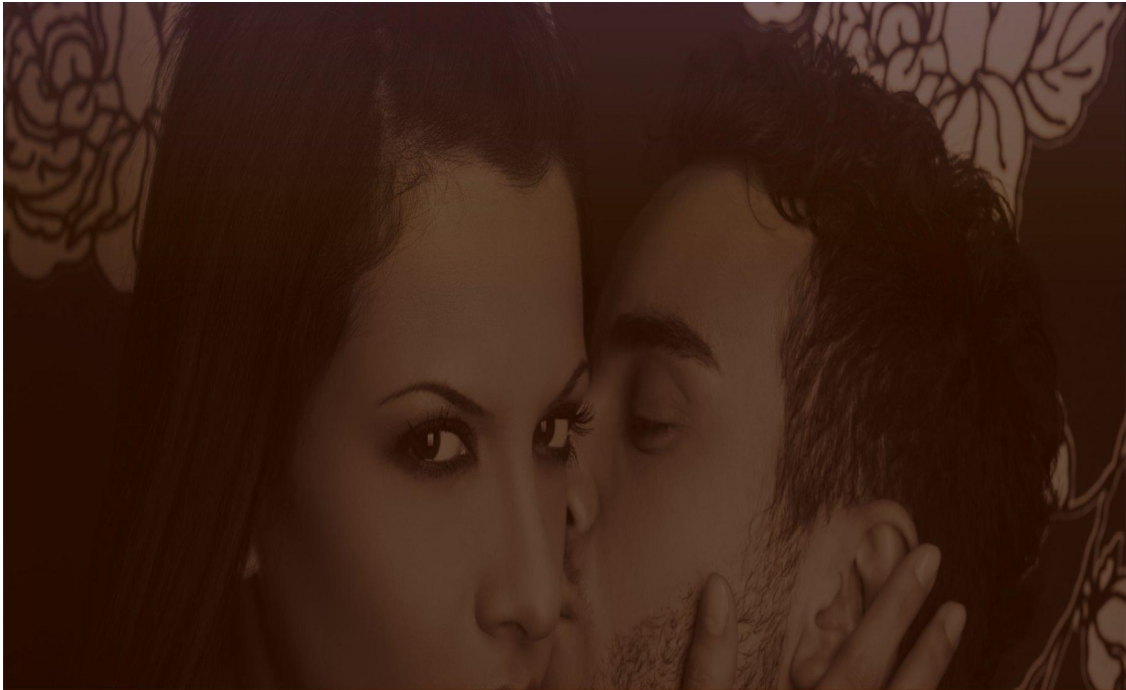




Brawich's Way

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A Trescott Cove Novel



Brawich's Way

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A Satin Notes Free Novel

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Dedication

To our fans who have supported us. We give you this free read in appreciation for all your support.

Aliyah, McKenna and Taige

Chapter One

The house stood out like an oasis. At least that's the way it seemed to Nicola Holland as she pulled into the driveway. She turned off her car and took a deep breath. She knew Trescott Cove very well and usually didn't have a problem finding an address; yet this time, even with the precise directions she had been given, she had gotten lost a few times on the winding and twisting roads. She glanced at her watch and noticed it was almost three hours since she'd left her office. To get here should have only taken half an hour or less.

Narrowing her eyes, she glared at the beautiful large townhouse style house. If it wasn't for the stubbornness of the occupant, she would never have had to make this trip. Nicola grabbed her bag, opened the car door, and got out. With a glance, she took in the mountains that separated Savoy Valley from Trescott Cove. It was a breathtaking backdrop to the house, making it seem almost mystical. Shaking off her fanciful thoughts, she started up the walkway, glancing around at the nicely decorated gardens.

With quick steps, she went up the stairs to the front door and pressed the bell. Tapping her foot, she waited. After a few moments, she touched the bell again. No one answered.

"It figures," Nicola said.

She looked around at the seemingly deserted area. Turning back to the door, she put her hand up, shading her eyes to try to peer through the stained glass. Seeing nothing, she stepped back and debated what to do. Reaching out for the doorknob, she tried it. Surprised, she felt it give. Pushing the door open, she stepped inside, then closed the door behind her.

"Hello?" she called.

Receiving no answer, she walked deeper into the house. Nicola glanced at the staircase that led up, but bypassed it, instead continuing on the ground floor. She whistled at the sight of the well equipped kitchen. Envy filled her. She loved to cook,

but her kitchen didn't have the space for her to fill it out like this one. She wandered around, admiring the marble counter tops, stainless steel appliances, and various gadgets that would make any chef do a happy dance. Trailing her hand over the oven built into the wall, she resisted the urge to open it.

"I don't know if I should be jealous of the way you're petting the oven, or ask you, 'Goldilocks, are you lost?'" a deep baritone asked with a tinge of amusement in the tone.

Nicola jerked her hand away and tried not to feel guilty about just walking in. Drawing on the arrogance she was known for, she turned to face the voice. She stifled a gasp as she took in the devastatingly sexy man leaning against the kitchen doorway. The man smiled, a warm grin that made his whiskey eyes twinkle invitingly. His blond hair ranged from dark golden brown to pale gold. It reminded her of the coat of a tabby cat with all the various brown colors. His hair curled in charming disarray, falling to his shoulders and framing a craggy face. A strong masculine forehead, full nose, sharp cheeks, firm jaw, and full, kissable lips all came together in a rough, rugged look that was irresistible. She continued her study, taking in his lean, lanky frame. The gray tee-shirt hugged his broad chest and trim waist. The loose, dark blue soft-looking pants didn't hide the muscles of his long legs.

He was wiping his hands on a towel. She followed the movements of his long fingers. Finished, he put the towel over a shoulder. He studied her with the same thoroughness she had studied him. Nicola smiled, slightly amused. The man met her eyes again, and his smile widened. He stood away from the doorframe and came toward her. She bit her lip, holding back a whimper. His walk made her think of pure, raw sexuality. It was all there in his lazy saunter. She was used to sizing up people as she met them. This man was confident, arrogant, and knew what he wanted. For a woman like her, who was similar, it was an aphrodisiac. He stopped a hairsbreadth from her. The scent of turpentine and man filled her. It was strangely arousing.

"So Goldilocks, are you lost, or just here to molest my appliances?" he asked.

“What can I say? I can’t resist your appliances.” Nicola looked at him, then deliberately reached out and stroked the front of the oven again.

The man laughed, a rich, sexy sound. She stilled her shiver. His lids dropped to half mast, shielding his whiskey gaze. He licked his lips. She followed the movement and held in a whimper. Her mouth ached to taste his. She would stroke her tongue into his mouth and taste all of him.

Pull it together. You’re here on business. At that thought, Nicola snapped out of the lustful haze that had come over her.

“You’re a hard man to get a hold of, Brawich.”

“Call me Bradford. If I’d known such a beautiful woman was looking for me, I would have made myself available.” He raised an eyebrow.

“Does that really work on women?” She studied him up and down.

There was even more amusement on Bradford “Brawich” Chadwick’s face. He rocked back on his heels and shrugged his shoulders.

“I wouldn’t know, since I usually don’t even have to try.”

“I dislike arrogant men.”

He shook his head. “Not arrogance,” he said. “Just confidence. There’s a fine line between the two. It would be arrogant if I was to just kiss you without asking. On the other hand, it’s confidence if I tell you that I’m going to kiss you, and then I do.”

Wetness flooded her pussy, but Nicola refused to let him see what she was feeling. She kept her face blank.

“And it would be *my* confident arrogance when I slap you for doing either one.” She raised an eyebrow.

He laughed putting up his hands. “I’m just giving you an example of why they’re different.”

“Yeah right.”

“So, Goldilocks, what’re you doing in my house?” He let his hands fall to his sides.

"I'm not Goldilocks." Nicola flicked her fingers at the edge of her kinky raven hair that was in a braid down her back.

"I'm not talking about your hair color," he replied.

"You better not be talking about my skin tone." She narrowed her eyes.

"Why not? It's like caramel. Looks sweet and probably tastes sweet, too. I happen to be real fond of caramel." His eyes twinkled devilishly.

She wasn't sure if he was joking or not. Nicola tried to remember what she knew or had heard about Bradford "Brawich" Chadwick. Trescott Cove had a few artists in a variety of mediums who resided there. They also had actors and actresses, singers, writers, and numerous well-known entertainment figures. Since most were born here or had lived here so long, the residents tended to leave them alone and treat them like everyone else. Brawich was known as a recluse. He did socialize, but it was on such rare occasions it was noteworthy when he did.

When the residents talked about him, it was with respect and fondness for his eccentric ways. It was the same tone they used when discussing Quinn "Adrian" Chadwick, Brawich's brother, a famous singer who also lived on the mountain that separated Savoy from Trescott. They even mentioned Dakota Willis, another artist who was antisocial, with the same fond regard. Dakota lived closer to the base of the mountain area that separated Savoy from Trescott. Nicola had met Dakota and even visited her home on occasion. She had never met either of the Chadwick brothers, although she handled their extensive investment portfolios. She had initially gotten them as clients on the recommendation of her friend William Chadwick, who was also a client. She also handled investments for the rest of their siblings--Ryker, Connor, and Dancia.

When she had decided to open her own company almost two years earlier, all of the Chadwick's, including William and his brothers Chad and Robert, had come with her. It had surprised her and her partner, Kylie Jordan, how many of their clients had come with them when they opened NK Investments. One of the things they had done when they started the company was meet personally with each of the clients to assure

them and go over their portfolios. At least, that was what they had planned. She and Kylie each had clients that they hadn't met. Kylie was having trouble meeting with Dillon McGee. Since he was moving to Trescott soon, Kylie planned to make sure he wouldn't continue to put her off.

In Nicola's case, since she hadn't met either Quinn or Bradford, she had been excited to finally talk with them face to face instead of by email or through assistants. Although Quinn, with his busy touring schedule, was hard to pin down, she had succeeded in meeting with him. But her attempts to meet with Brawich had all been thwarted.

She had finally had to ask, then threaten, Camilla Maxwell for directions to his house. It had taken her months to convince Cami. She remembered Cami laughing when she had finally given up the address, and after the winding trip, Nicola now knew why. Cami hadn't expected her to find it. She made a mental note to have a chat with Cami soon, then focused back on Bradford.

"Too much candy will rot your teeth." She bared her teeth.

"It's all according to how you eat it. I like to savor it, nice and slow." His voice deepened.

Nicola knew they were not talking about candy, but she refused to be drawn into whatever he was doing. She stiffened and glared at him.

"I'm here on business, Mister Chadwick. I've been trying to get you to come and review your portfolio."

Surprise flashed on his face, and then he smiled again. "Ah, Nicola Holland."

"Yes. So you *have* been told I've been trying to get in touch with you."

"Yes. I've gotten your numerous messages, but as my assistant has advised you, and I've told you by email, I've been busy."

"All I need is an hour of your time. That isn't a whole lot. Instead, I've been getting the run around from your assistant, and emails from you, all of which, in my opinion, are stalling tactics." She tapped her foot. "My time is valuable. Today, instead

of being in the office working, I had to take a trip that took me *over three hours* to get here, just to impart to you how important it is for us to meet to go over your portfolio."

"Three hours? Why the hell did it take you three hours to get here?" The disbelief was clear in his tone.

"In case you didn't notice, you live in no man's land. It would take a hell of a tracker, some dogs, and maybe a shaman's blessing to find this place. Instead, I had directions, without which I probably would have ended up someplace in Savoy Valley."

"You had directions. *Really.*"

"Yes." She spit the word out.

He laughed long and hard. Tears of mirth rolled down his face. He wiped them and looked at her, shaking his head.

"Whoever gave them to you was messing with you. The directions you probably got were those I usually give to someone who I don't want to find me. Somebody like a tourist wanting to meet the artist or someone I dislike. Who gave you the directions?"

"Camilla Maxwell." Nicola remembered her laughing face.

"*Cami.* She knows the right way to get to my house."

The familiar fond way he said her name made her grit her teeth. She clenched her fist.

"What did you do to piss her off?" Bradford bit his lip, trying not to laugh.

"Nothing yet. But ask me in a few days," Nicola retorted.

"Oh boy. I wouldn't like to be on the receiving end of what that look promises. I'm afraid to even ask what you have planned."

"Plausible deniability is best in this case." She smiled fiercely.

"In that case, I don't want to know. " He paused, and then his look went heated.

"So, when do you want me, Miss Nicola Holland?"

Now! Strip down and let me have you. She blinked as images of them going at it filled her mind. *Christ, Nicola. You have better control than this. Snap out of it!*

“Ne-“ She cleared her throat, then tried again. “You know what, Mister Chadwick? Call my office and make an appointment.” She stepped around him and went to the door.

“Nicola? Don’t you want to know how to get back to Trescott without taking three hours?”

She could tell he was trying not to laugh. Nicola stopped, turned, and refused to ask. Bradford strolled over to her and stopped just before her. He rattled off directions that were so much simpler than the ones she had been given. She envisioned punching Cami’s face. Even as she thought it, she knew she had to plan something real special to pay Cami back.

“Thanks,” she said grudgingly, starting to turn away.

“I’ll see you at ten o’clock tomorrow morning,” Bradford said conversationally.

“What?” She stopped and looked at him.

“For my appointment.” He smiled sweetly.

“You don’t have an appointment for tomorrow.”

“I do now.” He countered in a tone that brooked no argument.

“Suppose I have another appointment at that time?” Nicola glared at him.

“You’ll reschedule it.” He shrugged.

“Arrogance is unbecoming.”

“Confidence. And since you have problems understanding the difference, let me demonstrate. I’m going to kiss you.” He reached for her and pulled her into his body.

Nicola gasped. His mouth covered hers. She stiffened and went to push him away. She hesitated. His tongue swept into her mouth, tangling with hers. It was an almost tentative foray instead of the aggression she had expected. It confused her. He murmured and licked along the sides of her mouth while his lips moved on hers. Nicola’s knees went weak at the mastery of his kiss. Bradford made a hungry sound, then deepened the kiss. He kissed her ravenously, his arms holding her against his strong muscular body. He pulled back and let her go. She wobbled. He reached out and steadied her on her feet. Nicola drew in a deep breath, then looked at him.

"That was confidence." His whiskey gaze was smoldering.

"And this is confident arrogance." She replied.

She slapped him, turned, and walked away.

"See you tomorrow, *sladjik dikobaz* !" Bradford called.

"You have a fondness for weird names. That one doesn't even make sense," she said.

Nicola continued through the open door of the kitchen to the hall. She could hear his footsteps behind her.

"It does if you speak Russian," he responded.

She bit her bottom lips as she reached the front door. She didn't want to ask yet the curiosity was tempting her. Finally she gave in.

"What does it mean?"

"Figure it out," he replied.

She could sense him close to her back. Opening the door, she stepped back and shuddered as she brushed against him. He didn't move away. Instead, he stepped closer, molding his frame against her back. The hard length of his shaft pressed against her ass. Nicola locked her knees, refusing to let him know how he affected her.

"Until tomorrow, *sladjik dikobaz*." His breath heated the side of her face.

Stiffening, she stepped away and out the door.

"Don't be late, Mister Chadwick," she snapped.

"We can do away with the formalities, Nicola. It's Bradford." He chuckled.

"My time is valuable, so don't be late," she reiterated.

"I look forward to seeing you, *sladjik dikobaz* ."

"Stop calling me whatever it is you're saying. I don't know what whatever you're calling me means, but from the way you're saying it, I know it isn't appropriate."

"Ah, *sladjik dikobaz* , you have no idea." He laughed again.

Stiffening, Nicola went down the stairs, his laughter trailing after her. She pressed her car alarm and opened the door. Throwing her bag into the passenger seat, she got in and closed the door. Starting the car, she glanced back to the door of the

house. Bradford was leaning against the open doorway, watching her. He waved. She jerked her gaze away from him and drove away.

As she went the opposite way from where she had originally come, Nicola tried to get herself under control. Less than a half an hour later, she pulled up to the guard booth for Caspain Towers North, Number 3.

“Good morning, Nicola,” Michelle Stevens, the guard currently on duty, said as she buzzed her through.

“Hey, Mic,” Nicola said absently.

“They delivered the last of the furniture for your offices earlier this morning,” Michelle said.

“Oh, good. I’m glad it’s finally done,” Nicola replied.

“You and Kylie both.” Michelle laughed.

Nicola joined her. She honked her horn and drove on. As she continued through the parking area at the back part of the base for Caspain Towers North, Number 3, Nicola smiled. A few months ago, she and Kylie had bought this office space. Since opening NK Investments, they had grown. They’d had to hire more people and needed the space. Now, they were not only building owners, but had inherited other businesses who rented from them. They also had some empty spaces they were looking to rent out.

The timing of their move had worked out well because Cerberus Associates, who they rented from previously in Caspain Towers North, Number 2, was also expanding. Cerberus Associates had merged and was now called Cerebus Eclipse. The old Cerebus Associates was now housed in Caspain Towers North, Number 1 and 2. NK Investments owned Number 3, and Number 4 was owned by the law firm of Montgomery, Gilmore, McCoy, and Montgomery. Caspain Towers South had J&R Construction in their building Number 1, while Numbers 2, 3, and 4 were owned by Cerberus Eclipse and housed the old Eclipse divisions.

Nicola pulled into her parking space and noticed that the one next to her, which was for Kylie, was empty. She breathed a sigh of relief. If Kylie was in, she would ask

her how her meeting went, and Nicola didn't want to discuss it. Not yet. She needed time to figure it out herself. She picked up her bag and got out of the car. As she walked to the elevator, she thought of the rest of the Caspain Towers on the other end of the complex.

All four buildings in Caspain Towers East was owned by Artisan Architectural & Design. She knew Robert Chadwick was a partner in the well-known firm. All four buildings in Caspain Towers West were owned by Renegade, William Chadwick's company. A CEO ran the day to day things on William's behalf. Although the last time she spoke with William, he had started spending more time in his own company now that Chad had started to take more interest in the family business, Chadwick Pharmaceuticals.

She frowned as her thoughts of William led her back to his cousin, Bradford "Brawich" Chadwick. Pressing the button for the elevator, she stepped in as it came immediately. As the elevator rose to her floor, she still couldn't believe he had kissed her. She raised her hand to her mouth. Jerking it away as the elevator opened, she strode off. She made her way to her office. As she passed the outer office where Madison Jones, her assistant, usually sat, she was glad Madison was away from her desk. Knowing her assistant, she would know something was wrong and would want to know what. And Nicola didn't have any answers. Closing her office door behind her, she leaned against it.

Bradford had thrown her with his charisma. She straightened and strode to her desk. Nicola put her bag down and looked at the beautiful view outside the window.

"Bradford will learn that I do things my way. And nothing stands in my path." She smiled wickedly.

Going around her desk, she sat and pulled out his file. As she read through it, she plotted how she would handle what he called his "confidence."

Bradford watched the taillights of Nicola Holland's car disappear from view down his driveway. He rubbed his stinging cheek. Nicola was a pleasant surprise. He

had thought when he met Camilla Maxwell that she was a spitfire. But next to Nicola, Cami paled in comparison. He could tell why the two ladies were friends. Since he didn't go to town often, he hadn't met Nicola. And he had been too busy for her demands of a meeting to go over his portfolio. She might think he was just avoiding her, but it was true. He had been preparing for a show.

He worked in a variety of art forms, and usually when he had showing, it took him more than a year to get pieces he wanted to show ready. The last of the pieces he was showing had been taken to Moore Gallery yesterday. He had decided a little over a year ago to make Moore Gallery and the one run by Mika Kendrick in Savoy Valley the exclusive galleries for his new work. He still had very few pieces in a few places that were not sold yet, but he was through with traveling for showing. His need to stay close to home wasn't his only reason for choosing Moore Gallery and Mika's gallery for all his future showings. The reputation of Moore Gallery and the owner, Moore Blade, was impeccable. And anyone in the art world knew of Mika Kendrick. She was fierce, proud, and damn good at what she did.

When he was trying to pick one and having a hard time at deciding between the two, he had called them both to his house and told them his dilemma. They had looked at each other and told him to give them an hour to figure out what they would do. He had left them to it and went back to work. In less than the time they stated, they had come up with a proposal to share his works between the two galleries. They would rotate the pieces between the two exhibit spaces. They didn't stop there. They also promised to work with each other, sharing contacts and so on, to help make the showings their galleries a success. He knew that Mika was probably with Moore right now, deciding where to hang or put his pieces for optimum viewing. He had gone by yesterday, and after an hour of their combined brilliance, he'd left, knowing his work was in good hands.

Bradford looked after Nicola's car that was now out of view. She had caught him at a good time. He was between projects at the moment. He shifted, trying to ease the pressure of his pants on his cock. He could still remember the first primal reaction he'd

had to the raven-haired woman. Her back had been to him. He had clenched his fist to resist touching her braid that fell between her shoulder blades to rest just before her full ass. The edge of the braid curled just over the swell of her ass where he wanted to touch. Her hips made his mouth water.

When she turned to him, the exotic tilt of her dark brown eyes through her stylish gold glasses captured him. There was intelligence, confidence, and an assurance that made her even more endearing. Her honey skin seemed to glow with vitality. The carved cheeks, full nose, and suckable lips completed the enticing package. She had raised her chin, and although she was trespassing, she acted as if she owned the place.

If he hadn't been studying her so closely, he would have missed the slight hitch in her breath when she looked at him. He had returned the favor, and she had smiled, an amused grin that made his cock stir. She presented an unruffled exterior, and he could tell she missed nothing. As she traded banter with him, his attraction had grown. He appreciated a woman who could hold her own and didn't take crap from anyone. He brought his hand down to his lips. It had been an impulse to kiss her, and he couldn't bring himself to regret it. Her sweet taste still filled his tongue. The slap he had been expecting, since she'd warned him. But even that wouldn't have stopped him. He stood, stepped back, and closed the door.

Whistling, he went over to the phone. He dialed a number. It rang once, then went to voice mail. He grimaced. He hated leaving messages.

"Hey, William. I'll be close to your office tomorrow, so meet me for lunch at Blue Moon Café. Oh, yeah. Bring those brothers of yours too, so we can catch up. If you can't make it, call me back and leave a message. I'm going to be working. If I don't hear from you, see you at about twelve or so. "

He hung up and walked down the hall. He passed the kitchen, formal dining room, family room, and his office. He went to the closed door and opened it. Striding into his massive studio that covered the entire back of the house, he glanced toward where he kept his finished pieces. It was partially empty, since he had the showing

coming up and he had sent the pieces he felt worked for the theme he was going for. Looking away, he went over to his molding clay. He sat and started to work.

Hours later, he stretched and groaned. Bradford lifted what he had been working on. The look of passion on Nicola's face after he kissed her, and that slight almost sway of her body, was depicted perfectly in the clay figure he had done of her entire frame. Carefully, he set it down to set.

"Hmmm... I'll cast it in gold, then brush it with bronze."

He stood and rolled his head to loosen the tense muscles. A broad smile curled his lips as he looked down at the figure of Nicola. He would make it his mission to make her have that look on her face often. He turned and strode to the door of his studio. Bradford knew he had a lot of convincing to do, but he was looking forward to it. After all, he had the confidence to see it through. He chuckled as he remembered the look on her face when he told her it was confidence. In time, she would come to realize it was, and then she would see things his way.

He was used to going after what he wanted, and he usually got it. Nicola Holland might have other plans, but she had piqued his interest, and he wasn't a man to back down from a challenge. And that was what she was. An endearing *sladjik dikobaz*. He chuckled as he strode down the hall, back the way he had come earlier. Reaching the stairs, he stopped.

"*Sladjik dikobaz*," He laughed again. "I wonder what she will do when she figures out *sladjik dikobaz* means sweet porcupine. I can't wait to find out."

Whistling, he went up the stairs quickly, already planning his next meeting with his *sladjik dikobaz*.

Chapter Two

Nicola glanced at the glass clock on her desk. It was almost ten o'clock. She twirled her pencil between her fingers. Bradford might have thought she was kidding about not being late, but she was dead serious. Putting down the pencil, she rubbed the back of her neck. She had stayed up late making sure she had all Bradford's details for his portfolio. Although she would never admit the truth out loud, she would have been finished much earlier if she hadn't kept thinking of their meeting. Bradford Chadwick had gotten under her skin. Nicola slammed her hand down on her desk. She couldn't allow him to get any deeper.

Keep it business.

"Good morning, *sladjij dikobaz*." His deep voice swept over her like a naughty caress.

"Stop calling me that," she snapped. "Thanks, Tori." She acknowledged the front receptionist who had escorted Bradford in.

"You're welcome, Nicola," Tori replied, and went back out the door.

Her assistant was working on a special project, so Nicola had asked Tori to show Bradford in. She finally glanced at him. Nicola stifled her groan. Bradford strolled toward her in that lazy saunter that made her want to jump him. She had only seen it once, but it was tempting her to want to do all manner of sin. His casual, open-necked button down chocolate brown shirt and slacks complemented his eyes and skin. He grinned, a wicked curve of his lips.

"Ah, *sladjij dikobaz*. I've been looking forward to seeing you again." He walked around her desk and took a seat on the edge close to where she sat.

"Really? Who would have known you would be so excited about your portfolio? After all, it took me over a year to actually get you to come in," she stated drily.

"I'd apologize for it, but it's useless now." He shrugged.

"True. Let's get started." Nicola stood from behind her desk.

In a moment, she decided to walk past him instead of going the other way. She would not let him have the satisfaction of thinking she would go out of her way to avoid him. As she stepped toward him, Bradford stood. She stilled a shiver as she felt the heat of his body and his sexy scent reached her. His eyelids lowered, partially shielding his whiskey eyes. Nicola met his gaze and moved past him. Her fists clenched as her body brushed his. She relaxed her fists as she got by him.

“I have your information set up over here.”

Striding toward the small conference table, Nicola gestured to the chair for him to sit. Bradford shook his head, then pulled out her chair. Following his silent offer, she sat in the chair. He seated her, then went over to his own chair.

“These are all your current investments. You can read through or I can tell you what we have,” she stated.

“I’ll read through,” he answered.

“Okay. I’ll be back. Note any questions you have.” She stood and went out the door.

Knowing it would take him a little bit to read through the files, she checked in with her other investment managers. Approximately fifteen minutes later, she returned to her office. She entered and paused, studying Bradford’s bent head. He was still reading. Suddenly, he looked up. She blinked at the soft smile that curled his lips. She walked toward him. He stood and held her chair again. She sat, and then he returned to his seat. Bradford closed the file, clasped his hands, and rested them against it.

“Any questions?” she asked.

“Yes. But first—you’re making me even more money. I knew you were, but seeing this made me realize something.”

“What?” She looked at him suspiciously.

“You are very good at what you do, *sladjik dikobaz*.”

Nicola lowered her gaze, not wanting him to see how much his quiet statement filled her with pleasure.

Instead, she asked, “What does *sladjik dikobaz* mean?”

"Figure it out." He laughed.

She glared at him. "I know it's something that would probably piss me off."

"Ah, *sladkij dikoba*, it's a term of affection," he said.

"You don't have right to use it, then."

"I will," he replied.

The certainty in his tone made her stiffen.

"Arrogance again."

"Confidence. Do I need to refresh your memory?"

His silky reply caused her mind to flash to their kiss.

"What are your questions?" She changed the subject.

He chuckled, then started to ask his questions. Stunned at his pointed and knowledgeable queries, Nicola answered. They talked about his investments and what he wanted. She mentioned her plans and, although he didn't agree with all her suggestions, he showed a savvy view that impressed her. She took notes as they spoke. Her watch made a discreet beep, and Nicola glanced at the time. Shocked, she realized the two hours she had set aside for the meeting were almost done. They had only fifteen minutes to wrap things up.

"Email me with the information on the companies you think I should invest in. I'll look them over and let you know which I think would work." Bradford stood.

She stood to join him. He put out his hand. Nicola put hers out. Bradford closed his hand over hers. His gaze was steady. He stroked his finger against her palm. She narrowed her eyes, then gripped his hand hard. Bradford laughed and released her hand.

"I look forward to seeing more of you, *sladkij dikoba*."

"We've discussed all we need to. We can go back to emails," she stated.

"Business. We've discussed business, but we still have a lot to discuss about our private matters."

The sensual promise in his voice made Nicola's pulse speed up and her nipples pebble.

"We have nothing to discuss, Bradford, except business," she replied.

"There's a lot for us to discuss. I'll be getting in touch soon." There was a warning in his tone.

He reached up and cupped her cheek. Nicola's eyes narrowed.

"And when I do, be prepared. I get what I go after, Nicola," he stated.

"Arrogance," she snapped, jerking her head back from his touch.

"Confidence. I'll be speaking with you soon, Nicola."

Bradford lowered his hand and strode across the office. He looked back at her, smiled, then walked out the door, disappearing from view. Nicola shuddered and swore. Bradford was a draw she could not afford. She tended to avoid entanglements that she knew would be messy. One look at Bradford and she knew anything with him would be one big messy complication she did not need.

Don't forget pleasurable and probably worth every messy moment.

She ignored her inner voice, went back to her desk, and sat on her chair. Looking off into space, she murmured, "What is *sladjij dikobaz*?"

"Sweet porcupine," a voice filled with mirth replied. "I can see the porcupine part, but who the hell thinks you're sweet? I so need to call the guys in white coats for them."

"Screw you," Nicola replied, glaring.

"Sorry, but you are so not my type." The caramel-skinned woman leaned against the doorframe, her arms crossed over her chest.

"Is there a reason you're pestering me, Rayne?" Nicola sighed.

"Not really," she replied, her startling blue eyes twinkling. They were surrounded by thick lashes.

Nicola sighed loudly and rolled her eyes. Rayne Willis laughed and strode into her office. She moved with an effortless grace and confidence. Even if you didn't know she was related to the Willis clan by the way she moved, her eye color and features would make you know it. All the Willises had blue eyes, and against their skin tones, which ranged from café-au-lait to dark honey, the effect was captivating. Although the

Willises had similar features, there were slight differences--like more lines around eyes, fuller lips, and so on--that made each member of the family distinctive. When she had first met them, Nicola was drawn in by their looking so much alike. The sharp angles of smooth forehead, high sculptured cheeks, aristocratic nose, full lips, and rounded chin were put together in a perfect blend. On the women in the Willis family, it was beautiful, vixenish, and sensual. On the men, it seemed rugged, rakish and sexy.

Rayne came around Nicola's desk and took a seat in the same spot where Bradford had sat. She glanced around.

"I came by to check out your new digs. Was that Bradford I saw leaving?" she asked.

Nicola's fist clenched at the familiarity with which Rayne said his name. She slowly unclenched it, reminding herself that Rayne would know Bradford and be very familiar with him.

"What do you think? Yep, that was Bradford."

"From what I saw, it looks great. I'm so happy it worked out." Rayne looked around, then back at Nicola. "I'm sure you're pleased you finally got him to come in for a meeting. If I had time, I'd go and say hi to Bradford."

"At his house? You know how to get there?" she frowned.

"No, not at his house. But yes, I know how to get there. Don't you?"

"I didn't. I got some directions, but they sucked."

"Oh boy. I know that look. Who's going to be taught not to piss off the Holland?"

"Cami," Nicola purred.

"Oh. Well then, go ahead, and if you need help, let me know." Rayne chuckled.

"I'll keep you in mind."

Rayne nodded and looked at her watch. "Maybe I can squeeze in a moment to see Bradford."

"Where?" Nicola asked, confused.

"At Blue Moon Café," she replied. "William drove over with me. He's having lunch downstairs with Bradford, Chad, and Robert."

Nicola smiled at the mention of the Chadwick men. “How’s William treating you?”

Rayne rolled her eyes. “I have to get used to having him around, now that he’s cutting back on his time at Chadwick Pharmaceuticals and spending more time at Renegade. Thankfully, he’s not one of those bosses who micro manage.”

Nicola laughed. “Like you’d let him.”

“True. William knows that I would leave as Renegade’s CEO in a minute if he started getting all controlling. We have a good working relationship. He and his crew do their projects, and I run the rest of Renegade.” Rayne chuckled.

Nicola joined her. She knew all Rayne said was true. She and Rayne were good friends, and she had seen firsthand some of their arguments. When Rayne first became the CEO of Renegade about eight years ago, Nicola had visited a few times. Sometimes, she also had to meet with William concerning his investment portfolio. She had heard them disagreeing about something or the other. If Rayne didn’t agree with him, she’d let William know it. Since Rayne was so good at what she did, he usually shook his head, laughed, and let her have her way.

The first time he’d said no, Rayne had threatened to walk out, and William had countered that she was free to go. Since Rayne didn’t bluff, she left. The employees of the company still kept contacting her, and she sent them to William. William refused to back down also and sent them back to Rayne. Then finally showed up at her house. They had come to a compromise: William would run his own projects, but the rest of Renegade’s decisions were left to Rayne’s discretion, or they would put it to a vote among the two of them and the three vice presidents. Majority ruled. The only reason Nicola knew this was she had been at Rayne’s house when William showed up, and he had asked her to stay. After that, they had solved any issues that arose that way.

“At least it works.”

“Yep, it does. So, who’s calling you sweet porcupine?”

Nicola blinked, realizing what Rayne had said earlier. “*Sladkij dikobaz means sweet porcupine.*”

"Yes."

Nicola narrowed her eyes at the laughter in her tone. Rayne put up her hands, as if saying "easy."

"Hey, I didn't call you that. Heck, I still disagree with the 'sweet'."

Nicola smacked her on the arm. Rayne laughed and rubbed her arm.

"Don't bruise the merchandise. Are you going to tell me who's calling you sweet porcupine?"

"Bradford." Nicola leaned back in her chair.

Rayne raised an eyebrow. "Really? You must have made a heck of an impression on him. I want details."

"He's arrogant."

"Arrogant? I don't see it. Confident. Now that I would use to describe Bradford," Rayne replied.

"Oh God. He has you snowed on that confident thing."

"What are you talking about?" Rayne looked confused.

Nicola shook her head. "Forget it."

Rayne gave her a look. "Okay. So give me details."

"T-"

Rayne's cell rang. "Shoot. Let me get that." She stood and picked up the phone.

"Willis. What? I'll be right there." Rayne hung up and glanced at Nicola.

"I've got to go. I want details later. Call me."

"Nosy."

"You know it. Don't make me have to come looking for you." Rayne chuckled.

"Later."

Nicola stood and hugged her. Rayne left. Walking over to the window of her office, Nicola looked outside.

Sweet porcupine. What a term of endearment. She pushed thoughts of Bradford away and went back to her desk. Opening a file, Nicola got to work.

Bradford sat at a table in the back of the spacious dining area of the Blue Moon Café. He frowned when William walked in. His attention was caught by the two men with him. The men were like yin and yang. Symond LaPalia was as pale as Barkin Quinn was dark. The two men, both over six-foot-four, were an intimidating sight, yet they were greeted warmly by people in the café, as was William. The men had lived in Trescott Cove for over ten years. They had come as friends of William's, but stayed on. William said something to the men, then turned, making his way toward Bradford. Symond and Barkin went to a table across the café.

Bradford stifled a laugh as the women's heads turned to follow William's progress across the café. He shook his head. William arrived at the table.

"How does it feel to be so adored?" he teased.

"Don't make me hurt you," William replied in a cool tone.

He liked to call it the "mess with me and pay the price" voice. It didn't work on Bradford at all.

"It's like you're a rock star or something."

"I'll leave that up to Quinn. I like the sedate life."

"That's a word I would never use to describe you." Bradford laughed.

William flashed a wicked grin. "Even I don't buy it."

"Why are you walking with Symond and Barkin?"

William shrugged. "Nothing. Just caution."

"Where's your third?" he asked.

"Ziva's been in Europe, and she's on a plane on her way back as we speak."

William sounded fond.

"At least she'd pretty up the place," Bradford replied.

"Don't let her hear you say that. She might hurt you." William laughed.

"Nah, Ziva likes me," he replied.

"True," William agreed and looked around casually.

Bradford didn't let the anxiety he felt show. As far as he knew, very few people in Trescott were aware that Symond, Barkin, and Ziva Jackson did more than work for

William. The only thing William would admit to Bradford is that they were for his personal protection. He would not tell him from what.

William retuned his attention to Bradford. "Cumquat."

Bradford straightened from his lazy pose. It was the code term William had told him. It was the word Bradford was to use if he needed help, or if William or one of those he told him to trust used it, a warning to be on guard. Against what, Bradford wasn't sure, but he knew not to question it.

More than ten years ago, when he was having a show in New York, Bradford had found out from his aunt that William was also in town. He had gone to look him up and walked into something that, to this day, he could not explain. The sight of William with a gun was etched in his memory. William had said, in his soft tone, to get down, then proceeded to shoot everyone in the room. William had grabbed Bradford, and they had run. They had been met as they ran by people he found out later were Symond, Barkin, and Ziva. William had left Bradford on the curb somewhere in New York that he hadn't recognized. He had warned him not to tell anyone what he had seen, or that William had been there. Then he and the others had left, just moments before a car rolled up.

Men had gotten out and put Bradford in the car. He was shocked to see two men from their hometown--Ulrich Willis and Marcus Carmichael--who he knew were New York City cops. They had all grown up together, but Bradford had no idea what they were into. When he questioned them, no one would give him answer.

They had driven him to a house and left him there. Men had come, and he had been grilled about what he knew. He didn't mention William or the others. Since he didn't know anything, he couldn't tell them anything. Hours later, they had let him go. He had gone back to his hotel confused. When he had called William's cell, he'd gotten no answer. When his show was over, he had returned to Trescott. A few weeks later, William had come by to see him and explained the little he could.

William was in a line of work that skirted the thin line between law and crime. Now that Bradford had been there, he had to learn to protect himself, just in case. When

he had asked William which side of the line was he more on, William had given him a fathomless look and said it was better he not know. Since Bradford trusted him implicitly, he hadn't asked him anything else. But after what he had seen, Bradford knew that all those mysterious trips William took, going all over the world, were more than any of the family knew.

William had given Bradford a code word, and then set about training him. Bradford now knew more about weapons and hand to hand than he ever thought he would need. Not only did William train him, but Symond, Barkin, and Ziva did, as well. Even Dominique and Hunter had helped. Although Ulrich and William didn't broadcast it, they were very close and met at Bradford's house often to train him and hang out. Ulrich had come back to Trescott not too long after their meeting in New York. He had taken over as the head of the police force. Marcus Carmichael, who still worked in New York, and whose brother Rafael was on the police force with Ulrich, flew in to his private air strip and had a hand in Bradford's training, too.

Shortly after what Bradford had seen in New York, William's trips had stopped. William had opened Renegade, and the others had joined the staff too. Bradford knew it wasn't a coincidence, but could never get William to admit it had anything to do with the incident in New York. Even though it had been years, William still made sure Bradford's training was up to date.

"I'll be careful," Bradford said to William.

"Good. Remember, if you can't find me, contact them"--he motioned to Symond and Barkin--"or Ziva first." William made a prompting motion.

"And if I can't find them, call Ulrich, Dominique, or Hunter." He listed them in the order William told him to contact for help.

"Ulrich, Marcus, Dominique, or Hunter," William countered.

"Marcus? How can he help me from New York?" Bradford asked.

"He's leaving the force in New York and joining the one here. He's going to be the second in command for the force. So Marcus is coming back to Trescott."

Although he had lots of questions on how William knew, Bradford didn't ask, since he knew from experience that he wouldn't get an answer.

"Okay." He looked at William. "Be careful."

William gave him a small, cold smile. "No worries."

Bradford shivered. William's expression changed to his usual fathomless look.

"Wil-."

"Leave it," William said in a tone brooking no argument.

"Well, imagine my surprise when I got an invite to see someone who I think is my cousin. But since I haven't seen you in a bit, I don't know."

Bradford exchanged a look with William, then looked at the men approaching the table.

"Please. Cami has you on lockdown," Bradford replied.

"Oh, yeah." Robert grinned.

"Get your mind out of the gutter," Chad said, smacking Robert across the head.

"You're just jealous because, with Ariel running around, you and Jem don't have more alone time," Robert countered.

"Who would have thought a 19-month-old would have so much energy," Chad replied as he sat in the chair.

"Get used to it, buddy. The terrible twos are next," Robert said gleefully. He sat next to Chad.

"I wouldn't get so smug. It'll be you soon," Bradford warned.

"Christ. At least let me get Cami down the aisle first," Robert said. He gave a smirk. "Then I'll knock her up."

"Don't let her hear you say that," William warned.

"Could you imagine if she did?" Robert shuddered.

Chad and Bradford joined him. William chuckled. Camilla Maxwell was a formidable woman, and was not to be crossed.

"How're the wedding plan's coming?" Bradford asked.

Robert groaned. "The wedding planning is going to take us as long as it took me to get her to agree to marry me."

"So, I'll make sure to mark my calendar for two years from now," William said solemnly.

"Not funny," Robert growled.

"Who's kidding?" William replied.

The waitress came by, and they stopped talking. They had been here often enough that they knew what they wanted. Bradford gave her his order. As the others gave her their orders, Bradford studied his cousins. Chad looked a little tired, but that was to be expected. He had an active 19-month-old. He and Jem had been married a little over two years and still acted like newlyweds. Robert was teasing Chad. A few weeks ago, Robert had finally gotten Cami to agree to marry him. Since Robert had made his intention to marry her clear, the Chadwick family had run a bet on how long it would take him to convince her. Bradford had lost by two months, but he was happy for Robert. William spoke in his quiet voice. Anxiety filled Bradford. He was concerned about what was going on with William, yet he knew there was nothing he could do. You would think he would be used to it by now. Over the years, there had been a few times William had used their code word. Then, a few days or weeks later, he would tell him it was all clear.

"So what are you doing in town?" Chad asked.

"I had a meeting with Nicola Holland," Bradford said.

"So you finally met with her," William said.

"Does everyone know she's been trying to get a meeting with me?" He glanced at them.

Chad and Robert nodded.

"She met with the rest of us and mentioned she has been trying to meet you," William replied.

"She's intriguing." Bradford thought of her.

A smile curved his lips.

"Uh-oh. I know that look. Run Bradford. Nicola Holland is Cami to the tenth power," Chad warned.

"Hey, Cami has mellowed. She's a pussy cat," Robert defended.

"If Cami is a cat, she'd have some mighty sharp claws," Chad countered.

"True," Robert agreed.

"Nicola isn't that bad." Bradford rubbed his cheek, smiling.

"He is so gone already. All I'll tell you is, Nicola is one of the few people who can match Cami barb for barb."

His smile widened. His *sladkij dikobaz* was sharp tongued, and he liked that.

"Who are the others?" he asked, curious.

"I can only tell you of those who I have seen match her. That's Kylie--Nicola's business partner, Dominique, Hunter, and Mika."

Bradford nodded, knowing all those mentioned.

"She's feisty," he said.

"That she is." William chuckled.

Bradford didn't appreciate the warmth in his tone.

"What do you know about it?" he asked in a silky voice.

William looked at him, raising an eyebrow. "You really don't want to take that tone with me."

"I do." He didn't even hesitate.

"Yep, he's gone. He's already staking his claim." William's lips twitched.

"There's something about her." Bradford grinned sheepishly.

"From one man who has a woman who is a handful, you have my sympathy."

Robert looked at him solemnly, then glanced around. "Don't tell Cami I said that."

They all laughed. The waitress arrived with their food. She set their plates on the table. Suddenly, a trilling sound filled the air.

"God, that's Cami. I hope she doesn't have another wedding detail to discuss to death." Robert flipped open his phone. "Hey Ca-?"

Another ring came, and it sounded like the theme song to *The Little Mermaid*.

"Jem likes it." Chad flushed and took out his phone.

"Hey Jem." He listened, then straightened abruptly. "What?" He looked around them and lowered his voice. "I'll be there in a few." He closed the phone.

"Go there now, Cami." Robert took the phone away from his ear and winced.

Bradford could hear her loud talking, but didn't know what she was saying. After a few seconds Robert put the phone back to his ear.

"Okay. Curse me later. I'll be there." Robert hung up, then sighed. "I'll pay for that later."

Robert looked at Chad. "Jem is on her way."

"No. She's already there. She has seats for all of us. Even you two," Chad said.

"Where?" Bradford had no clue what they were talking about.

Robert leaned close to him and whispered, "The Rivalry is on at Rissablu."

Bradford's eyes widened. He knew what that meant. Darryl Blade, the chef at Rissablu, and Nina, the owner of Blue Moon Café, were competing again to outdo each other.

"The Rivalry can't be on. If it was, in here would empty in moments," Bradford countered.

As he said it, cell phones started ringing. People started answering and standing. Robert and Chad stood.

"If you want to come by, we'll save you a seat. See you there," Chad said.

"Gotta go," Robert said.

He and Chad turned and joined the mass exodus out of Blue Moon Café. After the noise had died down, only Bradford, William, the staff, Symond, and Barkin were left.

"It's been a while since I've been in town for the Rivalry. I forgot how fast people move to get to wherever they are." Bradford shook his head. He looked at William. "Why aren't you running out to join the horde? Even if Jem or Cami gets a table, you know they might not be able to keep your chair vacant."

"I have an in. Nina will make sure I get whatever they're dishing out." William shrugged. "I notice you're not rushing either."

"Since I usually miss it, Danica keeps me supplied with any Rivalry goodies. "

"I still can't convince *your sister* to clue me in on how she knows so fast, and always gets a table, no matter where the Rivalry is."

"My sister, huh? She's your cousin. And if she tells you, let me know. I have no clue."

William looked over at Symond and Barkin. "I'm heading over to Rissablu to check out the entertainment of the Rivalry. " He paused, then grinned. "Then again, maybe the entertainment here will be more interesting."

"Wha-" Bradford turned his head and trailed off.

The sight of the sexy vixen coming toward him left him speechless. Nicola A male back momentarily blocked his view of Nicola's sensual strut. He blinked. His eyes narrowed as William took her hands in his. Bradford hadn't even seen him move. Nicola laughed, and William chuckled. He couldn't hear what they said; they were too far away. William kissed her cheek. Bradford growled. William looked at him, his pale grey eyes amused. He turned and made his way to Symond and Barkin. Nicola looked after them as they left. When the door closed, she returned her attention to him. She continued her sassy strut to him. Reaching his table, she sat next to him. He waited for her to speak.

"Sweet porcupine?"

"Ah, someone told you what it meant. Aren't you sweet, yet prickly?" He smiled.

"In a way," she agreed. "But I can be very sweet."

His cock hardened at her flirtatious tone. He shifted.

"Do tell."

"Hmmm... yes. I've come to a few decisions," she said, watching his mouth.

"We're going to do this my way. I'll pick you up at your house at seven tonight. Wear something sexy." She purred.

"What?" he asked hoarsely.

"For our date tonight," she replied.

"Date?"

"Yes, date. Seven sharp."

"Are you asking me or telling me?" He was captivated by the determined look in her eyes.

"Telling. Since you already made your interest known, no reason to ask." She said softly, "I'm going to kiss you."

Nicola leaned over and pressed her lips to his. Her kiss was thorough, lush, and hot. She left nothing unexplored. She drew back, and her gaze was hungry.

"Seven o'clock," she said, and stood, striding away.

"You don't have to tell me you're kissing me. You can do it anytime," he called.

Nicola stopped and turned, coming back to him. She leaned over until her lips almost touched his.

"I plan to. I wanted to show you that I understood what confidence is." She kissed him again.

Bradford cupped her cheeks and kissed her back. She murmured, then pulled away.

"Seven o'clock. Remember--dress sexy," she said.

She ran a finger down his cheek. Nicola straightened and started to walk away again.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"Kylie is holding a table at Rissablu. The Rivalry is on. See ya later." She proceeded rapidly to the door.

She waved as she left. He watched her until she was out of view. Bradford leaned back and smiled. So Nicola had come to a few decisions and thought it was going to be her way. He picked up his fork and started to eat. He would need his strength to match wits with the spitfire of a woman who had captured all his attention. Nicola might think she was in control, but she would soon learn that it was always Brawich's way.

Chapter Three

Nicola pulled open the door to Rissablu and smiled as all the noise and wonderful smells reached her. Looking around, she spotted many familiar faces as she adjusted her glasses. The Rivalry always had such a huge turnout, for as spectators and tasters, they had no idea what amazing items awaited them. She scanned the room for Kylie and the saved chair which from the looks of things, she really was going to need.

"Hey," a soft voice said beside her.

Turning her head, Nicola met the kind gaze of Jem Chadwick. "Hey yourself."

Jem was a sweet soul, as opposed to her sister, Camilla Maxwell--Cami to most.

"It's really good to see you, Nicola." Jem tipped her head to the right. "She's over there, and Kylie is four tables away from us."

"Thanks, Jem."

"I do what I can," she said with a hint of fire.

Maybe she isn't such a sweet soul after all. Figures she'd know about Cami sending me off with those horrible directions.

"Maybe I will stop by and say hi to Cami." Even Nicola heard the underlying threat in her own tone.

Jem didn't say a word, just headed with single-minded purpose in a direction. Nicola followed her and narrowed her eyes as she saw Cami sitting beside Robert.

"Hello Chad, Robert," she paused, and said on a low thread of venom, "Cami."

The men returned her greeting, but Nicola never took her gaze from the woman who'd sent her on that wild hunt for Bradford Chadwick's house.

Cami looked at her and scanned her from head to foot before one half of her mouth curved up in a mocking smile as she said, "Late as usual, eh Nicola?"

"I was working." She smiled at the rest of the group before moving to stand directly behind Cami. Lowering her head so she could whisper into Cami's ear without being overheard, Nicola murmured, "You've done some shitty things, Cami, but I never

thought you would do something that could jeopardize my career. I'm going to enjoy paying you back for that stunt."

Rising back to her full height, Nicola smiled as she rested her hand on Cami's shoulder, squeezing tightly. The flinch Cami gave made her want to smile. "Enjoy the competition." One final pinch, and she walked to where her business partner had both legs slung over a chair, holding the spot for her. Nicola noticed many people were eyeing the seat.

"Damn, girl. I was wondering where you were. Any longer and I would be fighting people off for this seat," Kylie sassed. Nicola sneered at Kylie and grabbed the back of the chair, dumping Kylie's feet unceremoniously to the floor. Kylie laughed. "That's the thanks I get for risking life and limb to hold this for you?" She tsked.

Nicola stared at her friend and business associate, Kylie Jordan. She had a beautiful peaches and cream complexion, with thick silky hair that looked like she had it infused with gold. Many other investors seemed to overlook them both, not realizing that just because they were pretty, it didn't mean they weren't cutthroat.

"I had to stop by and say hi to Cami," Nicola said with a terse grin as she sat down and placed her gaze upon the raised platform where Darryl Blade and Nina Osborne were showing off their knife skills.

Darryl was going first. Nicola let her gaze travel over his dark brown skin and short hair. She knew he had green eyes, which at the moment were watching what he was doing. He was a great person, and she enjoyed him very much. Darryl was impressive with his ability to wield the cutlery knife, and she applauded with the rest of the room when he finished with a low bow toward Nina.

Nina responded with a regal nod of her head. Her coppery gold hair was gathered in a French twist updo. The white of her shirt offset the dark caramel hue of her skin. Nicola sat forward as Nina began. It was unbelievable to watch her work. Even though Darryl had been cooking longer, Nina's knife wielding ability made his pale in comparison. The blades became a blur as Nina continued to perform for the awestruck crowd. Everyone held their breath as she showcased her ability. Nicola

leaned back in her chair and enjoyed the show. As the cheers and noises from the jam-packed establishment filtered through her ears, Nicola found her thoughts had drifted to Bradford "Brawich" Chadwick.

Wear something sexy. That had been her parting command to him. What could he wear that *wouldn't* be sexy? *Damn man could wear a trash bag and still be sexy.* His attitude only added to his entire sexual appeal.

Arrogant... Nicola shook her head. Confidence is what Brawich called it. *Confidence, hell!*

"What has your attention, Nicola?" Kylie's whispered question broke her concentration.

Knowing better than to admit who truly had it, Nicola lied. "I ran into William Chadwick before I came here. You know how he is," she said with a shrug.

Kylie's golden locks moved with her head nod. "No argument here," she agreed as she reached for her glass and took a sip. Then she added, "I still think you're lying. All the times you've talked about William, I've never seen this look on you. So, lie all you want. I'll find out soon enough."

Nicola snorted. "Delude yourself if you wish."

Kylie leaned closer so they could talk, even while continuing to watch the performance before them. She rattled the ice in her glass before saying, "Funny thing about assistants. They may be loyal, but it's not always the same with their replacements. They do so like to gossip."

Jerking her gaze off Nina, Nicola looked at her friend. Kylie continued to stare ahead. Giving another harrumph, Nicola pushed her glasses further up with her middle finger, then focused again toward the front. Kylie's laughter reached her, but she ignored it. Soon, she was deep into *The Rivalry*, and it took a touch on her thigh to draw her attention away.

Nicola smiled when she looked down into the sparkling eyes of Zora Jameson. "Hey Zora," she said.

"Hey yourself."

Nicola pointed at Zora's hair. "No unusual color today?"

Zora smiled. "Not today, but who knows what tomorrow will hold?" She winked. "Hey, look, I know you're all into the show, so I'll make it quick. We're having a get-together next month. I would love for you to come." Zora looked at Kylie as well. "You too, Kylie. I'll send you both the dates when we get them finalized."

Nicola nodded. "That would be great." Pointing to the front, where it was once again Darryl's turn to be in the spotlight, she asked, "Why are you not up there?"

Zora responded with a husky, amused laugh. "Oh no. This is something I enjoy watching far too much to participate."

Nicola looked behind Zora to see her husband, Chance, waiting for her. The expression on his face was that of a man totally in love and with endless patience. Chance was a very handsome man, but no woman could pull his attention off the one he married. Even so, despite the calmness he portrayed, there was something about him that said "dangerous if provoked." Nicola couldn't explain it, for she'd never even heard him raise his voice. But it was there, more of a subtle aura about him than say, what she felt around William. His friend Taylor McQueen was like that as well. It was almost like you weren't even sure you didn't just imagine it.

With a smile, she nudged Zora. "Enjoy it so much you're leaving early?" she teased.

With a wink, Zora grinned. "Can you blame me?" Nicola shook her head. "Besides, Nicola, it's almost five, and we're having Natalie and her son, Malik, over for dinner. So, see ya. Bye Kylie."

Zora stood and moved back to her husband, who gave her a loving smile. Then he looked in Nicola's direction and nodded once before turning his attention back to his wife. As they moved to the door, Nicola put her focus back on the new challenge unfolding before them.

Almost five. "Ahh, crap," she swore. "I gotta go." Nicola got to her feet.

"Where are you off to?" Kylie questioned.

"I have to go. Have a...a...meeting tonight."

Kylie held her straw between her lips and murmured around it, "Is that what you and Bradford are calling it now?"

Nicola's eyes grew wide. *How the hell did she know?*

This time, Kylie looked at her, mirth all over her face. "Told you." She faced front again. "Assistants talk." One hand waved idly. "Bye. Have a good *meeting*. I'll expect a full report on...erm...the outcome of your meeting tomorrow. I'll be by your office for an update."

Shouldering her purse, Nicola shook her head. *With friends like that...* She wove her way through the crowd to the door and slipped out into the evening. Heading for her car, she smiled as she unlocked it and climbed in, lowering the roof. She loved her car, a BMW M3 convertible in beautiful Le Mans Blue metallic. Soon she was headed for her house, the powerful engine getting her there in a hurry.

Striding through her home, Nicola made her way to her bedroom and quickly into the shower. As she stood beneath the hot pounding spray, Brawich swaggered his arrogant ass to the forefront of her thoughts. Or was it a confident ass? His molten whiskey gaze increased her heart rate and made her long for his company even more than she had seconds before.

Finish the damn shower and you'll be sharing dinner with him, she reprimanded herself. Despite the mental voice, the memory of his kiss lingered, along with the feelings she got when he had her in his arms. Nicola finished her shower, and her skin tingled with a longing she needed to relieve. She padded to her room, towel wrapped around her middle, to prepare for her night.

A small smile filled her features as she finished rubbing her lotion into her skin. It was a combination she only wore on special occasions and this definitely qualified as one. She hoped he appreciated it. A mixture of night-blooming wildflowers, Virginia cedar, Bulgarian rose, and black currant were some of the scents she could identify. It made her feel sexy and sultry just rubbing it into her skin. Once her lotion had dried, Nicola carefully dressed for her night with Brawich.

This time, when she pulled away from her house, the top was up on her vehicle. There was no point in ruining her hair just yet. She pulled into his drive a few moments before seven. Taking a deep breath, Nicola got out of her car and shut the door. Her heels clicked as she moved along the softly lit walkway to the front door.

Definitely a different feel being here at night than during the day. A much more seductive feeling.

One finger reached out and pushed the doorbell. She could see a shadow moving toward the door, and she licked her lips nervously as the handle began to turn. Facing the other way, Nicola prayed for control.

“Good evening, *sladkij dikobaz*,” he crooned in his deep sexual timbre, pulling her head around as if on a silken thread. His head was down, and as it rose to meet her eyes, all she could do was stare.

Bradford “Brawich” Chadwick stood before her, looking better than any man had a right to. Her heart sped up rapidly as her mouth grew dry. Her belly began tightening, and her pussy let her know it was still there too, and needed some attention. His powerful body was clad in a two-button peak lapel tuxedo coat, under which sat a black satin vest, and the bow tie hung loose around his neck. He also wore a pair of single pleat pants.

“Wow,” she managed to mutter.

Sexy was a gross understatement. He oozed sex from his very being.

His whiskey gaze flared as he stared at her, moving from the top of her head down toward her feet and back up again, then once more when she faced him fully. But he still remained silent. Nicola saw his nose flare and his jaw clench. Her eyes focused on his lips as his tongue snuck out to dampen them.

Brawich was at a loss for words. All the blood in his body rushed directly to his cock as he gazed upon Nicola Holland. She stood before him with all the regality of royalty. She wore a black dress that immediately made him think of sex and femme fatales-- darkly alluring women from an age that seemed to be long gone, where you

didn't care if they were going to kill you or kiss you, so long as they graced you with their presence. It hugged her form, highlighting her hourglass shape, and her hair only added to the amazing look. The halter style top made him want to untie the strings and feast upon what lay beneath. The back was a low cut V, with another tie across the middle of her back.

"Cat got your tongue, Bradford?"

He smiled. "Have you seen what I'm looking at?" he asked in a deep voice. "You would lose your tongue, too."

A faint blush filled her cheeks. "Am I at least allowed in?"

"You're always welcome in my home, *sladkij dikobaz*." He stepped back, and she entered.

The scent that wafted from her skin to his nose only increased the pressure in his slacks. He knew she must be wearing tall heels to be so much closer in height to him. His cock throbbed with an insistence that made him want to forget dinner and take her to his bed, where all she'd wear is her high heeled shoes.

"Ready for dinner?" she purred as she walked around him, her hand trailing along his ass.

Brawich spun her so she was between him and the door. Putting his face in hers, he rubbed his cheek along hers. Nipping on her ear, he whispered, "I'm not sure you're ready for all I am when it comes to you, Nicola Holland."

Her lithe body shuddered beneath his, and he pressed closer to her.

"I'm not afraid of what you can dish out. But I am hungry, so if you don't mind..." She trailed off.

Brawich chuckled, but he backed off. "Very well. Let's go eat. You'll need your energy."

"As will you, Brawich," she snapped back immediately.

When she turned to move toward the door, he put out an arm to stop her. "Why am I back to Brawich? I thought I told you to call me Bradford."

Her dark eyes moved from his arm up to his face. He stilled a shiver when one hand trailed up the material of his tuxedo. "I'm sure you get called a lot of things," she murmured.

Moving his lips closer to hers, he nodded. "I do. Doesn't change the fact I told *you* to call me Bradford." He loved the spark of defiance that flared in her eyes.

"And I told you I was ready to eat. So let's go," she said with just as much authority.

"All right. I'll get my car."

Nicola shook her head. "Uh-uh. I'm driving. When I said I'd pick you up, I meant it." He stilled as she reached out and quickly tied his bow tie. "Let's go. We have reservations."

One day, Nicola, you'll realize I much prefer to be in charge.

"Very well, *sladkij dikobaz*. Lead the way."

Brawich held the door for her and followed her sashaying hips down the walkway to her car. He held the driver's door for her before going to the passenger side. He settled back as she whipped the car around and headed for town. The ride flew by in a flash, and he nodded his agreement of her choice when she pulled into the parking lot of Benevuto's.

"Nice choice," he observed.

"I like it here."

They walked inside in silence, his arm settled around her waist. He loved that she didn't argue with him about it. As they made their way to their table, Bradford was torn between growling in anger and preening over the looks Nicola received. He shouldn't really blame them; he couldn't keep his eyes off her either. It shouldn't, but it made him want to lay claim to her.

Back off guys. Nicola Holland is not available.

After they ordered, they ate salad and warm breadsticks. Nicola placed her fork down and took a drink of water. Her gaze met his in the low light of the Italian restaurant.

"Something on your mind, *sladkij dikobaz*?"

Nicola picked up a breadstick and broke it in two. He saw her slight smile as the steam floated up to her nose.

"Tell me something," Nicola said.

"Yes, I'm single," he replied with a wink.

She rolled her eyes. "Not what I wanted to ask. Where'd you learn Russian?"

Bradford ran his tongue over his top teeth. Leaning toward her, he snagged half of her breadstick. "I'll tell you if you tell me how well you know William."

A slight glint flashed in her eyes. "You're right. It's none of my business." She arched a brow. "Just like it's none of yours how well I know William."

He didn't like that answer and narrowed his eyes. She smiled and took a bite of her breadstick.

"Nicola," he growled.

She waved her hand as if dismissing him. "Please. You don't have any claim over me; stop acting as if you do."

That's what you think.

"We seem to be of different minds on that, Miz Holland."

"Apparently so."

He watched her smile and thank the server as their food was delivered, along with a fresh basket of steaming breadsticks. When the wine had been poured and they were once again alone, he studied her.

Nicola Holland was an enigma. He thought about what Chad and Robert had said about her compared to Cami, and he smiled. She may be as sharp tongued as Cami, but there was something she was desperately trying to keep hidden, and that was a softer side. It was a side he planned on exposing. Her rough edges may keep many away, but it only intrigued him even more.

"Well, we'll have to see about that," he said on a low thread of sound.

The remainder of supper was filled with easy conversation, nothing serious, but the sexual tension between them continued to rise. Bradford noticed everything she

did--the way her throat moved when she swallowed, how her mouth formed when she took food off the fork, the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. When their dessert arrived, he was trying to remain in control.

If she keeps licking her lips or releasing more of those cock stroking moans, I'll be carrying her out of here over my shoulder.

The second her slim hand reached for the check, he reacted. Curving his fingers around her wrist, Bradford halted her progress, even as he had to force himself to ignore the feel of her skin on his. Her dark gaze snapped to his, and he shook his head.

"You're not paying," he told her.

"It's my date."

He never took his gaze off her. "I don't care, *sladkij dikobaz*. You can assert yourself all you want...kissing, dates, and more, I can't wait. But you are *not* paying."

She narrowed her eyes and reached for her purse with her free hand. He reached for the bill and handed it back to the waiter, who stood there. *It was time for Miss Holland to learn he didn't relinquish his control. And this was one thing she'd not get him to give in on.*

"Put this on my tab," he commanded.

The server's eyes flickered between them both before she nodded. "Yes sir, Mister Chadwick." The young woman walked away without a sound.

Nicola snatched her hand back from under his. "You are something else," she seethed.

He met her gaze steadily. "I'm a lot of things. But I have never let a woman pay for a dinner. And I never will."

Bradford pushed away from the table and stood up before walking around to where Nicola sat. He placed his hands on her bare shoulders and lowered his lips near her ear. Her body was stiff beneath his touch.

"Don't be mad that I like to be in control as well, Nicola. Let's go. We have a few things to discuss, and I believe it's best done in private." She huffed, and he grinned.

"Well, unless you're into exhibitionism."

His breath caught when she turned her head and stared directly into his eyes. Flames were alive and well in them. Nicola leaned forward until their lips were a hairsbreadth apart. His skin prickled when her tongue slipped out and traced along his lower lip.

"I don't know if you could handle me, Brawich. I mean, all I've got on is this little dress, a thong, and stilettos." She kissed him lightly, her tongue slipping into his mouth and teasing his before she ended it and pushed against his chest. "I should get you home, though, shouldn't I?"

"Bradford," he whispered before stepping away and assisting her to her feet.

Her smile heated his blood, and he felt almost as if he was about to get pulled into quicksand. But if he was following Nicola Holland, he had no problem with that. His need and desire to always be in control of the situation waned when she stood next to him and slid her hand down his arm until their hands were palm to palm. Tightening his fingers around hers, he led her to the door.

The ride back to his house was sexually charged. He made sure not to touch her, but her description of what she wore made it even more difficult than he imagined. Bradford watched her face as she pulled up to his house. It was serene, or so he thought, until he caught sight of the rapid pulse in the side of her neck. When she put her car in park, he reached out and touched her carotid.

"Come with me, Nicola," he murmured as he got out and moved to her door, holding it for her.

He smiled when her soft hand landed in his. Instead of going toward the front door, he moved around the side of his house toward the backyard.

"Where are we going?" she questioned, tugging on her hand.

"To the backyard. I promise, I won't tie you up...this time. Unless you'd like me to, that is."

"Don't hold your breath," she snapped.

Brawich allowed his hand to trail over her ass before he began walking again. No word passed between them, only the sound of their shoes on the path and the night

noises, as they headed into his backyard. He could hear her small gasp of amazement as they rounded the side of his house.

“This is beautiful.”

“Be careful here. It’s not smooth, but stepping stones.”

Her hand tightened around his, and he led her carefully down to the open gazebo. Solar powered amber lights created a magical and romantic appearance. The sound of the fountain filled the air. He led her to a settee and sat near her in another chair once she had gotten situated.

“What’s the catch, Brawich?” she asked.

“Bradford,” he said without thought. “What catch?”

“You. You’re not being arrogant or over confident. So I ask again, what’s the catch?”

He looked at her in the muted light. Her arms were braced on the cushion behind her, but her gaze was directly on him.

“Is everything a battle with you, Nicola?” he asked, leaning forward a bit.

“Who says this is a battle?”

“You’re acting like it is. Is it so hard to just sit here and enjoy the night air?”

Bradford unbuttoned the two buttons on the coat of his tuxedo. Getting up from the chair, he stood before her and draped it over her shoulders. When she glanced up at him, he put his index finger and thumb under her chin and lowered his mouth to hers.

The kiss was gentle and exploratory, but it had the kick of a mule. He fought the moan that raced up from his chest. He shuddered as her sultry scent flowed to his nose, as her hands moved up over the silk vest he wore. Animalistic longings rose up within him, and he drew her up to her feet. The kiss intensified as she matched his passion. Shoving the coat off her shoulders, he moved his hands down over the bared expanse of her back, loving the silkiness of her skin. Without breaking the kiss, he undid the tie that crossed her back.

Her head fell back, giving him more access to her neck. He took full advantage and trailed light kisses along her skin. She tasted like candy, and he wanted a lot. When

he'd said he liked to savor his sweets, that was obviously before he'd had a taste of the succulent woman in his arms.

She made short work of undoing his bow tie, vest, and shirt. He nipped her jugular when her nails scraped along his bare chest. Bradford ran his hand over the swell of her butt, both loving and hating that the fabric stopped right before it. With just the tips of his fingers, he moved up to the back of her neck and pulled on the silken tie. Stepping back from her, he bit his lower lip as her top dropped down, exposing her full breasts to him.

Pressing his mouth to one, he drew the nipple inside.

"Shit!" she moaned to the night air. Her fingers dug into his hair and held him tighter against her.

He moved them to the chaise, where he laid her gently against the thick cushion. She squirmed beneath him as he pressed their bared chests together. He kissed along the hollow of her neck.

"Brawich," she panted.

"Bradford," he corrected, as his hips thrust against her pelvis.

"Off," she demanded, tugging on his shirt.

He complied instantly, then eliminated the space between them. His blood roared in his ears as her hands skimmed along his back. He settled one leg beside her hip on the chaise and braced the other on the floor before reaching for the bunched garment at her waist. He tugged, and the tight material slid down over her hips, moving out of the way so nothing hampered his progress.

The black material pooled on the floor of the gazebo, but his attention was taken up by the woman lying on the lounge. She wore nothing but a thong and stilettos, like she'd said. The shoes had silken laces that wrapped up her leg toward her calf. His body reacted with a jerk; his cock pulsed in want and impatience.

"Jesus," he uttered.

Nicola stared at him before her hands moved to the band of her panties.

"Undress," she ordered as she lowered her underwear ever so slightly.

He stepped out of his shoes and undid his belt, keeping his eyes on her, the amber light around them adding a glow to her skin that made him want to worship her even more. *What would she be like out here during the light of day?* Bradford fought to breathe normally as she wet her lips when his pants fell to the ground. He lowered his boxers as well, and watched her eyes widen as she stared at his shaft.

Wrapping his fingers around it, he stroked himself as she removed her black thong. When she reached for her shoes, he said, "Leave them on."

A sultry grin curved up her lips as her hands moved toward his jutting erection. His eyelids fluttered as she wrapped her fingers around him, and his skin tingled as she released a small purr of contentment.

"Let go," she insisted.

Bradford let go of his cock and allowed her touch to be the only one he felt. Her grip was firm yet extremely pleasurable. He stepped forward into her hands, pushing them further down his length. Looking at her, he almost lost it. Her teeth had captured her lower lip, and there were sexy little moans coming from her throat.

"Nicola," he ground out.

"Hush, Brawich."

He stopped her by grabbing her wrists. "No. Not this way, not the first time." He lowered his head. "And it's Bradford." Bending at the waist, he grabbed a condom from his wallet and sheathed his cock.

Gently, he pushed her back on the chaise and palmed her breasts. The nipples were peaked and hard as he rubbed them and tugged slightly on them. Tracing her silhouette with one hand down to her knee, he lifted it so her foot was up on the cushion. Then he moved his hand back up, but on the inside of her leg this time. Her hips shifted. And she whimpered. He stopped right before touching her pussy, and her whimper turned into a growl of frustration.

Leaning forward, he captured a nipple in his mouth as his hands continued to explore the satiny skin she had. He would trace along the insides of her legs and across her bellybutton, but he never touched her wet core. The scent of her arousal filled the

air--sweet, spicy, and heady. He longed to bury his head between her legs and feast upon all she had to offer and more. And he would. Just not right now.

Each pass he made which didn't touch her, she would thrash beneath him and moan. Brawich knew she was ready. She wasn't the only one. His cock was about ready to declare a mutiny. With a slight readjustment, he rose over her and placed the head of his cock at her entrance. Nicola whimpered again and tried to lift her hips to him.

Her eyes opened, and he could see her desperate need for relief swirling in their depths. He shook his head slightly.

"My speed, Nicola."

Her eyes narrowed, and he grinned. Slowly, he pressed forward and almost passed out from the pleasure that poured over him as her wet velvet heat welcomed him. Nicola's body held him like a glove. A hiss of pleasure escaped him, only to be echoed by one from her. Bradford continued to slide in until he could go no further. He held still for a brief second and stared into Nicola's eyes. Pressing a light kiss to her lips, he drew back, her pussy clamping down on him as if to beg him to stay. When only the head of his cock remained inside, he slid forward.

Back and forth he moved, a slow, continuous pace that had his skin burning.

"Faster, Brawich," she demanded, as her body undulated against his.

A low rumble rose up from his chest as he felt the heels of her stilettos dig into the flesh of his back.

"Bradford," he corrected. "I told you to call me Bradford."

"And I told you faster," she grumbled.

He nipped the side of her neck and rolled a nipple with his thumb and index finger. The walls of her pussy tightened even more as they began to milk him.

"Ask me nicely," he whispered in her ear as he tugged again on her nipple.

She gasped and shook her head. "No. I'm telling you."

He chuckled low and withdrew until just the tip of his cock rested inside of her.

"Do you not remember me telling you I liked to savor candy? And that you should call

me Bradford?” With his tongue, he traced along her jugular. “Call me Bradford, and I’ll give you what you want.”

Her nails dug into his shoulders, and he could feel his balls tightening. He wouldn’t be able to hold out much longer himself, but he had to show her she wasn’t the one in control.

“How do you know what I want?” she snapped, as her legs drew him further into her.

He released her nipple and moved his hand down to her tightly clipped pussy. “You want me to fuck you,” he murmured as he rubbed her clit. “Just say my name, *sladkij dikobaz*, and I’ll do just that.” He slid forward until he was completely embedded within her again.

Out and in at a snail’s pace, he waited for her to give him what he wanted. She arched against him, mewled, and moaned, but he never let her go over the edge. His jaw hurt from clenching it so hard to remain in control, but he was going to win this battle of wills.

“Bradford,” she said on a half sigh, half beg.

He didn’t gloat, didn’t say a word, just kissed her as he began to piston back and forth within her. His tongue thrust into her mouth at the same pace his cock drove into her. Brawich lifted her leg so it dangled over his shoulder and continued to stroke deep.

“Uh...uh...uh,” Nicola panted as she matched his speed and every thrust he gave her.

He closed his eyes as he sustained the motion. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead, and he could feel the approach of his own release. His skin burned where her nails and heels dug into him, and it increased his pleasure.

“Ahhhh!” Nicola screamed into the night.

Her hips flexed, and she came with a rush, clamping down on him like a vice. He was on fire, and it took only two more strokes before he too came with a roar to the heavens.

For a moment, silence reigned between them, shattered only by their harsh breathing. Taking what he could get, Bradford pulled out of her, removed the condom, and dropped it away from them before curling up to her naked body in the warm night air. She didn't pull away from him, but she didn't curl up against him, either. Pressing a kiss to the soft skin behind her ear, he murmured, "This is only the beginning for us, *sladkij dikobaz*, only the beginning." Grabbing a blanket from the back of the lounge, he draped it over the two of them. Nicola never said a word.

Chapter Four

Nicola grumbled to herself as she walked *back* past the Blue Moon Café and headed to the elevators which led to her office in Caspian Towers North 3. She stopped and groaned. Her head was killing her, and she wanted another coffee, hers currently residing on the cement beside her M3. The Blue Moon Café was closed.

“Damn it, Nina. Where are you?”

Glancing at her watch, Nicola groaned and shut her eyes. The strong scent of coffee yanked them back open. Nina Osborne stood before her, waving a tall cup filled full under her nose. Nicola couldn’t stop the mouthwatering groan that slipped out.

“Be careful what you ask for,” Nina said with a wink. “You could come in and sit down if you’d like. I’m sure you’ve burned enough calories pacing back and forth before my place.”

The lure of a new cup of java was too strong for her to snip back about the pacing comment. “Thanks,” Nicola said as she reached for the dark swirling brew in Nina’s hand.

“Uh-uh. Stop now if you don’t want to draw back a nub. This one’s mine.” Shaking her head, Nina opened the door and gestured for Nicola to join her.

Nicola followed her inside and toward a table near the kitchen. Two seconds after she’d sat down, Nicola looked up in surprise when a cup, the same size as Nina’s, full of coffee was placed before her. It was Natalie Varimis.

“Thanks, Natalie.” The dark-skinned woman never spoke, just gave her a small smile and disappeared as silently as she’d arrived. Glancing over to Nina, Nicola said, “She’s real quiet.”

“That she is,” Nina agreed. “So what are you doing here so early?”

“Me? What about you?” Nicola knew the café opened early, but she wasn’t used to seeing Nina here at this hour.

Nina shrugged. "I have a meeting with Ryker Chadwick of JR Construction. Gonna do some remodeling." She drank some of her coffee. "Tell me why you look as if you're running from something...or someone."

Nicola bristled and focused back on the conversation. She'd begun daydreaming the second the name Chadwick popped out of Nina's mouth. "I am *not* running from anything or anyone."

A smirk flitted across Nina's dark caramel face. "'Course not. That's why you spilled your coffee when a car door slammed."

Glaring at Nina, Nicola shook her head. "Like you don't have moments of being clumsy."

"Never said I didn't," Nina responded as she stood. "But you seem awfully defensive for someone who was merely having a clumsy moment." With a quick grab of her coffee, Nina walked off, saying over her shoulder, "Have a great day, Nicola Holland."

Nicola sat there for a while before reaching for her coffee and heading out of the still dark Blue Moon Café. She strode to the elevators again and was blissfully alone when the door slid shut. As the car took her to her floor, Nicola's mind drifted back to the previous night with Brawich...Bradford.

Damn man has a hard on for me to call him Bradford.

And last night, she'd given in. When he'd refused to let her pay for dinner, she'd wanted to jump over the table at him. There had been no room for argument, and that, to her, had been extremely arousing. Nicola didn't meet many people who would stand up to her. Bradford Chadwick had done so without qualms.

Get a grip!

Nicola groaned. Thinking about him, his take-charge demeanor, or his hard-on, wasn't going to do her a single bit of good. It had been hard to leave him there. Never one to cuddle after sex, Nicola had found doing so with that man...was more than nice. So much so she'd remained there about an hour after she knew he'd fallen asleep and just enjoyed being in his embrace. Shaking her head over her fanciful thoughts, Nicola let

herself into her office and sighed as she grabbed her headset, sliding it on. Some days it sucked to have clients all over the world.

Soon she was hard at work; her assistant had checked in and brought her a refill of coffee while she continued to talk on the phone. It was later in the afternoon, when she'd gotten a break from the phone and was looking for a file in the cabinet, that a deep, silvery voice grabbed her attention.

"Imagine my surprise when I wake up and find myself all alone."

Her body responded immediately. Nipples tightened as her belly quivered, her heart rate and breathing increased and, of course, her pussy gushed. Nicola bit the inside of her cheek and prayed for strength.

Focus, Nicola! she admonished herself. With a sigh, Nicola grabbed her necessary file and slid the walnut-hued drawer shut.

"Imagine that," she commented drily as she turned before walking to her desk and sitting down. "Am I supposed to believe you've never had a woman leave your bed?" Nicola didn't want to think of another woman in his bed, but she wasn't feeling like discussing what they had done the previous night.

A low growl filled the room. Nicola looked up at the man, who did an amazing job of sucking all the oxygen out of the room. Bradford "Brawich" Chadwick rested against the closed door, legs crossed at the ankle. Starting at the ground, she allowed her gaze to take in his appearance. Dark brown hiking or work boots, and blue jeans that would be slightly baggy were he standing straight. Since he wasn't, they were pulled tight around his muscular thighs. Brawich had his arms crossed over his chest, calling attention to the powerful and muscular biceps hugged tightly by his shirt's sleeves.

Ahh, damn!

Nicola fought the urge to lick her lips and squirm in her seat. She made sure to maintain her unaffected expression. Lifting her chin, Nicola held his intense whiskey stare.

"You know, Madison is out there for a reason. See, if there is a visitor—that would be you—who needed to see an investment manager—that would be me—your visit wouldn't be unannounced. And on the off chance she wasn't out there, there's this remarkable thing, maybe you've heard of it...knocking."

Brawich pushed away from the wall and moved across the expanse of her office to stop before her, his motion the same as it was the day they'd met. It was pure, raw sexuality done in a lazy way so you knew it was natural. She refused to drop her gaze, and his grew hard the closer he came.

She arched a brow, refusing to be intimidated. "Was there something else?"

Unnamed emotion flashed in his eyes, and they grew shuttered. He placed his hands on the edge of her desk. Immediately, Nicola thought of how his hands felt on her body.

"Somewhere you need to be?" he asked in a low tone.

Licking her lips, she glanced down to the file before her. Nicola got to her feet and smoothed her hands down over her skirt before picking up the file. "Yes. I have a meeting." She headed out of the office, only to stop when he maneuvered himself between her and the door. "Is there a problem, Brawich?" *Jesus! All I want to do is run my tongue all over his body.*

"Bradford, *sladkij dikobaz*. My name is Bradford."

Sighing, she stared at him. "Mister Chadwick, I have a client waiting for me in a conference room. He doesn't pay me to keep him waiting."

His gaze narrowed as his nose flared slightly. Nicola watched the tic as it grew in his jaw. Her expression never changed even as she dropped her gaze, fighting the desire to sink to her knees on the plush carpet and gently take his long, thick cock from the confines of his jeans to enjoy like candy. Her pussy pulsed and flooded at the idea.

Nicola, stop it! Big meeting, focus on that.

"If there's nothing else..."

Instead of moving out of her way, Brawich stepped even closer, bringing with him the scent of clean masculine ruggedness.

“Trying to be a bitch again?” he growled on a thread of anger.

Her entire countenance bristled at his comment. Nicola snapped upright as if steel had been infused to her spine. A sneer filled her expression as she narrowed her gaze at him.

“You’re not drawing me into an argument just so you can get your rocks off, *Brawich*. Many men have tried.” She tightened her grip on the folder in her hand, then added, “Better men have tried...and they all failed.”

Stepping around him, Nicola moved to the door where she paused. Without looking back, she said, “And as far as the bitch part, when one is ‘The Queen’, trying isn’t something you have to do.” Nicola walked out of her office and strode to the conference room, trying desperately to calm her nerves before she got there.

Brawich didn’t move for few seconds once she’d left the office. Nicola Holland had been on his mind from the moment he woke naked in his gazebo. He hadn’t wanted to believe Nicola would actually leave without a word. When he’d seen her car was gone, he knew that’s exactly what had transpired. For a while, he was pissed.

He began working on a new painting after he’d showered and changed. For a long while, he’d been working on his sculpting mostly, and the urge to paint had waned. Until this morning. After breaking for an early lunch, Brawich found himself driving toward Caspian Towers and heading directly for Nicola’s office. She was like a drug, and he was the addict who needed it. He couldn’t get enough.

Standing against the door, he watched in appreciation as she perused through her four-drawer vertical filing cabinet. Shamelessly, he raked his gaze up her form. She wore a navy blue skirt with a slit on the left side, which allowed him to see the firm flesh of her smooth leg. A dark amber satin shirt graced her upper body. Nicola wore sheer stockings, and he repeatedly ran his gaze up the seam along the back of her leg. She had on a pair of shoes that matched her skirt. Nicola’s hair was braided and hung down her back as it had the first day they met.

When she was caressing my kitchen appliances, making me jealous and craving her touch on my own skin.

So now he was alone in her office while she went to a meeting with some man. His body tensed at the thought. Closing the door, Brawich strolled near the walls. Numerous awards and her degree hung there in simple black frames. Nothing ostentatious. Brawich walked around her large desk, and a smile filled his features as he imagined laying her across the glossy mahogany surface and having his way with her.

She was neat, his Nicola. His *sladkij dikobaz*. Nothing was out of place and as he sat in her chair. He smiled again at all the organization of her desktop. Leaning back against the smooth black Italian leather of her high back chair, he swiveled around, getting a full view of her entire office.

Turning his attention back to her desk, he stared at the photos she had. Some of the faces he knew, some he didn't. *But I want to know them.* He got up from the desk and moved to the leather sofa along a wall. Sitting down, he relaxed and crossed his ankles, not willing to leave until she returned. And it was either wait here, or go interrupt her meeting.

Not getting rid of me that easy, Nicola.

So he waited. Despite his casual and relaxed demeanor, Brawich's heart rate sped up when the door swung open.

"Thanks, Madison. I'll get it when I come back from lunch." Nicola's voice entered the room before she did. He stared at her when she moved fluidly into her office.

"That was a long meeting, *sladkij dikobaz*." He spoke from his seat.

Nicola shut the door behind her and looked at him. There was no shocked expression on her face and no jump of surprise. She knew he was here.

"I'm assuming there's a reason you're still lurking about my office, Brawich," Nicola said in a dry tone. She moved to her desk with sure, sexy steps.

Brawich got to his feet and moved toward her. Nicola tossed the file in her hand down on the blotter and perched on the corner of her desk, facing him. Her hands rested beside her against the edges. She held his gaze as he approached.

“Bradford, Nicola. My name is Bradford.” He stood before her, close enough to smell her shampoo, but not yet touching. Leaning nearer, he whispered, “Remember how pleasurable saying it can be?”

He both heard and felt her sharp intake of breath. Her pupils dilated, and the pulse in her neck moved faster. His cock swelled when the tip of her pink tongue snuck out and wet her lips.

From behind him, a voice said, “Oh! Well, I wasn’t aware you had anyone in here, Nicola.”

Brawich didn’t turn at the sound, just continued to stare at Nicola. He watched her rein in her emotions. Her gaze cooled considerably before she looked past him and said in a detached voice, “Hi Kylie. I wasn’t aware either. Brawich here was just waiting when I got back from the meeting.”

A rumble of anger rolled up within him at her easy dismissal of him being there.

“Not a bad thing to have waiting for you,” Kylie teased. “So does this mean you’re not coming to lunch with me?”

“I’m ready,” Nicola said.

Brawich bit the inside of his cheek when Nicola got off the desk, but didn’t back away from him, instead opting to brush her chest against his. Turning, Brawich found Kylie smiling at him and looking between himself and Nicola.

“Miss Jordan,” he said.

“Hello again, Bradford,” Kylie responded easily.

“I trust you’ll be able to find your way out of my office this time.” Nicola’s words fell like ice shards in the room.

Brawich contained his smug smile when he picked up on the biting tone of her statement. Nicola Holland was jealous. “I’m capable of a great many things,” he purred. “I’ll leave you lovely ladies to enjoy your meal.” He walked to the door, where he

paused and turned back to stare at Nicola. He was happy to see her gaze following him.

"Three days. Seven at night. Moore Gallery. Don't be late, Nicola."

Her eyes narrowed. "Excuse me?"

He allowed himself a leisurely look at her body. *Damn, she's magnificent.* Spinning on his heel, he prowled toward her, ignoring the amused smirk on Kylie's face.

Stopping before Nicola, he grabbed the back of her head and hauled her close for a kiss. Brawich took what he wanted, and that was her submission. His tongue thrust deep throughout her mouth. Nicola stiffened for about three seconds before she purred in the back of her throat at his invading assault and responded.

The urge to sweep off her desk and bend her over it roared to life in him. With reluctance, he ended the kiss. Her gaze was hazy with desire and her lips swollen.

"Three days, Nicola." Squeezing her ass, he walked away. At the door, he paused again. "Oh, and wear something sexy." Then he left her alone.

Nicola drank some more of her tea as she sat across from Kylie at a booth in Jack's Bistro as they ate their lunch. Nothing helped eliminate the taste of Brawich she had imprinted on her taste buds. His sensual tone had told her the exact thing she'd told him.

"Well, it seems the two of you had a great time after your...um...what are we calling it? Ah yes, a meeting."

"Kylie," Nicola warned. "Now isn't the time."

As their server left their receipt, the door opened and in walked Cami and her sister Jem, along with Zora and her twin, Kenya. Nicola's eyes narrowed as she stared at Camilla Maxwell, soon to be Camilla Chadwick. *Bitch probably won't even take Robert's last name.*

"It never is the time with you, Nicola. Doesn't change the fact you and Bradford have knocked boots."

She jerked her gaze off Cami and glared at her friend. "Kylie," she growled.

Holding up her hands, Kylie laughed. "Okay, I'll let it go, for now." She stood up. "I'll wait by the door, since I know you want to say hi to Cami."

An evil grin filled her face. "Yes. Yes I do."

Nicola got up and strolled over to the booth where Cami sat. "Afternoon, ladies. Cami." She leaned against the back where the twins sat and stared into Cami's brown gaze. "I figured since you always come here for Tuesday lunch, I'd just alert the cook." She blinked a few times. "I told him to pay special attention to your meal, Cami. Enjoy your lunch. I have to swing by this dressmaker's. I think it's the one you're using for your wedding dress, Cami." Nicola wiggled her fingers and walked off.

Kylie snorted as she got there. "What are you doing to her?"

They walked outside and, at the window, paused to see Cami talking animatedly with the chef, displeasure all over her face. As Cami turned and flipped her off, Nicola laughed and waggled her fingers again.

"I was just waving to her. I believe that's a nice thing to do."

Kylie shook her head. "You're so wrong."

They headed back for the tower and their respective offices. Nicola hated the disappointment she got when she realized Brawich wasn't in her office waiting for her.

For the next three days, she didn't see or hear from Brawich. The day of their "date" arrived, and she'd gone by the gallery to speak to Moore Blade, just to make sure she wasn't being set up for something. He'd assured her it was all on the up and up. While she'd been in the gallery, Nicola had overheard some women muttering about what a catch Bradford Chadwick would be. That had sent her into a foul mood for a while, especially when she realized that man had turned her into a jealous woman.

Now that she was getting ready, she sat before her mirror and finished putting on her makeup. Her hair was done, gathered up and left to fall to the middle of her back. Nicola moved to stand before her tri-fold mirror and took in her appearance. She was wearing a light coral one-shoulder neckline gown. It had a fitted silhouette with a bow accent at the one shoulder, along with a mid-thigh side slit.

Wonder if he'll like it.

Nicola put on her black and white diamond journey necklace in 18K yellow gold. She had matching earrings in her ears. With a quick glance at her watch, she turned, grabbed her four-inch heels, and headed up to her living room, where she put them on. The chime of her doorbell brought her head up with a surprised jerk.

Odd. Not expecting anyone.

Walking to the door, she opened it and arched a brow at the man standing in a nice suit before her. "Yes?"

"Good evening, Miss Holland. My name is Franks, and I'm here to drive you this evening."

"Drive me?"

"To the gallery. Mister Chadwick sent me. Are you ready?"

"Just let me grab my purse."

The walk to the silver town car was done in silence. As she sat upon the smooth leather, she realized she'd expected to see Brawich in there as well.

I picked him up. Him...he sends a car.

When the car turned onto Caspain Avenue, she was in better control of her emotions. A cool nod was given to the man who'd opened the door for her and assisted her in getting out. Another man, in a tux this time, held the door for her. The first thing she noticed was how dimly lit the gallery was. A few recessed lights shone down upon the marble floor. There were no people, and everything was still covered.

"Good evening, Nicola Holland," a deep voice said from off to the side.

Turning, Nicola found herself staring at Moore Blade as he flowed from the shadows toward her. A smile touched the corners of her mouth. *Damn, that is one nice looking man.* His dark green eyes stood out vividly against his dark skin. There was a gentle aura around him, even with the intensity he brought.

"Am I early?" she asked. "Seems a bit dark in here for a showing."

He winked at her and pointed behind her. "I'll let him explain. I look forward to seeing you later on this night, Miss Holland." Moore bowed over her hand and walked away, vanishing into the shadows as quietly as he'd appeared.

Her skin prickled with an awareness that only Brawich created within her. Slowly, she turned around. Her breath caught in her throat as she watched Brawich walk across the marbled floor to her. The circles of light from the ceiling only added to the predatory sexuality he portrayed as he moved. She licked her lips as her body reacted immediately to him.

The tuxedo he wore draped his body like a lover, and she knew it had been tailored for him alone. The jacket, a two-button, single breasted with notch lapels, was unbuttoned. One side was drawn back by his hand that rested in the pocket of his slacks. His white shirt was simply elegant in its design. He wore no vest, but there was a black bow tie. She scanned him from the top of his head to the square-toed shoes he wore, and each inch of him was mouthwateringly fine.

His blond hair was rakishly messy, and her fingers itched to sink into its thickness. Brawich pulled off the “classic” look so well. His gaze seemed to smolder as he stopped immediately before her. Nicola fought the urge to kiss him. She burned beneath his stare as he moved it boldly up and down her body.

“Good evening, *sladjik dikobaz*.” He stepped close and placed a hand on the curve of her waist. Brawich leaned in, his warm breath sending shivers all over her. “You look absolutely amazing.”

Nicola flushed at his compliment, grateful for the darker lighting to hide it. She whimpered when his touch settled upon her skin at the top of the mid-thigh slit. His fingers moved closer to her inner thigh, and she began to shake.

“I’m glad you came, *sladjik dikobaz*.” His hips pressed against her, and she felt the outline of his cock.

“Wasn’t sure I was going to. You sent a car for me?”

“I knew if I came to get you, we’d never leave your place. This way, I’m not late for my own showing.”

His fingers slid closer to the juncture of her thighs. “You do realize we’re in the middle of the gallery, right?” she demanded, trying to remain in control.

He nuzzled behind her ear. “Did you think of me those days we were apart?”

"This is neither the time nor place," she said. There was no way she was going to tell him of her dreams of him.

Closer and closer his fingers inched. "I think it is," he insisted.

Lord, give me strength! "What are you doing?" she panted.

"Asking you a simple question, *sladkij dikobaz*."

"Moore is here." Nicola had to hold her body still so it wouldn't seek out more of his tantalizing touch.

A low growl rumbled up from his chest, vibrating against her sensitive breasts. "Nicola, another man's name should never be on your lips. Especially when it's my fingers on your body."

"Arrogant—"

Brawich tsked. "Didn't we learn the difference between that and confidence?"

She ground her back teeth and lifted her chin. "I refuse to make a spectacle of myself in the middle of this room that people will soon be in."

Brawich nibbled along her jaw. "You're right. I just can't help myself. You make me want to back you up against a wall and—"

She shoved him back and smoothed her dress while she found her sanity. "I get it. No need to spell it out," she interrupted.

A devilish smile crossed his features. He took her arm and walked up the raised step in the floor as the lights began to come on, one at a time. "Good," he commented as people began to move past them and uncover his work.

Nicola smiled at Moore Blade as he walked into view.

"Ready?" he called up to them.

"Ready, Moore," Brawich said as he slid his arm around her waist. Lowering his head, he whispered, "Just remember, every time I look at you, how much I long to strip this damn dress off you and do all sorts of wicked things to every inch of your amazing body." His hand dropped to caress her ass. "*Every time.*"

Before she could find her breath, there were people coming in through the doors. Brawich kissed her shoulder lightly and walked away, stopping briefly to look back and smile.

Nicola watched him move away. *What am I doing?* Her life was busy. She had busted her ass to get to where she was. Bradford Chadwick was one hell of a huge distraction. Awake or asleep, he managed to find a way into her thoughts and dreams. She found herself craving the interactions with him, the banter, and the bone-melting looks he'd give her.

Get a grip! She didn't need to become a horny girl right now. As if he could read her thoughts, Brawich lifted his head from where he stood at a sculpture with some people and winked at her. Her insides clenched with longing. She needed a distraction and, as her eyes alighted upon Robert Chadwick and Camilla Maxwell, Nicola knew she'd found it.

Grabbing a flute of champagne, she walked over to where they stood getting some drinks of their own. She noticed the look of love in Robert's gaze as he handed Cami a drink. With a slight smirk, she stopped him before he could take a sip of his own.

"Wait, Robert," Nicola said adding the right amount of windedness to her tone. She reached for his drink. "Don't drink this one." Nicola exchanged the one in his hand for the one she held. "This was supposed to go to Cami." Turning her head, she smiled at Cami, who narrowed her eyes in return. Nicola sighed. "That was close. Enjoy the show." Walking away without looking back, she chuckled to herself and wandered toward a line of sculptures.

There was a large card before the five items after it that read: *Love*. Each item was done with such intricacies it took her breath away. She could feel the love they had for one another in the design. It was that real. *Innocence. Purity. Simplicity. Bliss. Infinite*. Nicola stared hard at each one.

This man is amazing. Fighting down the urge to touch it, she looked harder.

"He does good work, doesn't he?"

Nicola glanced to her side and saw a pair of shrewd topaz eyes staring back at her from a beautiful caramel-hued face. Dropping her gaze, she took in the woman, who was dressed impeccably.

"Yes," Nicola said, wondering what this woman had to do with Brawich.

"Mika Kendrick," she offered. "I own Mika's Gallery over in Savoy Valley."

"Nicola Holland. Nice to meet you." Nicola stepped aside so others could view the collection. She saw Cami staring at the two of them with daggers in her gaze. Nicola grinned and raised her glass to her in silent salute.

"I take it you know Camilla."

"You could say that," Nicola answered.

"The look on her face says she's not very happy with you," Mika shrugged, "or maybe it's me."

Nicola smiled. "Knowing Cami, it's both of us."

Mika laughed and nodded. "I agree. Well, I need to go speak to Brawich. It was a pleasure to meet you, Nicola." She walked away without another word.

Who the hell is she to call him by that name? Her stomach rolled and heaved as he smiled down at Mika with affection. So he knows her well then. Perhaps he has a history with her.

Forcing herself to calm down, Nicola lost that bet when he slid his arm around her and kissed her. It didn't matter that it was on the cheek. Nicola was livid. Moving to the door, she stopped when she saw Moore standing there watching her.

"Problem?" he asked in a smooth voice.

"I need to go," Nicola bit off.

He looked between her and where Brawich stood, surrounded by women, and nodded. "I'll drive you."

"Thank you," she said. When he returned to her side, she looked back at Brawich. He met her gaze and narrowed his own. He spoke to the people around him, and she took Moore's arm and they left the gallery before he could reach them.

Nicola didn't normally run, but for some reason, all she wanted to do was hit the women around him who touched him and batted their lashes at him while flaunting their fake breasts. She needed a good night's sleep, and then she would be fine.

Won't I?

Chapter Five

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Nicola bolted up in bed and reached for the light. Rubbing her eyes, she looked at the clock. Two in the morning. She swung her legs out of bed and got to her feet, stopping to grab her plum satin robe and slide it on. *No sense in letting whoever at the door see what I sleep in.* Padding up to the door barefoot, she turned on the living room light.

"Who's there?"

"Open this door, Nicola!" Brawich's voice demanded.

Stiffening her spine, she unlocked the door and swung it open. He strode in, still wearing his tux, and slammed the door behind him.

"Something on your mind, Brawich?" she bit off.

"What the hell was that?" His tone was tightly controlled, and she knew he was pissed.

"What was what? My leaving? I didn't think I was needed to stand around while you were fawned over by other women." She shrugged with more calm than she felt. "So Moore was kind enough to bring me home." Nicola gloated inside when his eyes narrowed.

He shoved a hand through his hair before he unbuttoned his jacket to toss it on a nearby chair.

"Well, geez, make yourself at home, why don't ya?" she retorted sarcastically.

His lip lifted in a silent and warning snarl. "You don't stay, and you leave with...with Blade?"

Nicola crossed her arms and tried to ignore the fact he was untying his bow tie. "Was that a statement or a question?"

"My date, Nicola," he growled. "My date."

Damn man thinks he can claim me, like I'm some piece of property. “Actually, I was Franks’s date. He is the one who picked me up.”

Brawich narrowed his whiskey eyes and stepped toward her. Nicola raised her chin and held her ground.

“I think it’s time to clarify a few things,” he ground out.

Her eyebrows shot up. “Really? Fine. Clarify why you’ve come to my house at this hour.”

He released the top three buttons on his shirt as he finished closing the distance between them. Nicola’s pussy throbbed, desperate to experience his touch again. Her gaze dropped to settle upon the golden skin of his exposed chest. She barely stopped herself from licking her lips.

“I’m about to do more than clarify that.” He grabbed her and pulled her flush against him. “You don’t get to screw with people like that, Nicola. Running away like a child, pouting. What was that all about?”

She pushed against him, furious he was right and at the disappointment in his tone, but he didn’t move. If anything, he pressed closer. “I didn’t run,” she lied through her teeth. “I already told you, I didn’t see any reason for me to be there.”

“The fact I asked you to be there wasn’t enough? And don’t lie. You ran,” he uttered right in her face.

“One, you didn’t ask, you demanded. Two, I didn’t think you would even notice that I wasn’t there. Not with the way you were surrounded by women.”

Her knees shook when he took his hand and sank it into her hair at the back of her head. He tightened his fist and held her immobile. “I don’t lie, Nicola. When I told you what I would be thinking of every time I looked at you, that was nothing but the truth. Women come to the show, some for the art, some to see if they can land a wealthy man. I don’t care. If I did care what they wanted, I wouldn’t have had you at my side. Where you should be. Don’t ever leave like that again.” Brawich placed his lips so they were millimeters from hers, and his hands settled upon her hips. “Talk to me, Nicola, don’t run...especially with another man. I wanted to kill him. The thought of him

staring at all of this," his hands skimmed her silhouette, "made me livid. I damn near abandoned the show and ripped him limb from limb."

His voice was intense and growled. Nicola knew she had been childish, and she didn't care. It wasn't like she was used to being jealous of a man. All she knew right now was she wanted him. There was time later to deal with what happened.

Reaching out with her hands, she ripped his shirt open the rest of the way, the pearled buttons skidding across her tiled floor. His gaze became molten as he held her stare. Nicola shoved his shirt back off his shoulders and licked her lips when it fell to the floor.

"I'm not done yelling at you, Nicola," he uttered as she began undoing his pants.

"Yell later, Brawich."

"Bradford," he said automatically as he opened her robe and slid it off her. A low whistle left his mouth. "You shop at Unveiled." His tone was full of appreciation.

Nicola was glad she wore her glacier blue chiffon and lace halter babydoll with matching boy short panty. The fire in his eyes made her feel desirable and absolutely sexy. "I do," she admitted.

"This is not gonna make me forget what happened tonight." He played with the bow between her breasts.

"Then just go, Brawich. Go home. It's fucking two in the morning, and-"

His mouth covered hers with a ferocity that shocked her. Brawich swept through her mouth like a raging river, his tongue leaving nothing unexplored. There was nothing gentle in his kiss, and she didn't care. Gentle wasn't what she wanted or needed at this particular juncture. She growled and sucked hard on his invading organ. Her legs began to shake as he untied the bow and palmed a breast. His callused hand sent shockwaves of pleasure racing through her.

"Ah!" she shouted to the room as he pinched her pebbled nipple.

Nicola reached up and sank her hands into his hair, holding him tight against her. Her hips thrust against him as moisture soaked her panties. Without breaking the

kiss, Brawich stumbled them toward a wall and braced her against it, wedging his leg between hers.

Tugging hard on his hair, she pulled his mouth off hers. His eyes were swirling with passion and anger. Dropping one hand, she maneuvered the clasp on his slacks and leaned forward to nip his chin when his free hand lowered the zipper for her. She moaned in satisfaction as her hand curled around his rigid erection.

“Give this to me, Brawich,” she commanded.

A low rumble moved up in his chest as he slid two fingers under her panties where her thighs met. He ripped them off of her. “Damn you, call me Bradford.”

She shook her head. “Lose the clothes.”

Nicola wanted to grin as he stepped back from her and did as she’d ordered, but she couldn’t. All she could do was stare at him and shudder with longing. Brawich was a work of art, pure muscle and fluidity. Her eyes honed in on his large cock that jutted out from a nest of blondish-brown hair. Drops of pre-cum were there, and she longed to taste him.

Walking toward him clad in nothing but the halter top babydoll, Nicola pushed her hair back over her shoulder. Their eyes met in a clash of wills. Brawich closed the distance and wrapped a hand in her hair again, his erection prodding her stomach.

“Nicola,” he growled at her as he sunk two fingers deep in her soaked pussy.

Biting her lower lip, she did her best to contain the moan that tried to leave her lips. She gripped around his cock again and began to fist him slowly. Nicola longed to close her eyes in ecstasy, but wasn’t ready to give him that.

“Give me what I want, Nicola,” he rumbled.

“I was going to tell you the same thing,” she managed to mutter as his fingers set off another orgasm within her.

His fingers tightened around her hair, and he tipped her head back a bit more. A mix of pain and pleasure ran down her body. “We’re doing this my way, Nicola. Call me Bradford.”

Bradford! She longed to scream it to the heavens, but that would be admitting that he was right. And that he had the control. "No."

He withdrew his fingers and wrapped them around his shaft, pushing her hand away and placing the head at the entrance of her needy pussy. But he didn't enter, just held himself there.

"Brawich," she panted.

"Give me what I want," he ordered harshly. "Just give me what I want, *sladkij dikobaz*, and I'll return the favor."

Nicola took one leg and wrapped it around his waist, then leaned in to kiss him. When their tongues dueled with one another, she pulled her leg back to her, impaling herself upon his rigid length.

"Ohhh," she moaned into his mouth. Flames licked along her skin, and she looped an arm around his neck before lifting her other leg to hook behind him. "Much better." For a moment, they remained locked like that, gazes melting into one, breathing harsh.

Brawich readjusted so she was more secure in his embrace. Nicola loved the way he filled her, stretched her. Lowering her face until their noses touched, she whispered, "Now, will you fuck me?"

He still didn't move, his eyes shifting colors from dark to light. "I'm not wearing a condom, Nicola." His declaration was guttural.

She undulated against him. "I know. It's okay. I'm protected." Her heart softened a bit at his concern, but again, she kept that to herself. "Now...damn you, Brawich. Give me what I want."

His strong hands settled along her hips, and he began to thrust within her. Nicola purred in the back of her throat as he slid back and forth. Soon, she felt a wall at her back, and she bit her lower lip as he began to power in her, faster and faster. He drove into her so deep, Nicola had no clue of where he ended and she began. She believed she could feel him in her heart.

"Uh...give...I...now...Brawich..." Nicola mumbled incoherently.

His warm breath was by her ear as he continued his relentless strokes. “You know what I want to hear, *sladkij dikobaz*,” he whispered on a thread of silken promise.

“Harder,” she cried. His fingers dug deeper into the flesh of her hips as he slowed down. “No!” Nicola screamed. “Harder, damn you.”

“One word is all you have to say,” he ground out into her ear. His harsh breathing told her he was barely holding on to his own control.

Clenching her jaw, she refused to give him what he wanted. *Say his name, damn it!* her brain hollered. The rest of her body concurred.

“One simple word, Nicola.” Brawich’s timbre was about an octave lower than normal.

“Bradford,” she whispered. “Damn you. Bradford.”

Nicola screamed in pleasure as he honored his end of the deal and gave her what she wanted--an orgasm that rivaled anything else she’d ever experienced. A loud masculine roar soon echoed her cry, and she felt him unload deep within her, coating her womb with his seed.

He didn’t give her a moment’s rest for the remainder of the night. As the morning sun filtered through her curtains the room was filled with the sounds of lovers enjoying and exploring each other’s bodies.

Brawich stood back and looked at the image on the canvas before him. It was Nicola. Anyone who looked at it would be able to tell. It had been two weeks since his last gallery showing, when Nicola had walked out and he’d gone to her place after. Since then, he’d enjoyed her in her office, the elevator to her office, and more.

They were volatile. He knew that. But he couldn’t stay away from her anymore than he could ignore his body’s need for that next breath. He wanted Nicola Holland, and for longer than eternity.

“She’s something special if she’s got you back on oils, brother of mine.” A male voice shattered the silence of his studio.

Without taking his attention from the portrait before him, Brawich said, "Hello, Ryker."

"Hey." His brother jumped up on a stool near him. "So tell me more about whatever is going on with you and Nicola Holland."

"Let it be, Ryker."

He chuckled. "What fun would that be?"

Brawich glanced at his brother, younger by about a year. He was reclined against a worktable, beer dangling between two fingers, his black hair sticking out from under his baseball cap. "Comfy? Can I get you something to eat, perhaps?"

"That's okay, thanks. I fixed myself something before I came out here."

Shaking his head, Brawich rolled his eyes. "Don't you have a home to go to, or have you been evicted?"

Ryker laughed. "Again, what fun would that be if I couldn't stop by and pick on you? Besides, I should be able to live here. I helped with the improvements on this place to turn it into the masterpiece it is today."

Brawich sighed and put down the brush, knowing Ryker wouldn't let him be. He was right about one thing, though. Ryker was one half of JR Construction and had been instrumental in setting up his studio the way it was, as well as making improvements to his house. "Give me a beer," Brawich said. Seconds later, he was catching the one Ryker threw at him. "Let's go chat, then." Together, they walked out to his backyard. Once they were sitting under the gazebo's roof, Brawich turned to his sibling and arched a brow at his silence. "So silent now?"

"Some people have been asking about you around town."

Narrowing his gaze, Brawich looked at his brother, expecting to see some humor in his expression. There was nothing of the sort. Ryker's face was wiped clean of any emotion.

"Some people. Well, hell, Ry, that's kind of vague. People ask about Brawich. I did just have the showing at Moore's." Brawich took a sip of his beer, the cold liquid doing little to ease the tightness he'd begun to feel.

Ryker stared back at him with an unwavering stare of dark hazel eyes. “I don’t think it’s that. I was at the Blue Moon Café,” he frowned, “trying to soothe some feathers. But anyway, I overheard this guy asking about you. Said he was an old friend and had lost touch for a while.”

Narrowing his eyes, Brawich leaned forward and rested his elbows on his thighs. “Did you get a name?”

“Nope. Well, not at the time. Afterward, I asked the waitress and she said he’d left a business card.” Ryker reached into his pocket and pulled out a small off-white card and tossed it to him. “Someone you know?”

Brawich caught it and looked at it. Blank except for the name. Samuel Crawford. Frowning, he turned it over in his hand. “Not at all. I don’t recognize the name.”

Ryker remained quiet. Brawich knew to just wait him out. Ryker might be younger, but Brawich valued his opinion on things. While he waited for his brother to say something else, Brawich thought about the name on the card. Samuel Crawford. He dug down into the recesses of his mind. Client? Art dealer? Gallery owner?

Nothing.

And yet, at the same time, there was a small niggling of something telling him he *should* remember. He should know that name.

“Do you think it’s someone who wants some of your work?”

Ryker’s question snapped him from his thoughts. “For about one second I did. But if this person is claiming to be an old friend, I don’t see why he would be after that.” Holding his brother’s gaze, he said, “Describe him.”

Ryker set the bottle by his feet. “Never saw his face. Dirty blond hair, pale ass skin and, on the back of his neck, I saw part of a large strawberry birthmark.”

Brawich frowned. A flicker of recognition gleamed, but nothing came from it. Shaking his head in frustration, he pushed it to the back of his mind.

“I don’t know, Ry. Thanks for letting me know, though.” He got to his feet and jerked his head toward the house. “I’m hungry.”

Ryker grinned and stood as well. "'Bout damn time. I was gonna starve if you held out much longer."

Brawich laughed. "Thought you already ate."

His brother shrugged shamelessly. "So I lied." Ryker put his hands together and batted his lashes. "Feed me?"

Rolling his eyes, Brawich groaned. "Brat. Why do I put up with you?"

"Because mom would kick your ass if you didn't," Ryker responded instantly.

"How true. Come on, runt. I'm sure I can find some rotting thing to feed you."

"Runt? I'm shorter than you by less than an inch. And if you feed me rotten food, I'm tellin' ma."

"Smaller is smaller." He pushed his brother playfully and dodged the returning punch. "You are such a tattletale. Go whinin' to ma just because you don't get your way."

"Hell yeah. You say tattletale. I say manipulative and smart." Ryker threw an arm around him, and together they went into his house.

It wasn't until early evening that Brawich made it back out to his studio. In the warm light, he stood before his portrait of Nicola. He'd done it from memory. His breath caught in his throat as he stared at her likeness. It was so damn life-like.

Her dark brown eyes stared at him from behind her gold glasses. They were full of intelligence, untapped sensuality, and a healthy dose of stubbornness. Her hair was back from her face, but the braid it was in, draped over her shoulder. His gaze lingered over her full lips before he picked up a brush and brought it back to the canvas. Long into the night, he worked, until it was done.

Stepping back, Brawich stared at it. "Nicola," he breathed.

He cleaned up and dropped a cover over the portrait before shutting off all the lights and heading for his bed. As he teetered on the brink of slumber, it was Nicola's intoxicating gaze that pulled him over. Brawich fell asleep with her name on his lips, and woke the same way.

Not long after he woke, he'd showered, dressed, and was on his way to Caspain Towers Number 4. Brisk steps took him in through the doors and directly toward the elevators, where he pressed the button for Nicola's floor. Alone in the car as it rode up, he rested his head against the wall and closed his eyes.

Striding from the elevator to her office, he walked in and smiled at Madison, who sat at her desk.

"Good morning, Madison. Is she in?"

"Yes sir."

"Thank you." Brawich moved to the door and opened it.

He slipped through and closed it quietly behind him. He smiled wolfishly as his gaze landed upon her. She stood with her back to him, staring out the large window behind her desk, talking on the phone. He took advantage of this time to drink his fill of her.

She wore black wide-leg pants that cupped her full ass in a way that should be outlawed, in his mind. His breath caught in his throat when she turned toward him and smiled. Her shirt was a lavender silk front tie, and it offset her complexion beautifully. He was rock hard the second her gaze slid up and down his body.

Box in hand, he moved toward the desk and placed it down on her blotter. Brawich fought back a smile when she touched the plain brown box and looked back at him with one eyebrow lifted in silent question. He winked at her and sat down in a leather chair opposite her desk.

"Very good, sir. I'll have that stuff taken care of. Yes, sir. Have a great day."

Nicola ended the call and sat down in her chair, leaning back. "What is this?" she asked.

"It's a gift, Nicola. Open it and see for yourself what it is." Resting his elbows on the chair, he had his fingers laced under his chin. "It won't bite you," he winked, "I promise."

She sat forward and lifted the box. "It's heavy." Sliding her chair in closer, Nicola opened her desk drawer and pulled out some scissors. Slicing the tape, she replaced the item before opening the box.

Brawich focused on her face as she looked inside.

"Oh my God. This is beautiful," she said on a sigh. Nicola reached in with her hands and withdrew the sculpture.

Almost feeling like a voyeur, Brawich watched as her polished nails skimmed over the item--a breaching humpback whale with the water droplets falling off him. A brass plaque at the bottom on the marble stand said *Imperial Elegance by Brawich*.

"This...this...is...incredible..." Nicola met his gaze and smiled. "I don't know what to say."

He got up from his seat and walked around to stand beside her chair. Lowering his head so it was near her ear, he whispered, "Thank you, Bradford, will be just fine. I'm glad you like it. I remember seeing the photo you had of one up in your place."

Brawich could see her reluctance to stop touching the figure, but she did, and faced him. His skin heated up when her hand settled gently along his jaw line. "This is unbelievable. Thank you, Bradford." Nicola leaned in and kissed him.

"You're most welcome, *sladkij dikobaz*," he said when she moved back from him.

Her hands trailed down the front of his long sleeved shirt and lingered along the waist of his jeans. His cock immediately leapt to attention, and he groaned.

"I would love to thank you in a different way, but I have a meeting that starts in two minutes."

He sighed and kissed her again. "I know; you don't get paid to keep him waiting."

She smiled and winked before sliding her chair back and getting to her feet.

"Well, I don't, that's true. But this one is a woman." Nicola reached out and grabbed a fistful of his shirt, drawing him back close. "Let me make it up to you. Tonight."

A smile curved up the corners of his mouth. "I'll let you do whatever you like to me tonight, but I swear to you, Nicola. This gift is just a gift; I didn't want anything in return."

Her dark brown eyes glittered for a moment. "It's a good thing I know you speak your mind, Brawich. Or I'd be wondering why you don't want me to give you my thanks for this."

"When will you be home?" he whispered as he wrapped his arms around her, drawing her even closer to him. The heat from her body singed his, and he shuddered, trying to remain in control.

"Around eight." She shifted against him as her fingers cupped his shaft through his jeans.

Bucking into her touch, he kissed her hard and fast. "I'll be there. You have a meeting, and so do I. See you tonight, *sladkij dikobaz*."

Nicola nipped his bottom lip and muttered, "I want you inside me, Brawich."

Her touch tightened around him, and he longed to give in and let her have her way. Instead, he stepped back and gently took her hands from his body. "I'd love nothing more, Nicola," he admitted. "You have a client waiting, and I need to get to my meeting as well."

Frustration was all over her face as she nodded. "You're going to pay for leaving me horny as hell, Brawich."

Closing the distance he'd just put between them, he got right in her face and purred, "Do you want to go to your meeting smelling like sex, Nicola? I don't care if I do, so tell me yes and I'll have you bent over your desk and screaming so loud, Madison will be able to hear you."

Her eyes flared with passion as he held her gaze. Deep in the depths of her gaze, he could read her need. But Nicola was nothing if not professional, and that was the only reason he backed up again. Taking her hand, he bowed over it, kissing the back.

"I'll see you this evening, Nicola Holland."

She didn't say a word, and he knew she was struggling to regain her own control. Spinning on his heels, Brawich headed straight for the door and left, closing it silently on his way, and nodding at Madison, who smiled in return. It wasn't until he

was in his car, heading for his own meeting, that he managed to get some semblance of domination over his wayward emotions.

A content smile filled his face as he began heading up into the Pantera Mountains. They separated Trescott Cove from Savoy Valley. And he'd be hard pressed to find another spot in the world that was as beautiful to him.

I've got to bring Nicola up here for a picnic. Or more.

He groaned over the mental image of making love with Nicola in one of the sprawling meadows, or under some of the huge trees. Spending a day with her during the autumn brought another smile to his face. He imagined painting a picture of her with the changing leaves surrounding her.

With a sigh, he put his attention on the meeting he was going to. He was heading to Mika's Gallery over in Savoy Valley to discuss a showing over there. It had been set up when she'd come to Moore's and spoken to him. This was just the first time they could get together.

The winding roads went higher and higher. In his rearview mirror, he noticed a car following him. The one car became two and a sliver of uncertainty snaked up and down his spine. Both vehicles were black SUVs, and he couldn't see a front plate on the first one. Nor could he see inside it to possibly identify the driver. On a flat stretch, the second one shot up past the car behind him and passed him. Then it headed out of sight.

For some reason, that didn't help him breathe any easier. The lone vehicle behind him began to creep up on him. Closer and closer it came. Brawich increased his own speed, yet the one behind him kept up.

Shit!

Glad his Bluetooth was in, Brawich put both hands on the wheel and got ready to do some defensive driving if the need arose. Who knew, perhaps it was just some people out looking to be assholes. A hairpin turn was approaching, and when he slowed a bit, the SUV behind him crept closer.

His heart began to pound in his ears. He was well aware of what was about to happen.

“Call star-four,” he said, his mind racing with all the appropriate things to do when needing to get around a tight ass turn without slowing.

When the black vehicle backed off just a bit, Brawich found his opportunity. Hugging tight to his corner, he shoved it in neutral, yanked up on the emergency brake, and cut the wheel sharply, careening around the corner. Rubber squealed and burned. Releasing the brake, he shoved his car back into gear and gunned it, as the wheel spun through his palms.

He'd made it around the corner. His hope faded the second he saw the other SUV waiting in the middle of the road. What's a guy to do? Mountain edge on one side, forest of trees on the other. When the shots rang out, he cut the wheel sharply again, angling for the trees.

“Yes?” someone on the other end of the phone said in a deep voice.

“Cumquat,” he bit off as his windshield shattered and glass flew at him.

The explosion behind him from the two vehicles colliding grabbed his attention, and in that second, he lost control. The front end of his car hit the ditch toward the tree line, the bumper imbedded into the fertile ground of the Pantera Mountains. The rear of his car went up in the air, tires spinning and flames roaring behind him. The impact drove him into unconsciousness.

Chapter Six

Coming to consciousness, Bradford opened his mouth to groan in pain.

"Ah, Lover, don't groan or you'll get us killed," a husky voice said in an almost soundless whisper against his lips.

He stiffened and started to jerk away, trying to place where he knew the voice from. The person held him still. He struggled to open his eyes, but they felt heavy.

"Don't move, Bradford," the voice said firmly.

The lilt of a St. Thomian accent made him realize who it was. He relaxed.

"That's it, Lover. Ziva's got you," Ziva Jackson said in that same almost soundless whisper.

A sound close by made him stiffen. Ziva held him. Her curvaceous body blanketed his, shielding him.

"I'll be back in a sec."

Before she was even finished saying the words, she slid off him. One second, she was against his side, then she was gone. Bradford tried to figure out where he was. The last thing he remembered was the crash. With slow, deliberate, painful movements, he opened his eyes. Pain and nausea swamped him. He gritted his teeth, determined to not pass out. After a few moments, the feeling eased. He glanced at the covering on his body. It was silky and looked like foliage. From his training, he knew it was a camouflage blanket. From what his trainers had told him, they'd had it made specially here in Trescott Cove. It was made to blend into landscapes so you could hide in plain sight. The only way someone would know where you were is if they stepped on you, and by then it would be too late for them. He shifted his head to the peephole.

A man walked between the trees directly in front of him. He held a gun with a silencer. The man made a motion with his hand. Bradford couldn't see who he was gesturing to, but he figured it was another person hunting for him. As the man passed the trees and into the clearing, Ziva seemed to just appear behind him, detaching from

the tree. With a quick movement of her wrist, she flicked out her whip. It was an unlikely weapon against a gun, but he knew from having seen her wield it that, in Ziva's hands, it was deadly.

The man turned. In a move almost too fast for the eye, Ziva flicked the whip at him, and it curled around the barrel of the gun. With a jerk of her hand, she disarmed him. The man cursed fluently in what he could tell was Russian. Ziva made a motion with her hand, and the whip whistled as it cut through the air again. In a delicate touch Ziva once told him she called 'The Kill Kiss,' she hit the man in his pressure point. He dropped to the floor. Bradford knew he was dead. Before he could process what was going on, Ziva flipped as gunfire filled the air. Bullets sprayed where she had been. Ziva seemed to disappear once again. Three other men rushed into the clearing, standing around their fallen compadre. They stood back to back, looking around for Ziva.

A whistle came, and then the crack of the whip. Another man fell. The other two looked at each other, then started to run. Before the first man could move, the whip unfurled from over his head and wrapped around his neck. Bradford tilted his head and saw Ziva, dangling from the tree upside down. She jerked, and he could see the strain of her muscles as she tightened her hold. The man sputtered, grabbing for his neck. She pulled hard once, and he fell to his knees, his eyes closing. An unholy grin curved Ziva's lips as she tucked her body into her legs, then flipped out of the tree. She took off at a run. The second man turned to her and fired. She dodged, then flicked the whip at his legs. It wrapped around them, and she jerked. He fell, thrashing, on the ground. Quickly, she undid the whip. Then with another move, she delivered the 'The Kill Kiss'. The man stilled.

Ziva glanced around at the men littering the ground around her feet. She turned suddenly and flicked out the whip. Another man stepped out of the trees and caught the edge of her whip. Bradford's eyes widened as he watched the man.

What is Moore doing here? As soon as he thought it, he realized he was mistaken. The sense of danger and intensity let him know it was Alton Blade. Usually, he could

tell them apart instantly, but he felt foggy. For a moment, the cold expression on Alton's face made him afraid.

"You better mean it when you use a weapon on me, Ziva." Alton's tone matched his expression.

Bradford frowned. It wasn't like Ziva knew it was him.

"I always mean it, Blade. This was just a friendly warning. Next time you walk up behind me in battle, you better let me know you aren't the enemy."

Her words let Bradford know she had known it was Alton. Ziva jerked the whip away from Alton. She furled it across her chest, then put her hands on her hips.

"What are you doing here?"

"Like you, I was on my way back from Savoy Valley. So I was the closest to offer you back up."

Ziva turned to him. The anger on her face surprised him. Usually, she was very affable, or at least so it seemed. She didn't let much of what she was really thinking show. She took her braid down from where it was pinned on the top of her head.

"Did you leave any of the six other men alive for questioning?" Her tone was accusatory.

"Five. And you're one to talk. You didn't leave any, either." Alton raised an eyebrow, a sardonic grin on his face.

Ziva narrowed her eyes. Suddenly, she turned and pulled out her mini bow and arrow from her back sheath. She shot straight at Alton. Alton quickly moved out of the way. The arrow hit the man coming stealthy behind him. The man fell back onto the forest floor. Ziva smoothly put her weapon back in place, then turned on Alton. She stomped over to him. She poked him in the chest.

"You knew he was coming behind you, so why didn't you do something?"

"I didn't know you cared." Alton's reply was cold.

Ziva's eyes narrowed, and then she turned from him and gestured at the fallen man. "There. Now we have someone to question. The sedative on the tip of the arrow should keep him out for a few hours. William will want to question him. Ulrich can

keep him locked up until William gets back from his business trip. You carry him. I'm through with my good deeds for the day. I'll take Bradford back." She stepped around Alton and started to where he was.

"Where did you stash Bradford? Are you driving Kiki? No way can you get Bradford on her if he's hurt. How hurt is he?" Alton asked.

"Nope. Kiki is home today. The weather wasn't supposed to be so nice, so I decided to not ride my Harley today. I'm in Donald."

Bradford smiled slightly. Ziva had a tendency to name her vehicles and weapons. Ziva bent and uncovered him. Alton walked over to him.

"He probably has a hell of a headache. I ditched my ride a little distance away from the crash. When I got here on foot, a van pulled up with eight men who helped pull the two men who survived the wreck out. While they were distracted, I sneaked in and pulled him from the crash. Then I got him away from there. These jokers"-- she looked around at the men scattered in the clearing--"were trying to find us." She looked back at Bradford. "How are you feeling, Lover?" Ziva's voice was soft.

Bradford was watching Alton. His expression went deadly, then blank. Although he was feeling fuzzy, Bradford couldn't resist a wicked grin at Alton. Alton glared. They knew each other well. Bradford knew he would enjoy teasing Alton about his uncharacteristic behavior at a future date. For now, he would enjoy Ziva's attentions.

He turned to her. Her slightly slanted catlike eyes--a mix of green, hazel, and silver--studied him. Against her onyx skin, her eyes were startling, but they fit her exotic looks. Her braid trailed down her shoulder and almost touched the forest floor. Standing, it rested against her stomach.

"I'm a little weak," he replied.

Bradford was surprised at how his voice sounded as he said it. He frowned and shifted. Pain lanced through his head and body. He hissed. Ziva ran her hand down his body, checking him over. Then she sat back.

"Can you stand?"

"I don't know," he admitted.

"Let's give it a try," she said.

She helped him sit up. Alton leaned over.

"I've got it." Ziva glared at him.

Alton sighed, long and loud. Ziva ignored Alton, returning her attention to Bradford. With her help, he stood slowly. Bradford wavered. The dizziness increased.

"Christ, I'm weak. How the hell did I get here under my own steam?"

"You didn't," Ziva answered.

He turned to look at her. "What?"

The movement made blackness dance across his eyes.

"I carried you," she said cheerfully.

"Oh, shit," he said.

Bradford looked at Alton standing next to them. "Remind me of this later." He closed his eyes a moment, then opened them. "Okay, no carrying me. Just help me walk." He thought of something. "Crap. What time is it?"

"Almost eight o'clock," Alton replied.

"Fuck. I'm over two hours late," Bradford said.

Another wave of nausea filled him as Ziva started to help him move forward. They headed for the fallen men. Each step made his body ache.

"You've been stepping out on me, Lover--with that she-devil Nicola Holland, of all people." Ziva's tone was teasing.

Bradford opened his mouth to reply. Blackness made his sight flick out. His knees weakened.

"That's it." Ziva changed her hold.

Before he realized it, she had him over her shoulder and was walking across the clearing. Bradford blinked as he looked at her rounded ass. He reared to get down. Ziva smacked him on the butt.

"Keep still. Dropping you would be bad."

He stilled as she continued to walk. Her movements, although smooth, made his head swim. As blackness came up to claim him, he fought it.

“Nicola,” he whispered.

“Don’t worry, Lover. I’ll get you to the other woman.” The cheerful malice in her tone did anything but calm him.

“Behave,” he said, still fighting to stay awake.

“Oh, I’ll be so good.” The promise in her voice only made him worry more.

Alton snorted. Ziva stopped.

“What? I can be good.”

“Only when it suits you,” Alton replied.

“Of course. Only my way counts,” Ziva countered.

“Someday, you’ll learn that not everything has to be a battle, Ziva.” Alton said softly.

“In your world, Alton. Not mine.” Her voice was equally soft.

Bradford was shocked at her use of Alton’s first name. She always called him Blade. Before he could think on it anymore, they were moving. Each step made his nausea and the throbbing in his head increase. As blackness came over him, he was grateful.

Nicola paced in front of her couch. She stopped and crossed her arms under her breasts. A glance at the clock showed that it was over two hours past the time she and Bradford had agreed on for their date. She couldn’t believe he had stood her up. Furious, she strode toward her stairs. The sound of the doorbell made her turn. Narrowing her eyes, she walked over to the door and jerked it open.

“You have some ga-“ She trailed off as she took in the sight before her.

“I’m dropping off Lover for your date.” The woman standing in her doorway smiled.

Nicola stared at Ziva Jackson, then glanced at what looked to be an unconscious Bradford with his hand slung over her shoulder. She returned her attention to Ziva. Ziva’s smile widened.

"Where do you want Lover?"

Nicola's eyes narrowed as Ziva called him Lover again. As far as she knew, Ziva and Bradford hadn't been involved. Yet the familiar way she talked about him made Nicola rethink her assumption.

"Since you call him Lover, you can take him to your house." Nicola replied.

She gripped the door and pushed it closed. Nicola stepped back as the door flew open. Ziva pushed the door with her hand and narrowed her eyes.

"It's been a long day, and I'm in no mood for this. Where is the fucking bedroom?"

Speechless, Nicola stared at Ziva.

"Screw it. I'll find it myself," Ziva said

Ziva bent, then lifted Bradford over her shoulder. She stepped toward Nicola, who blocked the doorway.

"Move," Ziva growled.

"This is my house, and you don't walk in here and do what the hell you want. Who the fuck do you think you are?" Nicola narrowed her gaze and put her hands on her hips.

Ziva's expression went cold. "The woman who's delivering your man to you--a man who could only think of you when he's injured, and that he was late for your date. Are you going to turn him away?"

Nicola studied her silently. She looked at Bradford, then stepped back.

Ziva watched her, then demanded, "Are you claiming Bradford Chadwick as yours, Nicola Holland?"

"Are you going to stop calling him Lover?" Nicola countered.

"Nope." Ziva suddenly grinned playfully. "Ah, no need to be jealous. We were never intimate that way."

"He's mine, Ziva, and no woman but me will call him Lover. Find your own man," Nicola stated firmly between clenched teeth.

"If only it was that simple." Ziva said softly.

Nicola tried to read her expression, but couldn't.

"Glad to know Lover has someone who's willing to claim him and warn others off." Ziva smiled again playfully.

Nicola's eyes widened as she realized what she had done. She glared at Ziva.

"Mind your own business. My bedroom is this way. What happened to him?" she asked as she stepped back.

Ziva came further into the room. Nicola shut the door, then led the way to the stairs. Nicola looked up, then back at Ziva. "Maybe we should take him to the downstairs bedroom," she said.

"Nah. I'm good to take him to your room," Ziva said

Nicola continued up the stairs, keeping an eye on Ziva. Ziva climbed the stairs, carrying Bradford over her shoulder effortlessly. At the top of the stairs, Nicola turned left. Ziva followed her. In moments, they were in her room. Ziva put Bradford down on the bed gently. He didn't stir.

"What happened to him?" Nicola demanded.

"He had a car accident," Ziva replied.

For some reason, Nicola didn't believe that was all there was to it. It was something in the way Ziva said it. The doorbell rang before she could ask more. Frowning, she glanced back at the door of her bedroom.

"You better get that. Selena is doing us a favor by coming to check him out," Ziva said.

The name sounded familiar. It dawned on her who Ziva was referring to.

"Doctor Rashard is making a house call?"

"For Bradford, she is." Ziva practically purred.

Nicola could see the devilish look in her eyes. The bell rang again.

"Go get the door." Ziva grinned wide.

Nicola glared at her and went to the bedroom door. She went down the hall, then the stairs. At least with Dr. Selena Rashard, she didn't have to worry about her lusting after Bradford. Nicola didn't know the doctor that well, but knew she was intense and

very focused on her profession. Dr. Rashard was one of the best surgeons at Trescott Cove General Hospital. Nicola opened the door, then blinked.

The woman standing before her could not possibly be Dr. Rashard. Her hair was in wild, kinky disarray around a face that seemed lush and sexy. Nicola looked at the sports shirt that stopped just below bountiful breasts. Her midriff was bare and muscled. The biker shorts hugged curvaceous hips and stopped mid thigh. The woman held a black bag in her hand.

Where the hell is the buttoned down woman who I have glimpsed at the hospital?

"Hey. You must be Nicola. I'm Selena. Ziva called me to check on Bradford." Her voice was as lush as her body.

"She's upstairs," Nicola said between clenched teeth.

"Are you going to let me in?" Selena smiled.

"Oh, yes." Nicola stepped back.

After closing the door, she led Dr. Rashard up the stairs to her room.

"Hey, Lena. Thanks for coming." Ziva greeted her warmly.

"You know I'll do anything for Bradford," Selena replied.

"Yeah." Ziva laughed and looked over at Nicola.

Nicola clenched her fists and kept silent. Selena cut off his shirt and pants, then looked over Bradford, checking his injuries. After a bit, she was finished. She took out a bottle of pills and a card, putting them on the bedside table.

Selena turned to Nicola and said, "Those are for his pain. Thankfully, he doesn't have a concussion. From what I can tell, his ribs are bruised. He's banged up and will be sore for a few days. He should be okay after that. I've left you my number to call if anything changes." Selena touched Bradford gently, then glanced at Ziva. "Are we still on for a workout session?"

"Yep. Give me a sec," Ziva said.

"Okay, I'll be downstairs, Ziva. Nicola," Selena said.

She walked out the bedroom door and left. Ziva glanced at Bradford. She gently pushed his hair from off his forehead. Nicola growled. Ziva chuckled.

"I'm not poaching. Bradford has a lot of people who care about him. Not just you," Ziva said.

"I d-"

Ziva interrupted her. "Don't bother denying it, Nicola. I know the look. You care. You won't admit it to yourself, but you do." Ziva glanced at her. There was an intensity in her gaze. "Don't be stupid and fuck this up. Hurt him, and I will kill you."

Nicola believed her.

"Stop calling him Lover, or –"

"Or?" Ziva's tone was menacing.

Nicola didn't back down from anyone. She walked over to Ziva and got in her face. Ziva's catlike gaze was cold. Nicola didn't care. She smiled, a cold grin.

"Or you and I will have a little talk about what isn't an appropriate term to use with someone else's man."

Ziva stared at her a moment, then started to laugh. Nicola blinked at the turn around.

"You've got balls, Nicola Holland. I can respect that." Ziva chuckled. "Too bad I can't abide by what you want. Lover and I have a special friendship. That's all we have, but he'll always be my Lover. I care about him too." Ziva glanced at him fondly, then back at Nicola. Her expression changed, going cold once again. "If you can't accept that, then I look forward to our talk. Take care of Lover. I'll be back tomorrow to check on him. I'll lock up when I leave." She walked around Nicola and left the room.

Nicola looked after her and shook her head. Although Ziva looked like she would be a pain in the ass, Nicola could appreciate it. Heck, they might even end up liking each other, as long as they came to an understanding concerning Bradford. Nicola walked over to Bradford and sat by his side. She studied the various bruises on his body. Tentatively, she reached out and touched each one. She withdrew her hand.

"What am I going to do about you, Brawich? You've gotten under my skin."

She stood and went over to the other side of the bed. Stripping down to her underwear, she got in beside him. Gingerly, she lay close to him. She watched him sleep. After some time, her eyes closed as she went to sleep.

Nicola stirred. She opened her eyes and stifled a gasp. Intense light hazel eyes studied her.

"Nicola." The need was in his voice.

Bradford leaned close and kissed her. The hunger in his kiss made her pussy cream. Nicola shifted, pressing against him. Bradford jerked, then lay on his back.

"Shit." He hissed in pain.

"Oh, God. Bradford, I'm sorry. I forgot." Nicola sat up and looked down at him. Bradford blinked up at her, and then a huge smile curved his lips.

"Are you okay?" Nicola asked.

"You called me Bradford."

She blinked and bit her lip. She had without realizing it.

"Uh-uh. No taking it back, *sladjij dikobaz*," Bradford said.

She studied his steady gaze. The emotion in his eyes made her heart race. There was something there she never expected to see. Pushing it aside for now, Nicola leaned over him, careful not to hurt his injuries.

"No backing away," she promised.

Nicola kissed him softly. Bradford tightened his hold on her, tugging her. Nicola leaned away.

"You're hurt."

"I'll always be up for this. You can do all the work." He smiled crookedly, a wicked twinkle in his eyes.

She bit her lip.

"Nicola." The need and hunger in his tone weakened her resolve.

"*Sladjij dikobaz*," he said in that rich voice of his.

Although she wouldn't admit it, the way he said *sladjij dikobaz* turned her on. Quickly, she wiggled out of her underwear. She gently helped him out of his. When he

was lying back against the bed, she put a condom on him, then straddled him. His cock was already hard. Rising up on her haunches, she held his shaft in her hand and placed it against her entrance. Slowly, she lowered herself onto his erection. Bradford hissed.

“Am I hurting you?” Nicola stilled.

“Your not moving is causing me pain. Move, *sladkij dikobaz*,” he demanded.

Nicola smiled devilishly. “I’ll move as I want.” She rose up and down slowly after each word.

Bradford groaned. Nicola kept up her slow movements back and forth. Wetness made his cock’s passage slick and smooth. Bradford muttered as she took him. Tightening her inner pussy walls, she rotated her hips. She put her head back, moaning. Gripping her upper thighs, she rocked against him. Bradford stiffened. His orgasm pulsed inside of her. Nicola grunted as her own release overcame her. Shuddering, she tried to calm her racing pulse. Weakened, she moved off him, took off the condom, tied the end, and threw it in the trash by the bed. She lay down close to him. Bradford pulled her into his body, snuggling her close.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” She went to move away.

“I need you close, *sladkij dikobaz*,” he said.

Nicola glanced at him. “Fine, but if you let me hurt you, I’ll be pissed.”

Bradford said, “I’m glad you care, but you belong by my side.”

Pleasure filled her at his words.

“Okay. You can have your way for now,” she replied, trying to keep her voice steady.

“Always my way,” Bradford mumbled, sounding half asleep.

“So you think,” Nicola countered.

“So I know.” He chuckled.

She was silent. His soft snore came a few moments later. She clasped her hands under her chin and watched him sleep. He was more than under her skin. She cared about him--maybe too much. It was too soon. They had only been together a few

months. As she studied him, her head knew all the reasons she should not feel the way she did, yet her heart didn't care.

“What am I going to do about you, Bradford?”

Chapter Seven

“What are you doing out of bed?” Nicola demanded.

Bradford winced at the sound of her voice. He lay back in the bed then looked at her standing in the doorway to her bedroom. He stifled a moan. Her hair was in sexy disarray and what she called loungewear made him hard. The pale yellow loose shirt open at the neck gave him tantalizing glimpses of her rich honey skin while the matching soft looking slacks hugged her hips and long legs. He looked back at her face. Her eyes were narrowed as she glared at him. He knew there was a hint of concern in her gaze. Guilt filled him.

Damn William for making me fake I am sicker than I am.

The day after his attack William had called from out of town and told him to stay put at Nicola's until they found out what was going on. He hadn't wanted to put Nicola in danger so he had planned to leave. At least until William pointed out they were not sure they had caught all who was behind his attack and if they hadn't they probably already knew about Nicola. Thus putting her in danger. At the time it had sounded logical. William being the consummate detail person had sent Selena to check him over and tell Nicola he needed more bed rest than she recommended before. Now Nicola watched him like a hawk to make sure he didn't overexert himself.

“I just went to the bathroom.” He could hear the pout in his own voice.

“What have I been telling you these last few days?” Nicola crossed her arms under her breast and tapped her bare foot.

“Call you when I need to get out of bed.” He sighed.

“Exactly. I don't need you to bump your head Brawich. That will set back your recovery.”

Bradford narrowed his eyes and said softly, “Come here, Nicola.”

She glared but came towards the bed. “You should be more careful. “

He waited until she was close then reached out and pulled her off her feet into his lap. Nicola gasped. He took advantage and kissed her thoroughly. She stiffened for

a moment then moaned and kissed him back. Bradford slowly released her from his kiss. Nicola's eyes were closed. He made a rumbling sound pleased at her dazed expression. She opened her eyes. He leaned his head down and rested his forehead against hers.

"I know what you've been trying to do these last few days."

"What are you-"

He interrupted her. "Keep me at a distance by calling me Brawich."

She opened her mouth to deny it then closed it.

Nicola sighed and said softly, "Yes, I have but it's not working. And it's your fault."

Bradford started to laugh. The accusation in her tone was cute. Nicola jerked her head back and thumped him in the chest.

"It's not funny."

"Yes it is," he countered.

"Why?"

"You're trying to control this Nicola." He cupped her cheek. "This isn't something you can control. You need to let it happen. Let me-"

Nicola put her finger on his lip. "Don't, not yet."

He nipped her finger. She jerked away and glared.

"Not nice."

"Never said I was." He shrugged. He studied her leery gaze then said softly, "Why are you so afraid?"

Nicola crossed her arms under her breast. "I'm not afraid. I just don't want to be put into the category of the little biddable woman."

Bradford stared at her in shock. Then he threw his head back and laughed. Tears rolled down his cheeks. Nicola thumped him on the chest again.

"It's not funny."

“Yes it is. Where did you get that warped view that this would make you –“ He paused to cough trying not to laugh again. “a little biddable woman.” He chuckled. “God I can’t even say it without laughing.” He took a breath to control himself.

When he was finally in control he continued. “Biddable is the last word I would ever use to describe you.”

“It changes people,” Nicola whispered.

“For the better. It only enhances them,” He said equally as soft.

“Not from what I have seen.” She bit her lip then shook her head. “Makes you do things you usually wouldn’t.”

He thought about it then had to agree. “Maybe but only if it is what you want to do.”

“Sometimes you don’t have a choice.” Nicola eyes were troubled.

Bradford stiffened. “Who hurt you Nicola?”

She closed her eyes then opened them. “Not me. Isis -my sister. She raised me by herself. I was in high school when she met the supposed love of her life.” She made quotes with her fingers. “He changed her. Broke her spirit. Made her his biddable woman. He was the man and his word was law.” Her tone was bitter.

“Nicola he wasn’t a man. He was child. A man would never have done that,” he said.

“I know in here,” she said tapping her head. “But in here-“ She tapped her heart. “It is hard to let go like that.”

He studied her for a bit then spoke again. “Do you trust me Nicola?”

She looked startled then her expression softened. “Yes, I trust you Bradford.”

His heart sang at the use of his name. He wanted to hear it from her lips often.

“Then trust me to revere your gift and not abuse it.”

She stared at him a moment. “My sister did and look what it got her.”

“I’m not him, Nicola and not to sound cold but your sister has a choice to leave him. Change her-”

“Isis can’t change what happened. He broke her then when he-“ She stopped.

"He did what?"

Nicola leaned back slightly. "Not much people know but my sister is in jail."

He blinked but tightened his hold on her not letting her move away. "For what."

Nicola gulped. "Protecting me." She looked miserable.

"What happened?"

Nicola closed her eyes briefly then opened them. The pain in her gaze took his breath.

"Even back then I was outspoken. Isis raised me to speak my mind. I tried to keep silent when she got with her husband. Keep the peace but when he started to hurt her. Physically I couldn't any longer." She paused. "I still remember the first time he punched me in the face. Still feel it." She touched her cheek. "The rage on his face was so—" She took a breath. "I can't even describe it." Tears filled her eyes raining down her cheeks. "He was going to kill me. I knew it. Just from the look in his eyes. But—" Her breath hiccupped. "Isis stepped in. He turned on her like a rabid dog. I tried to help but I wasn't strong enough. He knocked me down and kicked me over and over. Isis was screaming and all I could feel was pain. Oh my god so much pain." She rocked.

"Nicola you don't have to say anymore."

"Yes I do."

He nodded.

She took a trembling breath. "He wasn't stopping then suddenly he did. He collapsed onto me. I could feel something warm and sticky. Isis was muttering. 'don't fuck with my sister.' She pulled him off me. We were there rocking and crying when the cops came. Someone had heard the noise and called them. All they saw was me and my sister with a dead body. They didn't care what he had done. They took Isis away and arrested her. I was sent to the hospital. Missed my senior graduation. And Isis pleaded guilty and they sentenced her."

"What? Why did she plead guilty? It was clearly self defense." He was astounded.

"We lived in a small town in New York. And he was one of them."

"Them who?"

"The line of blue. He was on the police force." Her tone even more bitter. "I pleaded with her to tell the truth. She refused. Since we didn't have a prison in our town they sent her to one closer to the city. It wasn't until years later that she told me why. The only way she could ensure I would get out without something mysteriously happening was to plead guilty. She didn't dare smudge the reputation of the golden child of the force. " She lowered her eyes then raised them again. "Her only concern was me. She didn't even care about herself or her safety. Do you know how humbling that is?"

"I can only imagine. She loves you very much." Bradford touched her cheek wiping her tears away.

"Yeah she does. You'll like her when you meet her."

"I'll gladly go with you to see her."

"There is no need. In a few month's she'll be moving to Trescott Cove. After serving ten years of her sentence she's getting out for good behavior."

"That's great."

"Yes. She's getting a fresh start. You know that empty space at the base of the building we bought."

He thought about it then nodded. "Yeah, the one that's been boarded up with renovations."

"Yes, that one. She's opening a bookstore there."

"You gave her the money for it didn't you?" Bradford studied her.

"No she has her own money. With Kylie's agreement we gave her the space rent free for as long as she wants it."

"How is it she's been in jail yet can still afford to open a store?"

Nicola smiled. "I'm good at making money grow."

"True." He chuckled.

"Even if I wasn't it wouldn't matter. You know I.L. Warner."

"The mystery writer. Man, his books are chilling."

"Her books."

"Her's?" Bradford chuckled.

Nicola nodded. "Her's. Isis writes them. She rarely gave interviews or anything and her publisher understood. She didn't let anyone think she was a man they just do. Isis has talent. That is one of the things that her husband tried to break her of but he couldn't. She kept writing. Each book getting more successful than the other. Even in prison she kept at it. She gave me all her money to invest and is nicely comfortable."

"I have her latest book on my nightstand at home to read. Wow I.L. Warner is your sister."

"Yes. And I can't wait for her to get here. Although I visit and talk to her often. It will be good to have her here. Until she can find a place she wants to buy she'll be living with me. She has so many ideas for her bookstore. Plus she is getting ready to start her next book." She paused then said in a rush. "I can't wait to have her here."

"I can tell." He cupped her cheek again.

Nicola turned her head and kissed his palm. She turned to him and rested her forehead against his.

"She'll like you," she said softly.

"She likes confident men huh."

Nicola chuckled. "Not really. She despised them. In you she will see your gentleness. Sweetness. Bossiness. And your care." She kissed a different part of his face as she spoke.

Nicola sighed and put her forehead against his. Bradford scooted down and moved her with him. She snuggled against him. He held her. After a few moments her breathing changed as she went to sleep. Bradford ran his finger down her cheek.

"Am I interrupting?" A languid voice asked.

Bradford sighed then looked over at the man lounging in the doorway.

"As usual your timing leaves lot to be desired, William."

"It's a gift." William shrugged then gestured to him to come with him.

William left. Bradford glanced down at Nicola. He gently disentangled from her. He stood then went behind William. A few moments later he walked into the living room. William was standing looking out the bay windows that overlooked the gardens in front of the house. Bradford joined him.

“When did you get back?”

“Day before yesterday.”

“And you are only coming to see me now?”

“I was busy.”

“Why do you sound so amused?” Bradford glanced at William.

There was a slight smile on his lips.

“Women are such fascinating people.”

Bradford thought of what Nicola had told him and nodded.

“Yes they are. Resilient to.”

“True.”

“So is there a reason we are talking about women.”

“Women are also the downfall of men.”

Bradford rolled his eyes. He knew William and he would get to what he was getting at in his own way. He continued to study the gardens. Ziva walked from behind a tree and blew him a kiss. He laughed and waved. She went back behind the tree out of sight. Ziva and the others had been watching the house to protect him and Nicola.

“A woman was the downfall of the men who tried to capture you.”

“Capture? They were trying to kill me.”

“No. They were trying to capture you. They were a little overzealous in how they were going about it.”

“So you’ve found out what this is about?”

“Yep. There first mistake was trying to take you. There second was going after the one woman who had no qualms about taking them out.”

Bradford tried to come up with who it could be. With the women in Trescott it was a long list to choose from.

"Okay, I give up. Who?"

"Dakota Willis?"

He winced as he heard the name. Dakota may look like an angel but once she opened her mouth you knew she wasn't. She was antisocial and usually kept to herself. Her house was a few miles from his on the Trescott Cove side of the Pantera Mountains.

"They drugged Anarchy and Mayhem."

Bradford turned to look at him shocked. "How the hell did they get close enough to them?"

He imagined the two huge wolves that Dakota kept as pets ripping anyone who threatened their Mistress to shreds.

"A dart gun shot from some distance away."

"Shit. Are they okay?"

"They are now. The vet kept them overnight for observation."

"So tell me the rest of the story."

"They thought four men would be enough to take Dakota."

"As if." He snorted.

"Exactly. She won't tell me how but she took them out. There was not a mark on them anywhere that we could tell. After she did she called for help."

"Good. Then Ulrich has them and I can see these bastards."

"Uh huh. Wrong Willis and there was a jurisdiction issue." William was back to sounding amused.

"Let me guess. Women were their downfall."

"Ah yes. Dakota called Hunter and Rayne. Hunter in turn called Dominique while Rayne called Ziva. Ziva brought Nina along for what she called the fun."

"Nina?" Bradford could understand the other women but the café owner seemed to be a weird choice.

William got that closed expression that clearly said he wasn't going to reply to his question. "This is all second hand from the women."

"Ziva didn't call you."

"She had a personal score to settle. As she put it. 'they hurt lover and I hurt them'."

Bradford chuckled. He blew the tree a kiss. Ziva stepped out and acted liked she caught it. She did a dance and walked down the drive and out of sight.

"The two of you."

"You're just jealous that she likes me."

William snorted. "Yeah that's it. Anyway. A long story short the women tracked the man who wanted Dakota taken. They went in took him and the sixteen other men he had with him out. Then they called us. Ulrich was livid. Ulrich, Symond, Barkin, Alton and Taggart – who had come to get his wife- and I were at the house they had commandeered when Ulrich realized since it was technically in Savoy Valley he should call in the police chiefs."

Bradford nodded. He knew that Savoy Valley had two mayors and police chiefs.

"They were in Savoy Valley?"

"They were staying in Khali's house."

Bradford goggled. Khali Kraven was an artist like him and Dakota. His home was on one of the higher hidden glens of Savoy Valley side of the Pantera Mountains. He made Dakota seem friendly. Most people looked at height of almost seven feet and his huge size and were intimidated by him. Khali played up on it to make people leave him alone. The only reason he knew was Khali was a friend. Well Khali decided he wanted him as a friend. He had shown up at Bradford's house and in his blunt way told him he liked his work but it was missing something. At first he was offended but after Khali had taken the piece he was working on and with a few changes made it more he had listened. They met up once in awhile to work on projects together. That first piece they had done together had sold for almost fifteen million dollars which they had donated to the community center in Trescott Cove.

"Is Khali alright?"

"Yes he is. I forgot you and he are friendly."

"Yes. I'm surprised he let them in."

"Actually he didn't. They were going to take him too but he wasn't home. They decided to wait for him and set up base there since his place is so secluded. After Ulrich called the police chief's we went in."

"Did they leave anyone alive to question?"

"Surprisingly they all were."

"Really?"

William chuckled. "Really. Thankfully Rayne isn't as bloodthirsty as the others."

"No way Rayne could control all of them."

"Don't underestimate Rayne. She runs Renegade and deals with all of us. She can hold her own."

"True."

William chuckled.

"What is so funny?"

"Women are remarkable. The men were all in the main room tied up. There were nicks from knives and whip marks here and there. Except for the four Dakota had taken out at her house. Not a scratch on them."

Bradford glanced at William. "And it is bugging you how she did it."

"Dakota is an intriguing woman." He smiled an enigmatic grin. "Heck they all are. We had barely gotten inside when the Savoy people showed up. Ulrich wanted to take the men to Trescott. He and one of the chiefs were arguing about jurisdiction. The other one just quietly directed his men to take the men out. Ulrich never noticed. Hell I wouldn't have if I wasn't watching. I swear they made no sound." William shook his head. "It was disconcerting and strange." He paused then continued. "By the time Ulrich realized what happened the men were gone. The chief that was left told him to get a judge to issue an order for the men and he would turn them over. The chief then asked the women what this was about."

"The chief, he sounds calm."

"She. Her name was Rowen."

"Another intriguing woman."

"Very much so. Despite Ulrich's insistence she didn't back down and never changed her view. Before the women could start Khali stormed in demanding to know where these interlopers to his house were. He went livid when he found out they were gone. I swear he was going to rip us limb from limb. Rowen stepped in and spoke to him to quiet for us to hear. He calmed right down."

"Really? I definitely have to meet her. Calming Khali in a temper is no easy feat."

"You would never have known. She did it so easily. After Rowen asked the women to fill them in. While they did Khali actually prepared food for us and we ate as they explained what they had learned. It seems as if the man who wanted you taken had a list of names. A few in Trescott and Savoy. He is a collector of rare things."

"Rare things? What the hell is that?"

"You don't have any kind of arrogance do you?" William looked exasperated.

"What?"

"He wanted you, Dakota and Khali because you are artists of some renown. They also had the elder Blade on the list. I don't know how Rayne controlled Dominique after she saw them on it. They even had Quinn on the list. I know Ziva lost it when she saw his name. Before they took out the leader I noticed he had a Z in his cheek. It looked to be from a whip."

Bradford smiled grimly. Ziva had a soft spot for him and Quinn. She was fiercely protective of Quinn.

"This collector just decided to kidnap us all for like an art collection. But with people." He couldn't keep the disbelief out of his voice.

"Not kidnap. Take. He wasn't going to ask for any ransom. Just keep you all." William shook his head.

"Fuckers. So when can we question them."

"Never."

"What?"

"Ulrich got his court order. He took a few officers with him and I tagged along. When we got to Savoy's station house Rowen met us. He gave it to her and she said she

was sorry she couldn't abide by the courts order. The men had already been tried, sentenced and were gone. I've got to give it to Ulrich he kept his cool and asked to see the papers to prove it. They had everything and it was all on the up and up. The judge from Savoy had done everything before Ulrich got his order. When he asked if he could question them he was told no. They were not attainable. That was the exact wording. "Not attainable". Rowen said it was now a Savoy Valley problem and there was no need to concern ourselves about it anymore." William shook his head.

"Why do you seem okay with it? Hell why didn't Ulrich do something?"

"I don't know. I believe Rowen that there is no need to be concerned about those particular men." William expression hardened. "On the other hand. I checked into this collector business and it seems as if this is a sort of society. A club of sorts. We have to check into it more. Then bring them down." William tone was deadly.

Bradford smiled. He knew from that tone William would get to the bottom of it.

"So, I need to keep on my guard? Were the others on the list warned?"

"Yes be cautious but for now the threat is gone. And they were. Adrian is coming home. They tried for him on his tour but failed. With the crazy fans and now this. We can protect him better here. Whether he wants it or not."

Bradford laughed. "Good luck convincing him."

"Your brother might be stubborn but I can out stubborn him any say."

"I can see I'm going to have to get the betting pool going."

William laughed. "Are you betting against me or for me?"

"I'll have to think about it. You're good but I know Adrian." Bradford thought of his brother.

He laughed and William joined him.

"Thanks for finding out what was going on," he said.

William snorted. "I didn't do much. The women are who you should be thanking."

"And I will. Every amazing and intriguing one of them." He paused then said, "I'm glad I wasn't the one they went after."

"You and me both. Those women are frightening when you get on the wrong side of them." William shuddered.

"Are you really afraid of them?"

"No. But caution is man's best friend when dealing with women."

"True." He smiled.

With the woman sleeping upstairs he had to be very cautious.

"I'll check on you a few days. I'll see myself out." William said.

"Later." He replied.

Bradford stood watching out the window. After sometime the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs reached him. Warm hands slid around his waist and up his chest. He leaned back and turned his head. Her lips covered him in a soft kiss. He drew back and gazed at Nicola. The caution in her eyes made his heart clench. Going with his instinct he stepped back and took her hand in his.

"Come with me. I want to show you something," Bradford said.

"You're supposed to take it easy."

"I'm feeling better. Besides you can drive us." He led her from the room.

"Where?" She asked as she followed him.

"My house." He glanced down at his sweat pants and loose t-shirt.

He looked by the entryway and saw his shoes and a pair of Nicola's sandals. He walked her over to them. She put on her shoes and he put his on. Nicola took her keys off the entry table then opened the closet and took out her purse.

"Are you sure about this? We can go tomorrow," she said.

"Yes. We need to go now. Come on." He tugged her hand.

Nicola grumbled but she went outside. She closed the door and then they went to her car. They got inside. Ziva walked up the drive and waved. Nicola growled. Bradford chuckled.

"You think this is funny. She calls you lover."

"We have a –"

"I know. A special relationship but not in that way. I still don't like it." She turned on the car then pressed the gas.

Ziva stood in front of car. As they reached her Ziva seemed to flow out of the way.

"See ya, lover," Ziva called.

Nicola growled. "At least I will get a chance to make her stop."

"What do you mean?"

"Boxing."

"Boxing?" Bradford frowned.

"In six month, Ziva and I will be meeting center ring. If I can last one round with her she will stop calling you lover. She thinks she offered me a chance." Nicola snorted.

Bradford had an uneasy feeling. He knew Ziva and she was good at hand to hand. Nicola on the other hand was tenacious.

"That--"

"Not your business. This is between me and Ziva." Nicola's tone held a warning.

He closed his mouth and sat back. He could only imagine what would happen when they met in ring. He hoped they would call it off before then. He settled in the car seat as the scenery went by.

Nicola was grateful for the silence between them. She couldn't believe she had reveled so much to him. When she woke she had thought he had left. The feeling of relief she felt when she saw him in the living room made her knees weak. It was instinct that made her go to him and touch him. Now they were on their way to his house. She didn't know what he wanted to show her. All she could think of is that he was feeling better. That meant he was going home. She refused to think too deeply on the pang that gave her. The forty-five minute drive went quickly.

Bradford got out then came around the car and opened her door. He held her hand as they went up the stairs and into his house. He walked over to the stairs and led her upstairs. When he turned left her heart started to pound. He had shown her his

studio before but not this side. His studio took up the whole second floor. He had told her the left side was the pieces he was working on for his next show and he wasn't ready for anyone to see them. He stopped a few steps before the door and let go her hand. Bradford glanced at her then opened the double doors. He retook her hand and led her inside.

Nicola gasped as her gaze landed on the floor to ceiling canvas with a likeness of herself. She put her hand over her mouth. She remembered the moment he depicted in the painting. They had been chasing each other around the meadow behind his house when it started to rain. Bradford had called to her to run to him so they could go to the house out of the rain. She had stopped and said she wasn't made of sugar and would not melt. Then she had started to dance in the rain. He had captured the moment perfectly of her dancing in the rain. In awe she looked around the room. There were various paintings of her capturing moments they had spent together. She blushed as she saw the very sexual one. Next she studied the pedestals that held various statues of her in various emotions.

She laughed at her mean expression. She turned in a circle and took in piece after piece of her. Tears filled her eyes. In each she saw the truth.

"Nicola, are you ready to hear what I have to say?" His sexy voice swept over her.

She turned back to him. Nicola walked over to him and took his hand.

"No."

There was disappointment in his gaze. She cupped his cheek. She let her gaze fill with what she was feeling. A smile curved his lips.

"Tell me," he demanded.

"My confident man, I love you," she said. "I love you with everything in my soul."

"Ah, *sladkij dikobaz*. I love you too." Bradford laughed and lifted her off her feet.

"Hell, I even love that you call me sweet porcupine." Nicola chuckled.

Brawich's Way

He lowered her. Nicola shivered as his hard length rubbed against hers. Bradford held her close and looked into her eyes.

"It has to always be your way huh. You had to say it aloud first," he teased.

"Would you have it any other way?" she countered with sass in her voice.

"Not at all *sladkij dikobaz*. Doing it your way has some benefits," he replied.

He lowered his head.

"Our way. Doing it our way," Nicola said.

"Ours for now and forever," Bradford agreed.

"Is that a proposal?" She demanded raising an eyebrow.

"Ah, no *sladkij dikobaz*. *I know better*. When I propose it will be with all the trapping and on one knee." He paused. "Unless you want to do the asking?" Bradford said.

Before his lips touched hers she whispered. "Maybe. In that case it will be my way."

Bradford laughed against her lips then kissed her hungrily. Pleasure filled Nicola. He knew her so well. She knew that whatever came they would overcome it together. Doing it their way. Nicola held on and kissed him back.

We hope you enjoyed Brawich's Way. Check back next week at Satin Notes ~ <http://www.satinnotes.com> for our new story.

For more about Trescott Cove and Satin Notes check out the site.

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