

Jake and Michaela

By Kate Simon

Jake Sokolov decided to walk off his brunch thinking he could get familiar with his new home. The pancakes he had at From Scratch were excellent but fairly well negated his three mile run up the beach.

He had only been in town a few weeks, reassigned to the Defense Language Institute as an instructor. After two tours in Moscow he was now teaching Russian language and culture to personnel newly assigned to State Department duties. His childhood had prepared him well for his career.

Major Jacob Sokolov grew up in a brownstone in Brighton Beach with his parents and paternal grandparents, naturalized citizens from Russia. They spoke only Russian at home which wasn't a problem since most of his neighborhood spoke it too. At Columbia he majored in History and Russian thinking he would become a teacher like his mother. He was top of his class and nearly ready to graduate when a Marine captain came to campus looking for him. Apparently his excellent grades and work ethic were impressive but what got him noticed was his Senior thesis on the Soviet political climate. It was his supposition that the Soviet Union would collapse within five years. This was 1986. Three years later he was proven right.

The captain explained that his unique skill set would be invaluable to his country in uncertain times. The captain made a convincing argument and shortly after graduation he entered officers candidate school. After he received his commission he spent a number of years at the State Department and the Pentagon. He'd finally gotten the assignment he really wanted, attaché at the American Embassy in Moscow. He already missed Russia but he wouldn't miss the winters. Now he was back home probably at his retirement post. After thirty years it might be time. He'd been a Marine for so long he wasn't sure what he would do if he did retire.

It was a busy time of year in Carmel by the Sea. The Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance was in full swing less than three miles up the road. People came from all over the world came to see the biggest and most elegant car show in the country. Everyone dressed up for the event like the Kentucky Derby, minus the horses. When the well dressed hordes had enough of the cars they descended on the shops of Carmel. To

accommodate and encourage the crowds most of the shops left their doors opened. Jake was walking by a jewelry store when he heard an customer yelling at the saleswoman in Russian.

"I'm sorry Ma'am. I don't speak Russian."

Jake walked into the store and smiled at the woman. "Can I help?"

The woman held up a lovely gold necklace with a blood red garnet. "I'm trying to tell her how much it cost and she doesn't understand me."

"How much is it?"

"Four hundred forty."

"Four hundred forty?" he asked.

"It's fourteen carat and I made it myself. It's a good price."

Jake turned to the confused woman and spoke to her in flawless Russian. "This nice lady says it's worth eight hundred."

"Oh no, that's too much."

Jake turned to the stunned saleswoman and smiled. He pointed to the necklace and smiled. "Just go along with me. She says its too much and I'm telling her it's worth it. Shrug your shoulders and say the word six."

She shrugged and said. "Six."

Jake turned to the customer. "She's giving in. She says six hundred."

The woman smiled. "That's more like it." She opened her bag and handed the saleswoman six one hundred dollar bills.

"Oh I'll get your," she started but Jake cut her off.

"Just wrap it up."

The saleswoman smiled and nodded. She wrapped the necklace and handed it to the customer who smiled and waved as she left with her purchase.

"What just happened?" asked the saleswoman.

"In most European countries bargaining is part of the process."

"But you got me more than I asked for."

Jake shrugged. "I thought it was worth it and she was certainly happy."

She extended her hand to Jake. "Thank you so much for coming to my rescue."

"You're welcome." He smiled and blushed a bit. He wasn't used to playing the white

knight for a woman. Especially one so beautiful. Her dark brown hair reached below her shoulders and he'd never seen eyes like hers. They were almost topaz.

"Michaela Turner, but everyone calls me Mike."

"Jake Sokolov, and you definitely do not look like a Mike."

She smiled. "It was a nickname my brothers gave me. It stuck. Well, Jake Sokolov I was about to take a break. There's a great coffee shop around the corner. Would you let me buy you a cup for saving my day?"

"I'd like that."

"Hey Mike. The usual?" asked the young girl behind the counter.

"Thanks, Kathy." She turned to Jake. "What would you like?"

Jake was startled when he looked at the menu. "You serve Raf?"

The girl smiled. "Yeah, it's pretty popular, especially this time of year with all the tourists."

"What's Raf?" asked Mike.

"It's a Russian drink. Espresso steamed with cream and sugar. It's delicious."

"Sounds great, make that two."

"Shortbread?" asked Kathy. "It's fresh out of the oven."

"Ah, you're killing me."

"But you still want it."

"Of course. We'll be over there." Mike pointed to a table by a window. Jake bumped over the vase of fake flowers as he sat. "They make these tables small to fit more in," said Mike. "That's why fake flowers. Vase with real flowers would be constantly spilling water everywhere."

Jake smiled, knowing she was making it up to make him feel better about his klutzy move. Her smile alone was making him feel like a fumbling teenager.

"So how long have you been rescuing damsels in distress, Jake?"

"It's a new occupation. My regular job is a teacher."

"Huh," she said looking a bit puzzled.

"What is it?"

"I wouldn't have pegged you for a teacher. Maybe a cop."

Jake smiled. "I teach Russian language and culture at the Military Defense Language Institute."

"Military?"

"I'm a Marine," he said as Kathy brought them their drinks and shortbread.

Mike smiled, "That's more like it."

"What do you mean?"

She blushed as she took a sip of her drink. "Oh that is good."

"Yes it is, but you still didn't answer the question."

"Okay, how do I say this without sounding strange. I'm in a people business. I have to read them fast to know what they want and what I can sell to them. You have a very...physical presence. You don't seem like an academic."

"What should I look like?" he smiled.

"Not like that," she murmured as she took a bite of the shortbread. She pushed the plate toward him. "Have some. It's delicious."

Jake took a bite and smiled at the smooth buttery taste. "That is good. You didn't say what an academic looks like."

"You know, thin, sweater vest, wire rim glasses, lives in a library. Not tan, and so...fit."

He blushed a bit. "Well, I may spend a lot of time in the classroom but I'm still a Marine. Although I'll admit the tan is new. I spent the last six years living in Moscow. I've been enjoying the sun."

"What were you doing in Moscow?"

"I worked at the embassy," He took another sip of his drink. "Enough about me. How long have you been a jeweler?"

"I started designing pieces in high school, went to design school. I apprenticed with a jeweler before I opened my own shop."

"I hear an east coast accent. Where are you from?"

"Westchester. You?"

"Brighton Beach."

Mike smiled. "That explains the Russian."

"Yes. I was born here but didn't speak English until I went to first grade." Jake sipped his coffee as he realized she was studying him and it made him a bit uneasy. Still, he couldn't stop staring at her and those beautiful topaz eyes.

"You said you're a Marine, but you never said what rank?" she asked.

"Major." She gave him a smile that made his heart beat faster.

"An officer and a gentleman."

Jake took another sip of his coffee, hoping to hide another blush. "I try."

"You succeed," she said with a smile.

"Yo, Mike," called the barista. "Some shortbread for the road."

"You're hell on my diet, Kathy. You know I'm trying to lose weight."

"So I should wrap it up?"

"Of course," she answered.

"Why?" he asked.

"What?" she asked.

"Why would you want to lose weight?"

Mike smiled. "I knew I liked you for a reason."

Jake stood and reached for his wallet.

"Oh no, Jake. I invited you." She signed the receipt and picked up her shortbread. She opened the bag and smiled. She took an empty bag from the counter and put some of the shortbread in the other bag. "Here. A little something for later."

Jake smiled. "Thank you." He walked her back to her shop and they stood in front of the open door. "Thank you for the coffee, Mike." He shook his head and laughed. "I'm sorry. I just can't call you that. No woman as beautiful as you are should be called by a man's name."

She smiled. "Thank you, Jake. I think I might like it if you called me Michaela."

"Thank you for the coffee, Michaela."

"You're very welcome. Jake, I'm here most days, if you'd like to have coffee again."

Mike smiled and walked back into her shop.

Jake smiled and thought about the next time he could see her topaz eyes.

The Meyers were going out tonight so he volunteered to take Hershey, their chocolate lab. Daniel and Becky Meyers were Jake's next door neighbors and landlords. They'd bought this ocean front cottage as a wedding gift for his son but the wedding never happened. Daniel was a retired diplomat and former student of Jake's. Daniel let him rent the cottage for next to nothing he said as a thank you. He told Jake that learning Russian was valuable but learning about the culture was even more important.

He'd taken Hershey for a run on the beach and now they were sitting on the porch watching the waves hit the shore. Hershey had a big bowl of water. Jake had a vodka and a bag of shortbread.

"I met someone today, Hershey. A woman. A very pretty woman." The dog looked up at him as if he was hanging on every word. "I had coffee with her. I want to see her again, but I've never been good at that sort of thing. I don't know whether I should call her for a real date or just show up at her store." He looked over at the dog, who barked. "Yeah, that's what I thought. Just don't tell Becky. If she knows, I'll never heard the end of it."

He was overwhelmed with sensations. He could feel every nerve in his body. She was so beautiful. He kissed her, tasted her. He couldn't get enough of her. She moved under him, writhing with him. He tried to push the hair from her face but couldn't. Everything was moving too slow. His vision was fading. She called out for him. "Jacob where are you?"

He sat up in bed and sighed. The clock read three a.m. It was usually about now that he had the dream. It had been getting more frequent in the last few weeks but this one was the most intense. He glanced over to see Hershey asleep at the foot of his bed. No reason to interrupt his nights sleep. Jake slipped out of bed and put on his shorts and pulled on a t-shirt. Might as well get his run in early. He went out the door and headed down the beach.

Mike took off her jewelry and put it in her jewelry box. It had certainly had been an interesting day. The car show bumped up the number of customers she would have normally seen. But the most interesting part of her day had been coffee with Jake. She

was not a woman who fell easily. She'd learned her lesson with Tony twenty years ago. Jake Sokolov, however, intrigued her. When he'd walked into her store she had a visceral reaction to him. He was an academic with broad shoulders and perfectly toned arms. Or maybe it was his crystal blue eyes. She was delighted when he accepted her invitation to coffee because it was then she discovered he was reserved. A man that handsome and that shy. She hoped he'd want another cup of coffee.

Mike walked to her closet and pulled out tomorrow's clothes. She picked the simple green button down blouse that was comfortable and easy to work in. She reached for a matching skirt when she noticed her favorite blue dress. It was cut perfectly, gathered at one shoulder, spreading down to her waist. She always got compliments when she wore it but it wasn't the easiest thing to be wearing while working at her bench. She put the blouse back and hung the dress on the door. Mike shrugged and smiled. "You never know."

It had been a normal day at school. Students, grading tests, working on his latest research project. All perfectly normal, except for Michaela. How could anyone call her Mike? Her long brown hair had been pinned back in a jeweled clip, probably something she created herself. A few stray curls hung down next to her face. She had lovely curves and couldn't understand why she's want to lose any of them. She was smart and funny. He'd thought about calling her all day but kept finding an excuses not to. He was driving home when he saw the exit sign for the business section of Carmel.

"Come on, Sokolov. Make a move," he said to himself as he put on his signal and made the turn. He pulled into a parking lot and turned off the engine. Checking his watch it was nearly five thirty and hopefully she was still in her shop. Walking up the street he was relieved to see the door to her shop still open. Looking in the window he saw Michaela leaning over the counter setting a display rack in the case. Her hair was loose today and she wore a blue dress that told him those curves were not his imagination. She looked up and saw him standing in the doorway and broke into a wide smile. His first question was answered. She was happy to see him again.

"Hello Jake," she said.

"Hi, Michaela. I hope you don't mind me just stopping by."

"No of course not." She smiled as she pointed to his uniform. He was wearing fatigues folded up at the arms and black uniform boots. "I assume this means you're coming from work."

"Yeah. Um, I know it's last minute but would you like to get some dinner?"

"I'd love to. Let me get my bag." She looked over at a young woman behind the counter. "Stacy, would you lock up for me, please?"

The girl grinned. "Sure, Mike. No problem."

He led her back to his car and opened the passenger side door. "There's a place up the road a bit, Delano's. They have fantastic lasagna."

"Sounds great."

Jake looked over at Michaela and smiled. "I've missed good Italian food in Russia."

"I'm really glad you came back, Jake."

"So am I."

Dinner was as relaxed as Jake could be sitting with a beautiful woman. "How did you wind up on the west coast if you grew up in West Chester?" as Jake.

Mike smiled. "I came out here after my divorce. I wanted to put as much distance between me and my ex-husband as possible. This was as far as I could go without falling off the continent."

"I don't mean to pry," he said.

"It's fine, Jake. It was more than twenty years ago. I was apprenticed with a jeweler in the city. He had a son, Tony. He was older and I was an idiot. Our marriage was short lived and volatile. He got really angry that I'd worked overtime and his dinner wasn't ready. He hit me."

Jake froze. "He did what?"

"It was the only shot he ever got. I left our apartment and went to his parents. They saw my black eye. His father was a good man and his mother had been a second mother to me. They were furious with Tony and protected me. I think they also felt guilty for encouraging our relationship. The next day I packed my things and left. I immediately filed for divorce, and his father, God bless him, told Tony if he didn't give me everything I wanted he'd cut him off. I got my divorce and enough of a settlement to start over. I worked

with a jeweler in LA for a few years until I opened my shop here fifteen years ago." She took a sip of her ice tea. "That's about it. What about you? Ever married?"

Jake shook his head. "I've been focused on my work for so long that it never left time for any real relationship."

"I know what you mean."

"What about your family?"

"My parents have been gone for a long time. I have two brothers, Paul and Matthew. They're the ones who tagged me with Mike."

"Are they still in New York?"

"Yes. I usually fly back for the holidays." She smiled. "Your turn."

"My father passed but my mom still lives in the house I grew up in. I have an older brother, Vasily, Val. He's a lawyer. I have a baby sister too, although she's not much of a baby anymore. She was born when I was fourteen and Val was sixteen, so that makes her thirty eight now. And yet she's still a giant pain in the ass." He smiled. "But I can't help but love her. Nobody can."

"What's her name?" She picked up her drink.

"Marina."

Mike choked on her ice tea.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Fine, I'm fine. Your sister is Marina Sokolov, the actress?"

"Yeah. She was always the drama queen when she was a kid. Now she gets paid a lot of money to be one."

"So how did you wind up as a Marine?"

"I was at Columbia and I got recruited. My specialties in Russian studies made me valuable. I liked the idea of my work being useful. Sometimes I can't believe it's been thirty years."

"What? Thirty?" asked Mike.

"Yes. I'm fifty two. Is that a problem?" he asked.

Mike smiled. "No, not at all. I just find it surprising."

"Why?" he asked.

Mike's cheeks reddened. "Well, as I mentioned before you're very...fit."

Jake smiled, "Thank you." He took a sip of his soda, wishing it was vodka to steady his nerves. "Am I allowed to ask you or is that still something you never ask a woman?"

"I'm forty six." Mike smiled. "Is that a problem?"

"No, not at all."

Jake drove Mike back to her car after dinner. He walked her to where she was parked and opened her door. "I had a really nice time, Michaela."

"So did I, Jake."

"Well, um, I.." Mike interrupted his nervous stutter with a tender kiss. "I'd like to see you again," he whispered.

"I'd like that," she smiled. "Do you have your phone on you?"

"Uh, yes." He pulled it out and she took it from him. She typed in her name and phone number and then pushed the button. He heard her phone ring in her bag. She handed him back the phone. "There. Now you have my number and I have yours."

He stared at her for a moment and touched his hand to her cheek. "I'll call you soon," he said.

"Please do," she whispered.

Jake for once took a risk. He pulled her close and kissed her the way he'd been thinking about all night. The way he'd thought about since he met her.

Mike took off her jewelry and put in her jewelry box, like she did every night. But this was not every night. She looked at herself in the mirror and realized she was still smiling. She felt like a teenage girl with a crush. She could still feel down that kiss down to her toes. He'd surprised her when he kissed her like that. Surprised and thrilled. The blue dress, now forever to be called the lucky dress, was back in the closet. Mike set the alarm on her phone and got into bed though she doubted she'd sleep. Her phone buzzed and she saw a new text.

*Checking to see you got home safe*

She smiled as she pressed buttons on the keyboard.

*Safe and sound*

She took a breath hoping for more.

*I had a great time tonight*

She smiled and typed

*So did I.*

Then she held her breath.

*I'd like to see you tomorrow.*

She squealed. Actually squealed. She was definitely becoming a twelve year old girl.

*I'd like that. What do you have in mind?*

She worried at the long pause. Maybe she'd been too suggestive.

*Do you like to swim?*

Mike laughed.

*I live in California. It's mandatory.*

*I have a place at the beach. How does swimming and a picnic sound?*

*It sounds wonderful.*

*How about I pick you up at noon?*

*Perfect. I'll text you the address.*

*See you tomorrow, Michaela*

*Good night, Jake. Sweet Dreams.*

Jake set down his phone and smiled. It might have been a cheesy way to ask for another date but it worked. He was glad because he figured she couldn't tell how nervous he was if he text her. He'd pick up an order from the deli in the morning before he picked her up. And maybe a bottle of wine.

He looked in the mirror as he hung up his uniform. "You are a grown man, Sokolov and you are behaving like a teenage boy." He took stripped down to his boxers and got into bed. He set his alarm so he'd have enough time to get every thing ready. He couldn't wait to see Michaela again.

She was back, in his arms again. He kissed her neck, whispered his love for her, touched her. She felt a part of him, she was a part of him, joined, hearts pounding. He pushed hair aside, seeing her face through a fog. The fog got thicker, her face faded. "Jacob," she called. "Jacob, where are you?"

He sat up in bed, heart pounding. The dreams were tormenting him. They felt just out of reach. He looked at his cell phone and shrugged. He'd managed to sleep until five a.m. He got up and threw on some jeans and a Marine t-shirt. He grabbed his keys and went to the all night market.

Jake looked around the cottage and decided it was fit for company. He kept the place pretty tidy but he'd added a few touches. He'd gotten a bunch of flowers for the living room but had to buy a vase to put them in. He'd gotten all the deli fixings and was surprised at the wide selection of wine available at a California grocery.

After he got out of the shower he put his swim suit on under his shorts and a fresh t-shirt. He looked at his watch and saw it was eleven thirty. He'd checked the distance and it shook take him no longer than twenty minutes to get to Michaela's even in traffic.

His estimate was correct and arrived at her condo at ten minutes before twelve. He walked up the path to her front door, took a breath and knocked. She opened the door and smiled. She was wearing a bright yellow sundress and appeared to have a suit on under it.

"Hi Jake."

"Hi," he smiled.

"Let me get my bag. I have a change of clothes and some beach things." She turned and went up stairs.

Jake looked around the condo and saw a tastefully decorated home. Nice furniture, warm colors, nothing too fussy. A place he'd be comfortable. Mike came back into the room with a beach bag and smiled.

"All ready?" he asked.

"Just one more thing," she said then slid her hand up his chest to his neck and pulled him in for a kiss. Her tongue slid over his lips and he met her kiss with unreserved pleasure. She pulled back and smiled. "Now I'm ready. Let's go."

Mike smiled thinking of the look on his face after she kissed him. She knew she'd thrown him off balance. With most men that would be a good thing but she knew she had to step carefully with him. She was stunned when they arrived at Jake's home. It was a beautiful, beachfront cottage tucked into a grove of Cyprus trees.

"Jake, this is lovely."

"Thanks. I rent it from the people next store."

Mike saw a huge home fifty yards away. For her, next door was spitting distance.

"Dan was a diplomat assigned to the embassy in Moscow. He didn't speak Russian so I helped him out."

They stepped up the stairs to the front porch and he held open the front door. There was a large great room, decorated in a comfortable style that suited him. There was a good size kitchen and a closed door that Mike assumed was his bedroom. On the coffee table was a vase of brightly colored flowers. She ran her fingers over the petals, knowing he got them for her.

"You must love it here." Mike looked out the living room window to the private beach. "The view is amazing."

"I do like it. It's very quiet. Hershey and I sit on the porch at night after our run and listen to the waves."

"Hershey?"

"Dan and Becky's lab. I look after him when they go away, like this weekend. I'll have to take him for a walk later."

"Sounds fun," she smiled. "I love dogs but I work so many hours it didn't seem fair to keep one locked up that long."

Jake smiled. "Lunch first or swimming?"

"The water looks great. Definitely swimming."

He grabbed the blanket and beach towels that were sitting on the couch and grabbed a couple bottles of water from the fridge. "Ready?"

Mike smiled and followed him the short walk to the beach. On either side of the cottage were beautiful mansions that explained the almost empty beach. A public beach on a day like today would be mobbed. Jake set out the blanket and dropped their bags. He stripped off his shirt and shorts and Mike's heart nearly stopped. She couldn't take her eyes off him. His shoulders were broad and his chest tightly defined. His arms looked like they could be made of steel. Jake saw her staring and stopped.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

She nodded and pulled her sundress over her head. She couldn't stop herself from staring and smiling.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

Mike laughed. "Major Sokolov, allow me to give you a piece of information you don't appear to have." She walked closer and put her hand on his shoulder, not resisting the urge to take another long look. "You sir, are a very handsome man." Mike loved his bright blush when he muttered, "Thank you."

Taking mercy on his unease she pushed a bit on his shoulder and yelled, "Last one in!" before sprinting toward the beach.

Jake ran after Mike and quickly caught her in the surf. She laughed and tried to splash him as she slipped from his grasp. They both swam out far enough to ride the swells. She was a strong swimmer and was able to keep from getting tossed around by the waves. The look on her face when they were on the beach had stunned him. He took care of himself but no more than any other Marine. Staying fit was part of the job description. He was equally pleased when she took off her dress. She was wearing a simple black one piece suit but it fit every curve perfectly. She'd beat him to the water because he was busy looking at her long, toned legs and her beautifully rounded bottom.

Thinking about her made him glad this water was a bit cold.

Jake watched Mike float on her back and close her eyes as she rode the crest of the swells.

"Oh, this is great," she said. Great idea after a long work week."

"Did you close your store?"

"No, Stacy's covering for me today. I'm closed Sundays."

Jake saw it before she did. A large swell coming right at them, probably the wake of a large ship.

"Mike, look out!" he yelled too late and she went under. His heart pounded as he fought the wake and swam towards her. He saw her struggling under the water and grabbed her by her arm. She popped up coughing and he held her around the waist. "Are you okay?" He asked. She nodded as he pushed the wet hair out of her eyes.

"I'm okay. I should know better than to close my eyes."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"I'm sure," she whispered as she wrapped her legs around him. She gave him a gentle kiss as they bobbed up and down in the water.

He rubbed his hands up her back and smiled. "Maybe we should get out of here before we get swamped again." They swam back to shore and grabbed their towels. He reached for a bottle of water and handed it to Mike.

"Thanks," she said as she grabbed a bottle of sunscreen. She sat down and began to smooth the lotion over her skin. He grabbed his own bottle and did the same. "It really is beautiful here," she said. "I love the quiet." She gave him a small smile as she watched him put on the sunscreen. She held out her hand for the bottle. "I'll do your back." He turned to give her a better angle. He closed his eyes at the sensation of her rubbing his back. She tapped him with her bottle of sunscreen.

"My turn." She turned around so he could reach her back.

"SPF 70? What comes out of here when I squeeze it, a sweater?" Jake asked.

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm really fair. I burn easily."

He rubbed the lotion on her skin, down her back, across her shoulders, down her arms. He handed her back the bottle and whispered, "I noticed."

Mike gave him a crooked smile. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." He leaned in and gave her a gentle kiss.

Jake and Mike laid on the beach and talked about nothing in particular. He tucked a stray curl behind her ear.

"Remember when we kids and you looked up at the sky? You figured out what the clouds looked like?" she asked.

"No, I never did that."

"What?" she said in horror. "How is that possible? Okay, we have to correct this immediately. Lay down and look up."

Jake did as he was told. "What am I looking for?"

"Look about ten o'clock. See it?"

"I see a cloud."

"No it's not, it's a bunny. See the ears?"

"Okay, I guess I see it."

"What's Russian for bunny?"

"Krolik."

"Krolik." she repeated. She pointed to another cloud. "That's definitely a dog."

Jake laughed. "If you say so."

"How can you not see that's a dog? See the tail? What's Russian for dog?"

"Sobaka."

"Sobaka," she repeated badly. "My Russian accent is awful."

He smiled. "It could use some work." He propped himself up on his shoulder. "I can also see a *krasivaya zhenshcina*."

"What's that mean?"

"A beautiful woman," he whispered before he leaned down to kiss her. He stroked her cheek as he deepened the kiss. She pulled him close as their tongues danced. He pulled back and looked at her eyes. The topaz had darkened.

"Jake," she whispered.

"Mikaela." Her name in Russian. He smiled and gave her another kiss. He whispered things to her in Russian that he would never say in English, at least not yet.

They worked together putting together a lunch and decided to have it on the porch. Same view, no sand, much easier to hold the wine glass.

"So what's it like having a movie star sister?" Mike asked as she sipped her wine.

"I don't really know. I've been in Russia a long time. She's gotten popular in the last five years. I see stuff on the internet but that's about it. She supposed to stop in next week for a visit on her way to, I've forgotten where. Probably her next movie set."

"Do you get to see your brother?"

"We FaceTime, I think mostly when he needs to hear some Russian."

"It must have been like growing up in two different worlds."

"It was. My grandparents were wonderful people, very traditional. My parents were more modern. My mom was a teacher and my father owned the grocery store my grandfather started. We spoke only Russian at home," he smiled.

She reached across the table and stroked the top of his hand. "It sounds like you had a happy childhood."

"I did. I was a bookworm from an early age, like my mother. My father I'm sure wished I was more like Val, football, baseball, very outgoing."

"Did you play any sports?"

"I ran track. Mostly cross country. I'm able to clear my head when I run."

"You still run?"

"I try and get my run in most mornings. I usually do Carmel and back."

"Carmel? That's got to be miles."

"About five I think. Never really measured it."

Mike took a sip of her wine and smiled. "Like I said, fit."

Jake took a drink, trying to hide his blush. He'd never been comfortable with compliments. "Okay, your turn. Are you the baby sister, like mine?"

"Yes but I was never the drama queen. I was always pretty quiet. My parents married late in life so they were older parents. My brothers were close in age so they were pretty tight. I'm six years younger than Matt so I wasn't a part of their circle."

"You said your parents have been gone a long time?"

"More than twenty years. Mom was forty five and Dad was fifty when I came a

long."

"I guess you were a surprise."

Mike laughed. "My Mom said Matt was the surprise. I was a complete and total shock."

Jake glance at his watch. "Oh boy. I should have taken Hershey out a while ago. He ran inside and grabbed his keys. I just have to run next door. I won't be long."

"Can I come?"

Jake smiled. "Sure. I'll warn you. He's very enthusiastic." Taking Mike's hand as they walked the short distance to Dan and Becky's seemed like the most natural thing in the world. He unlocked the door and punched in his code to the alarm. A brown blur came hurtling towards them.

"Hershey, down. Sit," Jake ordered. The dog plopped down in front of them and then bounced up again. "Hershey, down."

"Hi, Hershey," said Mike. "It's very nice to meet you." She started to scratch behind his ear when he rolled over on his back, paws in the air. Mike laughed. "Not much of a guard dog, is he?"

"Not at all," Jake said. He grabbed Hershey's leash and hooked it up. "Let's go, boy." They walked Hershey while he sniffed the sniffs and took care of business. Hershey started to pull toward the beach. "No, boy. Not today."

"Does he usually run?"

"I take him down the beach and toss a ball or stick."

"Let's go," she smiled.

"You don't mind?"

"Of course not." Mike reached down and picked up a short stick from the sea grass. "How's this?" Hershey jumped up and barked. "I'll take that for a 'it'll do' ." She handed the stick to Jake. He unhooked Hershey's leash and threw the stick down the beach. The dog took off after it, looking like pure puppy joy.

Jake stood back and watched as Mike threw the stick and laughed when Hershey brought it back. She'd changed into shorts and a t-shirt after swimming and was running barefoot after Hershey. Her hair was in a loose ponytail with stray curls falling to the side. She smiled when she caught him watching her.

"What?"

He moved closer and put his hand to her cheek. "This," he whispered and kissed her with a passion that surprised them both.

They'd been talking for hours about their work, their families, and a lot about what it was like to be their age and single. He couldn't ever remember feeling so comfortable with a woman.

"You must have had a girl friend in high school," said Mike.

"Not really. I had some friends I'd hang out with but mostly I was in my room reading."

"I imagine there were a lot of disappointed girls."

Jake laughed. "I don't think so."

"I bet you were adorable at that age." Mike got quiet. "Were you ever serious about anyone?"

"There was a woman when I was in Russia. Elaine was an administrator at the embassy. We saw each other occasionally for a couple of years but she broke it off."

"Were you upset?"

"Not really. I think the relationship was more convenient than anything else, two Americans away from home. She met an up and coming diplomat and married him."

"No Russian girls?" she smiled.

"No. Even though we're allies, in my line of work it's never good to have a relationship with a foreign national." He took a sip of his wine. "What about you? Were you breaking hearts in high school?"

Mike laughed. "Hell no. I was always the quiet girl in the corner. Once I got into design, that was my focus. Tony was my first serious relationship and I told you how well that went."

"Anyone since?"

"Like you, not really. I have a group of friends I get together with but that's it. I dated a bit but never anything serious."

Jake was surprised to see the setting sun. "Wow, I didn't realize what time it was."

"I'm sorry. I got chatty. I'm sure you have things to do."

"No, I was just wondering if you'd like to have some dinner. I made plov."

"What's that?"

"It's a Russian chicken and rice dish. It's a little spicy." He smiled. "And there is another bottle of wine."

"Sounds perfect. Can we eat out here?"

"Sure. Let me get it ready."

They set the dinner on the porch and opened another bottle of wine. Jake spooned some of the dish on Mike's plate. "It's my grandmother's recipe. I hope you like it."

Mike took a mouthful and her eyes widened. "Oh, this is amazing."

"I'm glad you like."

"It's delicious. Your grandmother would be proud."

They talked and drank wine and finished off the plov. Mike smiled and looked up at the sky. It was a crystal clear night and the sky was filled with stars. "Jake, you never watched clouds. Have you ever watched the stars?"

Jake smiled and took a sip of his wine. "Can't say that I have."

"That's just criminal. We have to correct that. You go get the blanket and I'll bring the wine."

Jake grabbed the blanket and Mike carried two topped off glasses of wine. They laid down the blanket where it had been when they were watching the clouds. Mike sat first and Jake handed her the wine. He sat and took his glass.

"We didn't spill a drop," said Jake. He could see her smile in the moonlight. They touched glasses and took a sip. Mike made a small trench in the sand. She set the glasses in the trench and covered the bases, securing them.

"Very clever," he said.

"So I've been told," she smiled. "Now lay back and look up." Mike curled up next to him and he tucked his arm around her shoulder. "See that one, about three o'clock. That's the big dipper."

"Fascinating."

She leaned up on her shoulder and smiled. "That's it. That's all I got." She giggled. "I just think they're pretty."

Jake stroked her hair and smiled. "Very pretty," he whispered and gave her a soft kiss.

She leaned back and looked at the sky. "This perfect," she said. "The only thing missing is the dancing, like in the song."

Jake stood and offered her his hand. "May I have this dance."

She smiled as he helped her to her feet. "We don't have any music."

"Let's see. I know a couple of songs. My grandfather used to sing to my grandmother ." He took her in his arms and started to move with her in the sand. He began a lovely song in his deep baritone. He knew she couldn't understand the Russian words and for now, he was glad. This really had been a perfect day. Dancing with Michaela in the moonlight felt like the most natural thing in the world. He inhaled her scent as they moved, lavender mixed with the ocean. He forced himself to stand a bit apart from her fearing she'd would feel what thinking of her had done to him. He stopped singing and he kissed her, still holding her in his arms.

"That was beautiful," she said then leaned in and whispered. "It's okay if you want me. I want you too."

He pulled her tight to him and kissed her, his tongue exploring as did his hands. "Why don't we go inside?"

"Let's do that," she smiled.

"I do have to let Hershey out one more time," he said.

"Why don't you do that and I'll bring this stuff in the house."

"Okay," he smiled and gave her a quick kiss.

Jake ran over to Dan's and took Hershey for a quick trip to their backyard. He reached down and pet the dog's head. "No messing around tonight, buddy. Focus on your mission." Hershey trotted off to sniff some trees as Jake waited.

Mike gathered up the blanket and folded it. She dug out the wine glasses and dumped the remainder to make them easier to carry. She smiled as she thought of Jake and the most singularly perfect day she'd ever had. It was then she tripped in the trench she'd made and fell. The glasses dropped and shattered.

"Shit!" she yelled. She tried to stand and pain shot through her ankle. "Are you

fucking kidding me? Now. I do this now. Un-freaking-believable." She tried to stand again and realized it was pointless.

"Jake!" she yelled. "Jake, I need help."

She sat laid there for a minute realizing Jake was still with Hershey. She tried to stand again. Failed again.

"Jake, I need you." she called. Her frustration with her own stupidity made her angry. "Jacob, I need you."

Jake locked the door on Hershey's mercifully short bathroom break and started walking back to the cottage. He heard a voice calling. He walked quicker until he heard it clearly.

"Jacob, I need you."

He froze and he heard it again.

"Jacob, I need you."

Then he realized it was Michaela. He broke into a full run and found her where he's left her on the beach. She was trying to push herself off the sand.

"It's you," he said, not quite believing.

"Of course it's me. Who were you expecting? Now can you help me up? I twisted my ankle."

Jake scooped her up in his arms and started walking into the house.

"You could've helped me walk," she smiled. "I just need to walk it off."

"Ice first." He pushed open the front door and took her straight to his bedroom.

"This'll work," she laughed.

He set her down carefully on the bed. "I'll get an ice pack." He came pack a moment later. He placed it on her ankle and looked up at her. "How's that?"

"Fine," she said. She couldn't help but smile at his fussing over her.

He went into the bathroom and came back out with some aspirin and a glass of water. "Here. This should help." While she took the aspirin he grabbed and elastic wrap sock out of his dresser. "After you ice you should put this on. I use it if I get a strain running."

Mike smiled and took it from him. She patted the bed next to her. "Sit down, Jake. Please." He sat carefully trying not to move her ankle. "Stop fussing. I'm fine." She gave him a sweet kiss. She pulled off the ice pack and rolled her ankle around. "See. I just needed to work it out." She took the brace sock and slipped it on. "Now where were we before we were interrupted by my klutziness?"

"You'll be more comfortable if I sleep on the couch."

Mike had moved slowly with Jake, understanding what kind of man he was. But she only had so much self control and it was time to throw slow and careful out the window. She grabbed a fistful of his t-shirt and pulled him in to a passionate kiss. "Don't even think about it, Marine," she whispered.

He caressed her cheek in his hand and smiled. "What about your ankle?"

"It doesn't hurt *that* bad." She pulled him back to her and into a deep kiss. "Jake," she whispered. "I want you, so much." He kissed her neck then nipped. "God," she moaned. "So much." He slipped her t-shirt over her head and stroked her skin.

"Krasivaya," he murmured.

He placed kisses on the top of her breasts, moved down her body kissing and licking as he went. He slid her shorts down over her legs, careful not to touch her ankle. He rubbed his hands down her waist and thighs, slipping his fingers into her panties and sliding them off. He reached behind her, unhooked her bra and slipped it off her body.

Mike smiled as she watched his eyes travel up and down her naked body like a caress.

"O moy Bog," he whispered. He stood quickly and removed his t-shirt and shorts.

Mike's heart pounded at the sight of Jake naked. His strong chest and arms were matched by his trim waist and powerful legs. "Oh my God, Jake." She held her hand out to him and he got back on the bed, straddling her. She ran her hands down his chest and over his hips and thighs. "Perfect," she whispered.

"Mikaela, ya tebya khochu," he groaned as he dove into a deep kiss. He carefully slipped down her body tasting, setting every nerve ending on fire. He paid devotion to every part of her, sucking and nipping. He moved her legs, running his tongue up her inner thigh. Mike moaned pushing her head back into the pillow. He took her in his mouth. Rough tongue, hot breath, he drove her wild. Mike screamed his name when her orgasm

consumed her and spasms wracked her body.

Jake raised himself over her and kissed her as he took her in one thrust. Mike wrapped her legs around him and closed her eyes, listening to him speak to her in words she couldn't understand. He brought her to the edge again and when he cried out for her, she joined him.

Mike laid still holding him close, waiting for her senses to return. Jake lifted his head and smiled giving her the softest of kisses.

"Mikaela," he whispered. "Milaya Mikaela."

"My God, Jake. That was amazing. You're amazing," she whispered. "I could feel you on every inch of me."

Jake smiled. "Well, ma'am. I am a Marine. We do pride ourselves on our attention to detail."

"Well done, Marine," she tried to say with a straight face. Until they both started laughing.

Jake sat at his kitchen table in his shorts, drinking his coffee and watching the waves hit the shore. Yesterday had been a hell of a day. He wasn't good with situations like this. Actually, he didn't think he'd ever been in a situation like this. Any of the short term relationships he'd had never pushed the thoughts of work from his mind. Now, all he could think about was Michaela.

He'd slept until seven a.m. for the first time in months. It had been a quiet, peaceful sleep with no dreams. His grandmother would have called his dreams a prophecy. After how he found Michaela on the beach he thought grandmother would have been right. Now what did he do? The only thing he was certain of was he would always think of her as his Milaya Mikaela.

"Hey there."

Standing in the kitchen doorway, Michaela was wearing the t-shirt he'd worn yesterday, which covered her to mid thigh. "Good morning," he smiled. "How's your ankle?"

She picked up her foot and circled it. "Much better. A little stiff, but that's all." She walked towards him and smiled. "Let's try this again." She bent down and kissed him. "Good morning," she whispered. She squealed when he pulled her into his lap and deepened the kiss.

"Good morning," he whispered. "Can I get you some coffee?"

"Not now, thanks. Maybe later." She smiled and ran her hand over his short Marine hair cut. "So, should we have that incredibly awkward 'what now' conversation or wait until after breakfast?"

Jake smiled. "Now is fine."

"How about I go first?" she asked.

"Okay," he said with relief.

"Jake, I love spending time with you. Yesterday was perfect, despite the fact you had to rescue me twice," she smiled.

"It was my pleasure," he said and gave her a quick kiss.

"I would love to spend a lot more time with you, if, hopefully, that's what you want."

"It is," he whispered.

"I know you're a quiet man. You love your books and your work and," she nodded toward the window. "watching the waves roll in. But I saw the other side of you last night, the side I would guess you don't show to many. I also saw how uncomfortable you looked now when I walked in here."

"Michaela, I've never been good with this sort of the thing."

"I'm not a shining star at this either. But there's something I know. I like both sides of Jake Sokolov, and Jake I'll warn you right now, I'm a selfish bitch. I want both sides of you." She kissed him. "Don't ever hide from me, Jake," she whispered. "I want all of you." She kissed him again. "Touch me, Jake. Put your hands on me." He ran his hands down her back. "Put your hands on my skin, Jake. Touch me," she whispered. He slid his hand under the t-shirt, to her bare skin. She pulled him into a passionate kiss. She whispered in his ear, "Take it off me." He pulled it over her head to see there was nothing under it but her. Her eyes had gone dark with passion, her voice rasped. "You have a naked woman in your lap. What are you going to do about it, Marine?"

Jake grabbed her and stood, walking straight to the bedroom, tossing her on the bed, He reached behind his neck and yanked his t-shirt over his head. He pushed his shorts to the ground and covered her with his body. A part of him wondered what she was doing to him. The rest of him was about to show her just what this Marine would do.

Jake woke to an empty bed and the smell of bacon. His alarm clock read ten thirty. He couldn't remember the last time he's been in bed this late, or for a better reason. He tossed on some shorts and walked into the kitchen. Michaela was standing at the stove in his ratty blue bathrobe, making breakfast.

"Good morning, again," he said.

She turned and smiled. "Good morning to you too. Why don't you put on a fresh pot while I finish this."

"First things first," he said. He walked toward her and untied the robe. He slipped his hands on her waist and pulled her in for a kiss.

"Mmmm, very nice," she said. "But if we don't stop now we won't see breakfast until dinnertime."

"Okay," he said with a smile as he retied the robe. "Why are you wearing my old

robe?"

"Because it smells like you," she said as she pulled it tight. "And I like the way you smell." She turned her back to him and her attention to the bacon.

"Is that right?" he said with a grin. He put his hands on her hips and kissed her neck. Jake was vaguely aware of an opening door.

"I smell bacon. Good, I'm starving."

Jake turned around to see his sister standing in the doorway. The smile on Marina's face terrified him. This was going to be trouble.

"Marina, you're early."

She laughed. "Apparently. Aren't you going to introduce me?"

Jake turned to Michaela to see a look that said this was going to cost him. "Michaela, this is my sister, Marina. Marina, this is Michaela Turner."

She tightened the robe belt and extended her hand. "It's nice to meet you. Everyone calls me Mike." She turned to Jake and smiled. "Everyone except your brother."

Jake felt frozen, not knowing where to take the conversation.

"You take care of the food and I'm going to put on some clothes."

He nodded as Michaela left the kitchen. He turned off the bacon, looked at his sister and switched to Russian. It was always easier for him to yell in Russian. "You couldn't call?"

"I didn't think I'd need to. Come on, Jake. Even you have to admit that no one would believe I'd walked in on you with a half naked woman."

"Step carefully, baby sister."

Marina got a broad smile. "Wow, I don't believe it."

"Believe what?"

"My big brother's in love." Jake stared at Marina in stunned silence. "I can see it in your face."

"You don't know anything," he said.

Marina lost her smile and got quiet. "Normally, Jake, I'd agree with you. I don't know anything about anything but I know you." She walked toward her brother and wrapped her arms around him. "I'm really happy for you. You deserve this."

His heart melted, just like always. The world might see her as a bold and daring

actress. His Marina was a sweet little girl who came to him when she skinned her knee or had her heart broken. "What's going on sweetheart?"

"Marina, would you like an omelet?" asked Michaela as she returned to the kitchen. She released her brother and smiled. "I'd love one. What can I do?"

Michaela threw a t-shirt at Jake and he pulled it on. "I'll get the coffee going, you grab the plates," he said. He leaned in and whispered to Michaela as she plated the bacon. "How much trouble am I in?"

"Moderate, since I assume you didn't know she'd be early."

"I didn't," he said.

Marina set the table while Michaela made the omelets. Jake made the coffee and got mugs.

"Food's ready. Everyone sit," said Michaela.

Jake tried to enjoy his meal as he watched his sister and his girlfriend size each other up. "Girlfriend," he thought. "I wonder when that happened?"

"I thought you were going to spend time in LA with that computer guy," said Jake.

"That was the plan but he went and fell in love with someone."

"Oh, I'm sorry, sweetheart."

Marina smiled and took a sip of her coffee. "It's okay, really. We were never more than good friends. I'm happy for him. He's a good guy. He deserves to be happy." Marina smiled at her brother. "Seems to be a lot of that going around."

Jake glared and switched back to Russian. "Watch it, little sister. Don't embarrass me."

Marina winked and replied in Russian. "Me, embarrass you? Never."

Michaela held up her hand. "Ah, excuse me. I don't speak Russian."

Jake smiled. "I'm sorry. We forget sometimes."

"So, how did you two meet?" asked Marina.

"I have a jewelry store. I was trying to communicate with a Russian tourist and your brother rescued me."

"You sell jewelry? Oh, fun. I love jewelry."

"She designs it," said Jake.

"Really?" Marina asked looking her up and down. "You're not wearing any."

Michaela smiled. "Do you wear your movie costumes every day?"

Marina laughed. "Good point. So how long have you been together?"

Jake put his head in his hand. Marina was not going to let this go.

"Not long," said Michaela.

"It appears to be going well."

"It is," she smiled.

"Well, I'm for one am delighted. For the longest time we thought he was gay."

Jake exploded in Russian, "Marina, I'm begging you to stop."

"We did!" she exclaimed in English. "Every girl in school mooned over Jake but he never noticed. He always had his nose in a book. Val was so jealous."

"Excuse me?" asked Jake.

"Val did fine, don't get me wrong, but he had to work for it. Jake was just never interested. When he didn't notice boys either we figured he was straight but boring."

Michaela fought a smile as she saw Jake's face fluoresce red. "You'll pay for this," he murmured in Russian.

Jake looked at his watch and realized Hershey was overdue for his walk. "I have to run next door to walk Hershey." He looked at his sister and issued her a warning in Russian, "Play nice."

Marina smiled and replied in Russian. "I always play nice."

Jake walked out of the house muttering to himself, "I'm a dead man."

Mike smiled at Marina. "Okay, go for it. You better hurry before he gets back and starts swearing in Russian again."

"Excuse me?"

"This is the question and answer period, am I correct?"

"Correct. How do you know he was swearing?"

"The look on his face and he's never that animated in English."

"English is our second language, even though all of us were born here. Russians are passionate people." Marina caught Mike's smiling blush. "Really?" she asked with a smile. "My brother, the bookworm?"

Mike stammered. "He's very...thorough."

Marina burst out laughing and Mike joined her. Once she calmed down and wiped the tears from her Marina said, "Good to know." They both burst out laughing again. "So, are you in love with him?"

Mike gasped. "We've only known each other a few days."

"That's not what I asked. I asked if you are in love with him."

"What makes you ask?"

"Other than I love my brother? I can see it on your face. I saw it the way you watched him as he went outside."

Mike smiled. "I think I am. He's...remarkable. He's kind and loving. I'm not someone who falls easily but your brother," she looked at Marina. "How could I not?" She walked over to the window, and saw him running Hershey. "Of course, I haven't said anything to him. I don't want to freak him out."

"He may not be as freaked out by it as you think."

"What?"

"One more question. Did who I am have anything to do with this?"

Mike shook her head. "He told me who you are and I was surprised. I know who you are and I've seen a lot of your movies. I like your work, but honestly, I see movie stars all the time. I've managed to have a thriving business in one of the most expensive stretches of retail space in the country." She smiled. "I really am that good."

Marina stood and gave Mike a hug. "He's a good man and deserves someone who looks at him like the hero he is."

"Thanks, Marina."

"Of course if you hurt him I will come down on you like the hand of God."

Mike smiled. "I'd expect nothing else."

Jake ran Hershey up and down the beach for a few minutes. He hoped Marina wasn't giving Michaela too hard a time. Then again, Michaela was tough, she could handle her. Probably.

He was dreading later today when Michaela went home. "God, what's the matter with me?" he thought. The idea of him sleeping alone tonight was making him crazy. Tomorrow was Monday. They both had to work. Still, he didn't want her to leave. He felt like some old Russian love poem, overwhelmed by a combination of passion and angst.

Something was definitely up with Marina. She may have been laughing and kidding with them, but he could tell. When Marina ran from something, she always ran to him.

Jake left Hershey curled up in his bed and walked home. He opened the door to find Michaela and Marina laughing. They looked at him and laughed louder. "Great," he thought. "Just great."

"How's Hershey?" asked Michaela.

"Fine. He'll sleep until it's time for his next run. So were you two laughing at my expense?"

Michaela walked towards him and gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek. "Absolutely," she smiled. "Would you like some more coffee?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Marina?" she asked.

"No thanks. I'm good."

Jake sat on the couch next to his sister. "Okay, what's really going on?"

"What?"

"Marina, it's me. You may be able to act like nothing's wrong with everyone else but not with me." He knew he was right when he saw her eyes well with tears. Michaela walked in and set Jake's coffee in front of him.

"I'll be in the kitchen."

Marina looked up and smiled. "No, it's okay, Mike." She sat down on the other side of her. "I don't want to sound like a whiny diva. My life has given me a lot of advantages. But it has some downsides. You can't move through life the way the rest of the world can. You have to be always on guard. It's not an easy way to live."

"Your life has been like this for awhile. What's different now?" asked Jake.

"Marina, do you have a stalker?" asked Michaela.

Tears ran down her cheeks as she nodded.

"What? What's going on? Why don't you have security?"

"Jake," Michaela whispered and shook her head. "Marina, tell us what's happening."

Marina wiped her face and took a breath. "It started with emails to my fan site. Then creepy gifts started showing up at the studio. The notes were getting increasingly angry because I was ignoring them. Then flowers started showing up at my house, at my house Jake. This creep knows where I live. That's when I decided to go see Patrick. That didn't work out as planned so I came here early and disrupted your weekend.

Michaela put her hand on Marina's knee. "It's okay, Marina. This is where you should be."

Jake looked at Michaela and smiled. "Marina, I'm going to call someone."

"It's no use. I've already talked to the police. Apparently this guy hasn't crossed the legal line into stalking."

"I'm not talking about police. I know a guy, Frank Nash. We served together. He's a private security consultant now."

"I don't know, Jake. I don't want some goon following me around."

"He's no goon. He's a security expert and he'll know what to do. It's either that or having me follow you around."

Marina smiled and nodded. "Okay."

Jake put his arm around her shoulder and kissed her cheek. "Good girl. I'll go make the call."

Mike went to the kitchen and started the dishes. Jake was understandably upset about his sister. As much as she wanted to help, she wasn't family.

"Hey," said Jake as he walked up behind her. He slipped his arms around her waist and kissed her neck.

"Where's Marina?"

"Watching TV. Frank won't be able to get here until tomorrow night. He has a case in LA he's wrapping up."

Mike reached for the dishtowel and dried her hands. "We can't leave her alone.

Jake smiled and gave her a kiss. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For caring about her." He pulled her in his arms and held her tight. "I know I'm being incredibly selfish, but I don't want you to go home tonight."

"I'll stay with her. I can get Stacy and my part-timer, Karen to cover the store tomorrow."

He brushed his thumb across her cheek and whispered, "I don't want you to stay for Marina. I want another night with you."

Mike looked at his beautiful blue eyes and smiled. She took a deep breath for courage before she said, "You can have as many of my nights as you want." She was incredibly relieved when he broke into a broad smile.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," she replied as she kissed him. "I will need to go get some things from my place."

"That would be great if it's okay."

She patted his cheek as she began to put the dishes away. "Of course it's okay. I

own the place. I can do what I want. Plus Karen will be glad for the extra hours."

"I know Marina likes you."

"I like her too. She's sweet."

Jake laughed. "Not many people have accused her of that."

"Sokolovs are complex. Showing one side to the public and keeping their other side private." Mike finished with the dishes and slipped her arms around his waist. "Sound familiar?" she smiled.

Jake got a look she didn't quite understand. He became very still then pulled her into a deeply passionate kiss.

"I would never have believed it if I didn't see it with my own eyes," said Marina.

Jake looked at Marina standing in the doorway but didn't let Mike go. "I thought you were watching TV."

"It's Sunday afternoon. Nothing but sports and political talk shows. Ick."

"I'm going to run back to my place for some clothes. Do you have a swimsuit with you?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Great. When I get back we'll hit the beach."

Marina smiled. "Sounds like a plan."

"Jake, I'll shouldn't be long. It'll give you and Marina a chance to talk about me," she smiled.

"I'll get my keys, they're in the bedroom."

As Jake walked by Marina Mike heard him say, "Ty prav."

Marina smiled and replied in English. "I know."

Jake walked into the bedroom and Mike followed, looking for her purse. He closed the door by pushing Mike against it. "Jake? What are you doing?" He took possession of her mouth in a punishing kiss. "Moy sladkiy Mikaela," he whispered.

"Jake," she whispered. "You know I'd like nothing better than to continue this, but your sister is on the other side of the door."

He kissed her neck, rubbing his hands down her sides, cupping her ass. "We will

continue this tonight."

She gave him another kiss. "Yes, we will. Now, if you will let me find my purse and give me your car keys, I'll get back as soon as you can."

"I would drive you but I don't want to leave Marina."

"Of course, not. I wouldn't expect you to. I do have one question. Do you have a sidearm and are you any good with it?"

"Yes and yes, why?"

"Considering what's going on, it might not be a bad idea to have it available. We can put it in my beach bag when we're outside. That way we won't freak her out." Mike picked up her purse and put it over her shoulder. She held out her hand. "Keys?" He grabbed the car keys off the dresser and handed them to her, but not before giving her another passionate kiss. "Tonight," he whispered.

"Count on it, Marine."

"I was right?" asked Marina.

Jake sat on the couch next to her. "Yeah, you were sweetheart. I'm in love with her."

"Then why the long face?"

"Marina, this is crazy. It's only been a few days."

"So what? She's wonderful and she's crazy about you."

"What?"

"Oh please, Jake. It's so obvious."

"I've never been in a situation like this before."

"You're scared."

"I'm terrified. She's all I'm thinking about. Not my work, my classes."

"Not even me," she smiled.

"No, sweetheart. You know how concerned I am."

"I do, Jake. Honestly I do. But if Mike wasn't part of your life you'd be freaking out about me, and you're not. You're not pacing the floor swearing in Russian. Instead, we're sitting here having a reasonable discussion...in English."

"God, Marina, what am I going to do?"

"Jake, it's not a problem to be solved. What you're going to do is love her the best you can. I guarantee you she will love you back. You finally have the woman you've deserved your whole life." She kissed each cheek and smiled. "Now don't screw it up."

Jake laughed and pulled her into a tight hug. "I love you, baby girl."

Michaela returned about two hours later in a change of clothes and carrying an overnight bag. Jake and Marina had already changed into suits and were ready to hit the beach.

"How did you make out?" asked Jake.

"Fine. Stacy's got it covered." Michaela opened her bag and pulled out an earring box. "I often match jewelry to people's coloring. I have these earrings that I think would look great on you."

Marina opened the box and gasped. Inside were a pair white gold earrings with small dangling long, rounded rectangles. Inside each rectangle were cut similarly shaped openings. Inside the openings were different shades of blue glass, giving them the look of stained glass windows. "Oh, my God. They're beautiful."

"It's a technique I've been experimenting with. I do a lot of my work at home."

Marina pulled them out of the box and tried them on. "Mirror?"

"Bedroom," said Jake. Marina dashed to see her gift. Michaela tried to follow but Jake stopped her. He pulled her to him and kissed her. "You're amazing," he whispered.

"What? It's just earrings. It's no big deal."

He smiled. "Yes it is."

Marina came out of the bedroom and pulled her into a tight hug. "Oh, Mike. They're gorgeous. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"I'm going to take them out. Don't want to lose them on the beach."

Michaela gestured Jake to follow her into the bedroom. "Where's the gun?"

He opened his dresser and pulled out his 9mm. He wasn't required to carry here but the embassy was a different story. He kept his weapon and his skills ready. Michaela opened her beach bag.

"Ready?" she asked.

"One more thing," he smiled. He slipped his hand around her neck and pulled her in for a kiss. "Now I'm ready, let's go." Michaela smiled as she followed him out the door.

Jake watched as Marina and Michaela laughed and had fun in the surf. It was great to see his sister relax and Michaela was a big part of it. She was so easy to be with. He could see them being close friends, like sisters. "Easy, Sokolov. Don't get ahead of yourself," he thought.

Dinner was an unhurried affair. They ate the leftover plov and drank vodka. He could see Marina felt better than when she'd arrived, but still wasn't herself.

"Tell me about this guy you called." said Marina.

"I served with him. He was military police, security protocols. He's really knows his stuff. He did his thirty and retired."

"So he's an old guy."

"He's not an old guy. He's only a couple of years older than me."

Marina got a little sister grin. "Like I said. Old guy."

"Very funny," he said. Jake looked over at Michaela who was trying and failing to hide her smile.

"Seriously, sweetheart. He's very experienced. I wouldn't have called him if I wasn't absolutely sure about him."

"Okay."

Michaela stood and grabbed a plate. "Marina and I will get these. You go take care of Hershey."

Jake smiled. "Sure thing, lyublyu." He kissed her cheek and went out the door.

Mike put down the plates turned to Marina. "Okay, you have to translate for me. He's called me that a couple of times."

"I don't know if I should."

"Please?"

Marina smiled. "It means love."

Jake closed the bedroom door. They'd watched a movie until Marina started to fade. They'd gotten her set up on the fold out bed.

"Are you sure she's okay out there? I wouldn't mind sleeping out there with you," said Michaela.

Jake smiled. "For the record, I would be happy to sleep anywhere with you, but she's fine where she is."

"I guess you're right," she said while she started getting ready for bed. "She may be a movie star but she's no diva. Believe me I know divas. They're half my customer base."

Jake smiled as he took off his watch and set his alarm for the morning. He set down his clock and caught Michaela watching him. "What is it, sweetheart?"

"It's looks all so normal, the two of us getting ready for bed, like we've been doing it for years." She slipped her arms around his waist. It feels like we've fast forwarded our relationship months."

"I know what you mean," he smiled.

"I'm scared to death, Jake."

He tried to keep his voice calm. "Why, sweetheart? What's scaring you?"

"I'm scaring of feeling so much, so fast. Aren't you?"

"Yeah, I am, but not about you. I scared about me." He pulled Michaela to the edge of the bed and sat down. "I told you I'm not good at this sort of thing. I've never shared my life with anyone. I may drive you crazy."

"I may drive you crazy. I'm not sure about most this, it's too fast, too intense, I'm too old."

Jake laughed. "Don't forget, I'm older than you."

Michaela smiled. "Good point."

"There's only one thing I'm sure of." She paused and took a breath. "I'm in love with you, Jake," she whispered.

He smiled as he out his hand to her cheek and whispered, "I love you too."

They had the gentlest of kisses. "Michaela, I can't explain this let alone understand it and that's not something I'm used to. So how about this? We take this one day at a time

and we figure it out as we go."

"That sounds great." She gave him another kiss and stood. "Give me a minute."

"Sure. I'll check on Marina."

He walked into the living room and found Marina tucked in, flipping channels. "You need anything?" he asked in Russian. Sometimes speaking Russian with his siblings felt like a breath of fresh air for his soul.

"No, I'm good. It's been a hell of a day. I'll probably be asleep in a minute." Marina looked at him and smiled. "What is it?" she asked.

"What's what?"

"You're wearing a very goofy smile."

"No, I'm not," he said trying to be stern and knowing he was failing.

"You might as well tell me. You know I'll get it out of you eventually. Save yourself the aggravation."

Jake sat on the bed and kissed his sister's forehead. "You were right, again."

"Twice in one day. A record. What was I right about this time?"

"She told me she loves me."

"Hah. Told you so. Please tell me you didn't chicken out."

"I told her I love her too."

Marina threw her arms around her brother in a tight hug. "Well done, big brother. I'm proud of you."

"Thank you, sweetheart."

She sat back and smiled. "I love you, Jacob."

"I love you too, baby girl."

Marina watched as Jake grabbed a couple of bottles of water from the kitchen and walked back into his bedroom, their bedroom. She turned off the light and let her tears fall.

Jake walked into the bedroom and closed the door. He set the water bottles on the nightstand and started taking off his shoes. "I got us some water. Didn't want to wake Marina if we wanted..." Jake stopped talking. His stopped thinking. Michaela came out of the bathroom wearing a floor length black satin nightgown. "Oh my God," he whispered in Russian.

"I stopped at the mall on the way back." Thin straps held up a lace trimmed bodice. She turned around giving him a view of the low cut back. The material slid over her skin, outlining every curve. She walked toward him. He laid a hand on the cool fabric, moving it down her waist to her hip.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered.

"I love you, Jake."

"I love you, too," he said as he held her close. He took her face in his hands and kissed her. Michaela slid her hands under his shirt, running them up his chest. He reached behind his neck and pulled it over his head.

"Jake," she whispered as she placed a kiss on his chest. "My Jake, heart of a poet," she moved her lips over his skin, "the soul of a warrior," she smiled as she stood back admiring him. "and the body of a brick bunker."

He smiled as he pulled her into his arms and then into a passionate kiss. He picked her up and set her on the bed. As he shed the last of his clothes he enjoyed looking at her. The way she looked at him made him feel like he never had before. He covered her with his body fighting himself for control. He kissed her, moving to her neck kissing and nipping as he went. He slipped the straps off her shoulders, exposing her breasts. Jake kissed and licked, sucked and nipped. Michaela moans strained his control. He pull the gown further down, exposing the tiniest of thongs. He smiled as he slipped the gown the rest of the way off her body and pushed it aside. He ran his finger under the small band around her waist. "Umm, very nice."

"You like?"

"Oh yes," he all but growled.

"I'll stock up," she said. "Now, please," she murmured.

Jake raised himself over her and smiled. "Please what?"

"You know what I want."

"Do I?"

"Don't torture me. Remember, payback's a bitch."

He snickered as he reached down to take off the little thong. He placed his hand on her, enjoying her heat. He massaged and stroked her until Michaela hissed through clenched teeth, "Please, Jake. Please."

Jake stopped torturing them both and slipped inside her. He rested his forehead on hers, enjoying the perfect moment of being with her, in her. He began to move, quickly and quietly, their cries muffled by a deep kiss.

Marina stared at the ceiling. As exhausted as she was, physically and mentally, sleep refused to come. She was thrilled for her brother. He was a good man and Mike obviously adored him. She saw the love in their eyes. She wept with the knowledge that no one had ever looked at her with that kind of love.

Jake and Marina had an early run on the beach while Mike slept in. They stopped at the front porch to stretch out before hitting the showers.

"It was nice to be able to be out without a baseball cap and sunglasses," Marina said. "Thanks for letting me crash here."

Jake gave her a sweaty hug. "You're always welcome here, baby girl."

She laughed and pushed on him. "Eww. You stink. Go get a shower. I'll wait."

He smiled and walked up the front steps. "Fine."

"Jake," she called. "I love you."

"I love you too, sweetheart."

Marina smiled as she watched him walk into the cottage. She didn't know what she'd do without Jake. Val was terrific but they'd never been as close as she was with Jake. Maybe it was his gentle spirit. She laughed to herself calling her Marine brother gentle. He seemed calmed and centered like she'd never seen before. It was if he'd been lost and wasn't anymore. One reason, she thought, was this place. She looked out at the ocean, and felt the calm that her brother loved. The other reason was inside the cottage. She walked in to see Jake stealing a kiss from Mike as she slapped his hands away from a plate of bacon.

"Breakfast will be ready soon so hustle your butt, Marine."

"Yes, Ma'am," he said with a mock salute.

"Wow, Jake," said Marina. "Looks like she'll keep you in line. Just what you need."

Jake looked back at Mike with such love that her heart clenched. "Yeah," he said. "I know."

Marina walked into the kitchen and poured herself some juice. "What can I do?"

"Nothing really. It's just omelets and bacon," said Mike as she started chopping peppers. "How was your run?"

"Great. It was fun to run with Jake again. I still remember my mom taking me to the track with her to watch his meets. He was fast as lightning, at least that's what my four year old self thought. Once he got to college I would go with him to watch him practice. He'd always let me run with him on his cool down lap. I was only seven then so he ran slow so I could have the illusion on keeping up with him."

Mike smiled. "It sounds like you two were really close."

"Yeah. We were. Val was great but Jake had more patience. He's always been there for me, like now."

Mike walked over and put her hand on Marina's shoulder. "It's going to be okay. We'll figure this out."

Marina looked at Mike and smiled. We'd figure it out. She saw the real concern in Mike's eyes. She stood and pulled Mike into a hug. "Thank you."

"Hey, can I get some of that?" said Jake as he walked into the kitchen, his hair still damp.

"What time do you have to go to work?" asked Marina.

"I'm not due in until nine."

"Do you have a class?" asked Mike.

"No. The next session doesn't start for a couple of weeks. It's mostly paperwork and reports for now."

"Jake, did you take time off for Marina for next weekend?"

"Yeah, I was taking four days."

"Did you tell them you were taking it off for family?"

"Yeah, what are you getting at?"

"Did you ever tell your boss who your sister is?"

"No, I don't hide it but I don't bring it up."

Marina started to laugh.

"What?" asked Jake.

"I know where she's going with this," Marina said.

"Does your boss have FaceTime?" asked Mike.

"I suppose. It's pretty popular with military. Helps us keep in touch with family."

"Why don't you call him through FaceTime and explain how your sister came in early. Then introduce him to her. Marina, I assume you can do a grateful movie star thing for his boss."

Marina smiled. "Piece of cake. Let me grab my shower."

Jake watched as Marina dash out of the kitchen and Michaela return to chopping peppers. "What just happened here?" he asked.

She turned and smiled. "I hope that was okay. It's just the way she was talking about you just now I figured she'd be happier if you were with her today."

"You'll still stay too, won't you?"

"Of course," she smiled.

Jake slipped his arms around her waist. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you too. Now set the table."

Once breakfast was done and dishes cleared, Jake set the kickstand on his phone. They'd planned and laughed over their script for the call. "Ready?"

"Give me a sec," said Marina as she dashed to the living room and grabbed her purse. She sat back at the table and applied a coat of lip gloss and fluffed out her hair. She looked over at Michaela. "How's this?"

"Movie star quality."

"Cool. Okay, let's do this."

Jake opened the app and dialed in his Colonel's number. "Hello, Colonel Simmons."

"What's going on, Sokolov? Why is this necessary?"

"Colonel I had arranged to take time off next weekend when my sister came to visit but she came in early. For various reasons, she couldn't give me a warning."

"And this matters to me, why?"

"Well sir I'd like to be able to spend some time with Marina."

"Wait. Marina? Marina Sokolov is your sister?"

"Yes Colonel. She'd like to say hello." He turned the phone toward his sister who flashed her biggest movie star smile.

"Hello, Colonel Simmons. I'm so sorry to be such an imposition on you and my brother. Unfortunately because of security concerns I couldn't give him advanced warning. I'm sure you of all people can understand about security issues."

Michaela, standing out of the range of the camera, slapped her hand over her mouth to cover her laugh.

"Of course," said the colonel in a voice and octave lower than when he started the call. "I enjoy you movies, Ms. Sokolov."

"Oh please, sir. Call me Marina."

Jake thought the colonel's smile would blind him. "Thank you, Marina. Of course, Jake can take as much time as you need."

"Oh thank you, Colonel," gushed Marina. "I'm so grateful."

Jake stuck his face back in the shot. "Thank you, sir. I really appreciate it." Jake disconnect the call and the girls burst into laughter.

Michaela applauded. "Bravo"

Marina took a little bow. "I'd like to thank all the little people who made this possible."

This time they all laughed, even Jake.

They spent the afternoon relaxing on the beach and playing in the surf. Jake made sure Michaela didn't burn while keeping an eye out on the surroundings. He tossed the sunscreen back into the beach bag and heard it bounce off the gun. He'd do his best to keep his sister safe until Frank got here. Hershey was blissed out running up and down the beach between Michaela and Marina. Jake saw the dog panting and decided it was time to call it a day.

"Hershey needs some water so I'm going to take him back."

"We'll all go," said Marina.

"Why?" he asked.

"So I can snoop around that house." She didn't wait for Jake to object and ran toward the house with Hershey close behind.

"Sisters," he muttered as they grabbed their things and walked toward Daniel's.

Jake opened the front door and Hershey darted to his water bowl. While Hershey relaxed in his bed, Jake trailed after his sister, who was peaking into every room.

"Nice digs," said Marina. "Perfect. Looks like a model house."

"This is their home base but they travel a lot. That's why I take care of the dog." He grabbed his sister by the hand. "Come on, Marina."

"They gave you a key. It's not like we're breaking and entering."

"Now, baby girl," he said in stern Russian.

"Fine," she replied.

Marina grabbed a soda and sat at Jake's kitchen table. She watched Mike bustling around the kitchen, getting dinner ready. Marina been trying like mad to keep what waited for her back in LA out of her mind. Now all she could do was wait for Jake's goon to show up so she could relive everything that'd happened in the last few months. Dandy.

"What can I do to help?"

"Oh, I've got it," answered Mike.

"Please," she said. Mike turned and looked at her, understanding.

"You could put the salad together. Stuff's in the fridge."

Marina was almost done with the salad when there was a knock on the door. She froze. She knew it was probably Jake's guy, but hoped it wasn't another creepy floral delivery. She breathed a sigh of relief when she heard her brother.

"Hey Frank. Thanks for coming," said Jake.

"No problem."

"Come on in and meet everyone."

Jake walked into the kitchen with a man and Marina felt like she'd been hit by a Taser.

"Frank, this is my girlfriend, Michaela."

Mike extended her hand. "Everyone calls me Mike."

"It's nice to meet you," he said in a gravel voice.

"And this is my sister, Marina."

Marina thought she's extended her hand, but she wasn't quite sure. "Hello."

"Ms. Sokolov."

"Marina, please," she replied. She tried to keep her face neutral but it was damn near impossible. He was about the same height as Jake, his hair was a bit longer. Thick, the kind she'd like to run her fingers through. His eyes were steel blue and jaw was sharply defined. As was the rest of Mr. Nash. He was wearing a tight black t-shirt that hinted at a well muscled torso. She thought she saw the edge of a tattoo peaking out from under his sleeve. His blue jeans were well fitted, but not tight. She'd bet the house he had thighs

like tree trunks. His shoulder holster held a mean looking gun. But all of that wasn't what had stolen her breath. Marina knew some of the best looking men in the world. She'd even slept with a few of them. But none of them had what he did. Frank Nash was one hundred percent pure male energy. He was the type of man men wanted to be and women wanted to be with. This was gonna be trouble.

"Frank, you're just in time for dinner. Why don't you and Jake catch up and Marina and I will finish up in here," said Mike

"Thank you, but I like to talk to Ms. Sokolov."

"Marina," she smiled.

"They'll be time for that later," said Mike as she waved her hands at the men. "Now shoo. We'll never get this on the table with the two of you underfoot." Jake smiled and Frank looked confused as they walked into the living room. Mike turned to Marina and mouthed "Wow."

"So it's not just me."

"Hell no. I'm in love with your brother but I'm not blind. That is a whole lot of man."

"This is great, sweetheart," said Jake as he dug into his ziti.

"Thanks," she smiled.

Mike picked up the bread basket and passed it to Frank. "Have some. It was fresh out of the bakery."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Mike," she smiled.

"Thank you, Mike."

"That's better. You can even have seconds. Give me your plate." Mike went to the counter and dished another helping on Frank's plate. "Jake, you?"

"A little," he smiled.

Marina had the feeling Frank was watching her, even while he was eating. It wasn't the, 'Oh My God, you're a movie star' look she was used to. Sitting next to him was like sitting too close to an electric fence. She was near desperate to stop of thinking about something else.

"Mike, you have two older brothers too, don't you?" she asked. "Are they as much of a pain as mine?"

"I love you too, baby sister," Jake said in Russian as he shot her a wink.

"They're good guys. There isn't quite the age gap that you have with your brothers. Mine are six and eight years older than I am. We weren't close as kids but we're pretty tight now. I think they were jealous that a baby girl showed up to take up my parent's attention."

"Did they give you a hard time?"

"Not really. There was this one time they were supposed to be watching me. Each one of them were eating applesauce out of a can when they started a food fight. It went from the kitchen, up the stairs, into their bedroom."

Marina laughed. "Did you get in on it?"

"No I was just an innocent by sitter at that point, three or four at most. I was in the line of fire and wound up with applesauce in my hair. When my parents got home they were not pleased. Applesauce was everywhere. Do you know applesauce dries it's like cement? Years later we were still finding it in weird places."

"What about you, Frank?" she asked. She tried to hide a smile as he shifted in his chair.

"I have an older sister."

"Okay, next would be how much older?"

"Two years."

"What's her name?" Frank's discomfort was palpable.

"Carolyn."

"Were you close?"

"Ah, not really. We were into different things."

"So she's not military?"

"No, she's a doctor."

Mike apparently took pity on Frank and interrupted Marina's interrogation. "Jake, why don't you help me with the dishes while Frank and Marina talk."

Marina walked into the living room and sat on the couch. Frank grabbed a notebook from his go bag and took a seat in the recliner. "Ms. Sokolov, when did this start?"

"Marina," she said getting annoyed.

"Excuse me?"

"I've asked you to call me Marina."

"That's not appropriate."

"It is if I say it is. I'm the client. I pay the bill. I say call me Marina."

"I'm not doing this as a job. I'm doing it for a friend."

Marina stared at him for a second. He was stubborn as a mule. "Well then, if this is for a friend, that makes me a friend too. Friends call each other by their first names, Frank."

"Fine," he relented. "Marina, when did this start?"

She sat back in the couch. She had no choice but to go through it all again. "It started about three months ago. I was working on 'Countdown'. Things started showing up at the set. Flowers with no card. I asked around but know one noticed anything. Then the flowers came with cards, some were creepy some were just gross. I'd throw them out. When the film wrapped they started showing up at my house." She looked at Frank. "This creep knows where I live. I'm afraid to go back to my own home."

"Were there any threats?"

"Not directly which is why the cops wouldn't do anything. The worst of them said," she paused and tried to push back the threatening tears. "They said what he wanted to do to me."

"Jake, leave them be. Frank knows what he's doing and Marina wouldn't want you hear the details of this," said Michaela.

"How do you know that?" he asked.

"Because I wouldn't."

"I just feel so damn helpless."

Michaela slipped her arms around his waist. "You are anything but helpless. You did the best thing possible for your sister. You put your ego aside and have a man trained for this sort of thing taking charge."

He hugged her tight to him. "But she's my sister," he whispered.

"I know, baby. You did something for her no one, not even Frank could have done. You gave her a few days of peace."

"You did that too," he whispered. "She fell in love with you almost as fast as I did."

She smiled. "She's terrific."

Jake brushed his thumb across her cheek. "I love you, Michaela."

"I love you too, Jacob."

He smiled a bit confused at the use of his given name.

"Well, if you can go all formal with names, so can I. It's a very good name."

He gave her a soft kiss. "How do you feel about the name Sokolov?"

"It's a strong name," she smiled. He was grinning like a fool when it finally hit her.

"Jake, did you just?"

"Yeah, I did just. Michaela, I know we're setting world records for jump starting a relationship. Sweetheart, nothing in my life has felt as calm and good as you and me. It's like everything fell into place. Watching you here, in this kitchen, you make this place a home. In our bedroom," he closed his eyes and reached for the words. "We feel perfect. I want you to be my wife. Michaela, I love you with everything I am. Will you marry me?"

Tears fell as she nodded. "Yes, Jake. Yes, I'll marry you."

Jake let out a loud "Hoo Rah" before pulling her into a passionate kiss.

"What the hell is going on in here?" asked Marina. She was standing in the doorway with Frank standing close behind.

"Your brother just asked me to marry him."

"And she said yes," he said with a broad smile.

Marina squealed and pulled Michaela in a tight hug. "We'll be sisters! Does that mean I get a discount on jewelry?"

"Don't worry, sweetie. I'll hook you up," she smiled.

Frank extended his hand. "Congratulations, Jake."

"Thanks, Frank."

Marina looked at her brother with tears in her eyes. She spoke from heart, and she could only do that in Russian. "I am so happy for you. You are my rock, my hero. I am so glad you found her. I love you, big brother."

Jake realized he was crying too. He could only reply in Russian. "I love you too, baby girl."

The next morning Jake and Michaela stood on the front porch and waved as Frank and Marina walked toward his car. Once they were out of view she pulled his face toward her.

"She's going to be fine. Frank looks like the kind of man who will do everything in his power to keep her safe."

"Yeah, he is," he smiled. "Michaela, you are so good for me."

"You're pretty good for me too, Marine," she smiled as she gave him a kiss.

"I only have one problem," he said.

"What?"

"How do I come up with the perfect engagement ring for a jeweler?"

Michaela laughed. "Don't worry. We'll figure it out, together."

"Yes, we will," he smiled.