding.

"Let's go home and make your grandfather the second happiest man in the world."

"Take me home, Kee," she agreed and together they walked away from her past and into their future.

"Ya l'ublu' Va, Kirill."

"I love you too, Nika."

"You were always my Kee, you know. The key to my heart."

About the Author

Kat Alexis is the brainchild of best friends and multi-published authors Eve Savage and Allie Standifer.

Born in a bar on a cool February evening in New Orleans, Kat emerged as the perfect combination of Allie's flair for dialogue and storytelling and Eve's love of sensuality and strong characters.

Together with the bent sense of humor they share and an obsession with all things paranormal, Kat is definitely unique.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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