

# BRAZEN

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ILLUSTRATIONS IN THE LIMITED EDITION  
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# One

# NICK

**W**HEN NICK SORRENTINO'S alarm went off at five a.m., he bolted upright, certain it was his phone ringing, some emergency unfolding. Five years ago, he would have figured it'd be Elena or Clay with some Pack problem. These days, his first thought was "the boys." Reese or Noah was in trouble and needed his help. Or had been out drinking and needed a lift. Even with werewolves, the second was more likely, particularly if the werewolves in question were twenty-two and nineteen.

But it wasn't his phone ringing—it was the alarm. Why the hell would he set it for five a.m.? It must have been one of the boys, playing a sadistic...

As he reached to shut the phone off, he was stopped by the fact it was not on the nightstand beside him. Well, yes, it was, but there was an obstacle in between. A woman.

She groaned, fumbled for his phone and handed it to him.

Right. That was why he'd set the alarm. He needed to get home to take Noah to school because he'd been grounded from using his car, which was, Nick had to admit, turning out to be more of a punishment for him than for Noah.

At least he'd had the presence of mind to set the alarm. That alone was an accomplishment, given that he'd realized he *wasn't* heading home while in the back of a cab as Jacinda undid his zipper. Damn lucky he'd remembered. Or perhaps, he mused, a sign that he'd really had one too many women go down on him in the back of a taxi if he could still think "Huh, I should set my alarm." That, or he was getting old.

"Are you going to turn that off?" said a voice.

It was a woman's voice. But it didn't come from Jacinda's side of the bed. Nick looked over to see her friend, Heidi, curled up on his other side. Right. Huh. Well, maybe he wasn't that old yet.

He shut off his alarm. Then he checked his e-mail, making sure he didn't have an angry one from Frank Russell. Russell was a client he'd taken out last night on a double-date with Jacinda and her friend. Nick looked from Jacinda to Heidi.

Not the way a double-date was supposed to work. But in Nick's world, they did seem to, with rather alarming frequency.

He did have an e-mail from Russell, but only thanking him for the evening out, and asking if he had Heidi's phone number. According to Russell, they'd left together, then she'd had some emergency and taken off. Which was when she'd hopped into the cab with Nick and Jacinda, just before it pulled away from the curb. From there, well, things escalated. At least Russell hadn't figured it out.

Nick climbed over Jacinda and started pulling on his trousers. Heidi rolled from bed and stumbled into the bathroom.

"Where are you rushing off to?" Jacinda asked as she watched him dress. "Your car is ten minutes away, and you never start before nine, which means we have plenty of time for another round. Or two."

She tugged down the covers, showing him what was on offer. It was, he had to admit, a very nice offer. Tempting, though? Well, that was the problem. Ten years ago, he would have already been back in that bed. Hell, he wouldn't have gotten *out* of it until he made sure they both started the day off right. Now, though, he stood there enjoying the sight of her, feeling an answering twitch in his groin and a spark of regret. But that was it.

"I'd love to," he said. "But I need to take Noah to school, and it's an hour drive home."

"The kid has his license, Nick. He even has a car."

“He lost his privileges for driving home after having a beer.”

“A beer? One?”

Nick pulled on his shirt. “That’s the rule.”

“Since when do you follow rules?”

Since always, he could say. Maybe not the ones society set out for him—grow up, get a job, marry, have kids—but otherwise, rule-following was in his blood. He followed the rules of his kind, of his Pack, and imposing them on Noah was as important as sticking to them himself, no matter how inconvenient. Noah needed that stability more than most.

“I set out the punishment, I need to follow through with it.”

Jacinda shook her head. “I’m not sure I like this new Nick. The old, irresponsible one was a whole lot more fun.”

“Could have sworn you had fun last night. Or maybe that was just Heidi.”

She smiled. “Okay, you’re still fun that way. But taking in these cousins? And going to work every day? That’s not the Nick I knew.”

“I haven’t been that Nick in years, Jace.”

“I know, but it’s getting worse. How long has it been since you called me? Two months? I’m beginning to think I might need to bring a friend more often, just to keep you interested.”

He walked over and bent to kiss her. “You know better than that. Adding Heidi to the mix was your idea. I’m just flexible and accommodating.”

“You are indeed.”

She caught his hand and pulled him closer. Her other hand went to his waistband, but he peeled her fingers off.

“Don’t tempt me, Jace. I really do need to leave.”

He gave her a last quick kiss and started for the door.

“Were you even planning to come back?” she asked.

He glanced over his shoulder at her.

“Last night,” she said. “Before I jumped you in the cab, were you even planning to come back to my place?”

“If you wanted me to,” he said, which was the truth, even if it didn’t quite answer the question. “Get some more sleep. I’ll call you.”

“Soon?”

He hesitated. He could lie and say yes. Most guys would. But that was never how he’d done things. Don’t take her number if you won’t call. Don’t say you’ll call if you don’t plan to. Don’t say it’ll be soon if it won’t be.

“I’ll call when I can,” he said and slipped out the door.



AS NICK DROVE home, he left a message with his admin assistant to say he might be late. He worked for his father at the family business, which just happened to be a multinational corporation. Nick’s corner of it was small, by choice. There was no way in hell he could run a business like that—he had

neither the aptitude nor the interest. His realm was advertising. He wasn't even the boss there—again, not his thing.

His niche was graphic design and client services. He had an eye for what worked, whether it was clothing or advertisements. He also had an unerring instinct for knowing what people wanted. It wasn't a cut-throat ability to pander and manipulate, but a genuine desire to please.

When he disconnected, he received a text message for an entirely different sort of business. Pack business.

Nine months ago, Elena and Clay had discovered that a long-dead member was actually very much alive. At the same time, Elena had become Pack Alpha, with Clay as her beta. Between shifting Pack dynamics, regular Pack business and raising six-year-old twins, they had little time to search for Malcolm. Nick had offered to do it.

Malcolm Danvers. Father of Jeremy Danvers, the former Alpha. Nick remembered him well. Well and not fondly. No one remembered Malcolm fondly. They weren't searching to welcome him back. They were searching to kill him. Preferably before Jeremy found out he'd still been alive.

Werewolves were, by nature, violent sons of bitches, as Clay would say. Clay had been bitten at the age of five, rescued and brought home by Jeremy. The first time Nick met him, Clay knocked him flying. His way of saying hello. And establishing dominance. That's the way things worked in their world.

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Nick didn't have much use for dominance. He was happier obeying orders than giving them. Except now that his best friends led the Pack and there was a younger generation to care for, he'd realized it was time for him to step up. Hence offering to handle the hunt for Malcolm.

Back to werewolves and violence, though. While Nick was a fine fighter, he didn't feel the usual drive to hunt, to protect territory, to fight for his place. Elena teased he satisfied that urge in his romantic pursuits, but the truth was, he didn't really pursue there either. Like hunting, he enjoyed it and he'd rarely turn down an opportunity, but it wasn't a driving force in his life.

Malcolm sat at the opposite end of the spectrum. He pursued fights and women with equal vigor, as Nick recalled. And with the same ferocity. Women were prizes to be conquered and then discarded. Or worse. Nick's grandfather, Dominic, had believed Malcolm killed Jeremy's mother. Not that the old Alpha had turned him out of the Pack for it. Malcolm was too good a fighter to lose over a dead woman. Another Pack, another time.

But now, Malcolm was back. And finding him was Nick's job.



## Two

# NICK

**N**ICK LEFT HIS car in the drive. He'd pick Noah up, drop him off, then come back and clean up for work. Before he headed in, he texted a reply on the Malcolm issue. He sent a second text as he reached the front porch. This one didn't have far to go—less than a hundred feet, he'd guess. To Noah. Asking if he was ready. He could just open the front door and holler, but these days, text messaging seemed the way to go, even within the walls of your own house. Given that the walls of that house encompassed ten thousand square feet of living space on a hundred-acre lot, Nick had to admit that hollering from the front door wasn't practical, no matter how good a werewolf's hearing.

The estate was sixty miles north of New York. A property that size within commuting distance did bring the occasional enterprising real estate agent to the gate on behalf of some billionaire or other. You had to be a billionaire to afford property like this. Or you had to have family who'd bought it three hundred years ago when they emigrated from Italy. The house had been rebuilt twice in the interim, but it was an ancestral home. A communal home, too. That was how werewolves lived, all generations under one roof. For years it had been just Nick and Antonio. Now there were the boys.

Reese and Noah were permanent residents. A third young werewolf—Morgan Walsh—was older than the other two, and even more skittish about settling into someone else's home. He was on one of his walkabouts, gone to stay with the Russian pack for a few months. He'd be back, though, and was already hinting about finding work in New York and "renting" a room at the house. Rent wasn't necessary, but if it made him feel less awkward about the situation, they'd take it. Young werewolves needed a Pack, but they needed a family and a home at least as much.

When Nick opened the door, Reese greeted him. Coffee in hand, bleary eyed, he looked as if he hadn't gotten a moment's sleep. Which he hadn't. He'd just gotten in after a night shift at one of the family factories. His

choice—Antonio certainly wouldn't make his dependents work for a living, as Nick well knew. Reese was studying for his MBA and in the meantime he wanted to learn the business from the ground up. Which included working night shift at a factory.

The young Australian needed to feel like he was pulling his weight. Part of that was the werewolf in him, wanting to take a full role in his Pack. Part of it was just Reese. Nick didn't interfere, even if he would like to see the young man cut loose now and then.

"Thank you," Nick said, plucking the coffee from Reese's hand.

"Um, that was mine."

"I know. But you should be heading to bed, which means you do not need caffeine. I do." Nick leaned into the next room. "Noah!"

"He's coming. Slowly, as usual. He said you stayed in the city. You should have texted me. I'd have given him a lift to school. No need to end your date early."

"I had to come home and change anyway."

Reese lifted one eyebrow. "Um, no. You keep a bag in your car."

"I took it out last time we went to Stonehaven."

"That was a month ago."

Nick shrugged. "I forgot to put it back in."

Reese stared as if Nick had left behind his cell phone for a month. As Nick walked into the kitchen Noah swung around the corner, running his hand through his hair. That, along with brushing his teeth, constituted his idea of proper grooming. Sometimes Nick swore he did it just because it made Nick shudder.

“Are we shaving today?” Nick asked as Noah grabbed an apple.

“You can. I’ve got another day.”

Nick couldn’t argue. Noah did only need it a few times a week. He didn’t look nineteen. Or eighteen, which was his official age, shaving off a year when they’d taken him in, to help him catch up, academically and otherwise.

Nick could say Noah just took after his father. Joey Stillwell had grown up with Nick and Clay, and he’d always been small, always looked young, even for a werewolf. With Noah, though...well, there were other problems. Namely an alcoholic mother who hadn’t stopped drinking during her pregnancy. Add in a rough life with a brutal stepdad and Joey almost out of the picture, and you ended up with a whole slew of issues, from delayed maturity to learning problems to a hair-trigger temper. The last two had much improved since Noah came to live with them, but there was nothing that could be done about the former. At least he’d finally started his Changes a few months ago, which helped.

“So I guess your date went well,” Noah said, brows wagging as he took a bite of his apple.

“Do Nick’s dates ever not go well?” Reese said, reaching for a banana. “So how about Russell’s?”

Nick hesitated. He didn’t mean to—Reese wasn’t fishing—but it took him a second to think up an answer that wasn’t an actual lie, and that second was all Reese needed.

“Ah,” Reese said. “Russell’s date went home alone.”

Again, Nick wasn’t nearly quick enough. Or maybe a flicker of guilt gave him away.

Reese burst out laughing. “Whoa, no, his date did not go home alone. Was it a trade-up? Or did you take double-dating to a whole new level?”

“Noah? Where’s your knapsack?”

“What?” Noah looked from Nick to Reese as Reese sputtered with laughter. “What do you mean, take double-dating...” His eyes widened. “No...You mean...?”

“I *mean* get your knapsack,” Nick said. “Reese needs his sleep. These shifts are making him giggly.”

“So you...? Both? How...? I mean, how does that come up? You ask if they’re game?”

Nick could ignore the question. But that wasn’t his policy with the boys. Ask anything about anything. That was how Antonio raised him. It also meant never ignoring the opportunity to pass along a lesson or advice.

“No,” Nick said. “It has to be their idea. Otherwise, there’s going to be hurt feelings afterward.”

“Uh-huh,” Noah said. “So you wait for women to offer you a threesome? Outside of porn flicks, in what world does that actually happen?”

“In Nick’s world,” Reese said. “Which can bear a marked resemblance to a porn flick. Kind of a James Bond-high-end porn flick crossover. That’s Nick’s life.”

“No kidding,” Noah muttered. “I bet if his car broke down, he’d knock on the nearest door and find sex-starved college girls having an orgy.”

“Of course not,” Reese said. “In the Nick version, it’s classy grown women holding a Tupperware party, which turns into an orgy after he arrives.”

“Okay, ha-ha,” Nick said. “Are you going to school today, Noah?”

Noah found his knapsack. Nick had to remind him to actually put his homework in it, but five minutes later, they were off and Reese was headed to bed.

As they walked out the door, Noah said, “So, um, not that I’m likely to ever need it, but do you have any advice on threesomes? Like what to do, what not to do, how not to piss one of the girls off. Are there guidelines?”

“There are.”

“And you’ll tell me?”

“Yes,” Nick said. “When you’re twenty-one.”

“What? There’s an age restriction?”

“Yes. It’s twenty-one. Before that, it would just be awkward and messy. Get in the car.”



AT TWO THAT afternoon, Nick was driving across town. Very slowly, as one usually drove across New York on a weekday. Normally, he’d have called a driver, but the instructions had been clear. Use your own car. Bring no one with you. He hadn’t even been given directions until he was on the road.

All very cloak-and-dagger, which would amuse the hell out of Reese after his James Bond joke. The truth was, Nick’s life resembled that of the international spy only superficially. Yes, he had no problems with women. Yes, he had money and knew how to dress, what to drive and so on. He could hold his own in a fight or a car chase. But when it came to true espionage, he left that to the experts. Which is exactly what he’d done with the search for Malcolm.

When Elena and Clay learned Malcolm was alive, they’d known exactly where to find him. In Nast Cabal custody, where he’d apparently been for the last decade, serving a prison term as a thug or an assassin—whatever use they had for a psychotic werewolf. With a Cabal, the possibilities were

endless. Malcolm was a prize, and they kept him under tightest security. So he should have been there when Elena negotiated for his return. Except he wasn't.

Elena and Clay had seen Malcolm while he was being escorted from his cell...and while the entire Cabal building was in chaos, after the CEO had been murdered. After they parted, Malcolm saw a chance and took it, murdering his guards to escape. Of course, given that the Nasts wouldn't be eager to lose him—or risk a major political incident by refusing to release him—it'd been a while before Elena accepted that he'd really escaped.

Finding out Malcolm was alive had been bad enough. Alive, free, and knowing that Clay would come after him? A hundred times worse. It was a challenge Malcolm wouldn't ignore. He'd be biding his time, waiting for them to lower their guard. Then he'd go after someone—Jeremy, Elena, the kids—to preempt Clay's attack.

All this meant they needed to do more than keep their ears to the ground, waiting for him to surface. They needed to pull in whatever resources they could. For Nick, that meant hiring Rhys Smith's team of supernatural mercenaries.

Rhys's team had been on the job for two months. A guy named Ness was in charge of Nick's case. Though Nick had met a couple of the agents actually tracking Malcolm, he'd only communicated with Ness by text and e-mail. Now Ness

was in New York and had an update for him. He wanted to meet face-to-face to discuss it.

The directions led to a motel. As he pulled in, he had to text again for “final instructions,” which turned out to be a room number. He was told to park in front of the room. He did...eventually. First, he pulled into the restaurant lot next door and left his car between two rigs, while he slipped around and checked behind the motel. There was a man there, not visibly armed, though Nick was sure he had a gun tucked under his jacket. Rhys’s agents didn’t rely on their powers alone.

Nick got downwind enough to catch the guy’s scent. An ID check of sorts. No one he recognized, so he filed the information.

Next he checked the front of the motel. A guy sat in a pickup reading a map. He’d been reading it since Nick drove in. Another operative.

Nick returned to his car and parked in front of the proper room. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Rhys. The guy had nothing to gain from screwing over the Pack. Nick was only assessing the situation before he stepped through that door.