

Vasily Sokolov and Katherine Davenport

By Kate Simon

Val Sokolov sat back in his seat pretending to sleep. His client, Anton Fedorov had talked non-stop since he'd picked him up for their flight to LA. Fedorov was suing a Hollywood studio and producer for libel. They were alleging that the studio's latest blockbuster based their crime boss villan on Fedorov. Val would bet his considerable fee that the movie was completely accurate. Fedorov thought it made him seem like he was dim witted and, most offensive of all, had bad taste in clothes.

Vasily Sokolov was the go to New York lawyer for Russian immigrants navigating the American legal system. Val was raised in the Russian speaking home of his immigrant grandparents. He and his younger brother Jake didn't learn English until they started school, which caused them both a lot of issues. His sister Marina was born when he was sixteen. He and his brother made sure she had a proficiency in English before she went to school.

He'd decided to stay in LA for a few weeks. His brother Jake was getting married at the end of next month. Rather than fly back and forth, Val decided to give himself a little vacation. He didn't expect his business with the studio would take too much time. As much as Federov was an ass, speaking only Russian made him sound intimidating. Val would translate Fedorov's demands, everyone would argue for at least a day before they gave Val what he asked for. Clients didn't hire him just because he spoke Russian. They hired him because he was a damn fine lawyer.

He sighed and opened his eyes when he heard Federov hitting on the flight attendant. Fortunately, the young woman did not speak Russian. If she did, she would have dumped the coffee she was serving in Federov's lap. Val spoke to his client in Russian. "Lay off her, Anton. She doesn't understand a word your saying. Not to mention she's young enough to be your granddaughter."

"Yes, young and lovely," Federov replied.

Val wanted to smack him, just on principle, but smacking a man like Fedorov could have long term consequences. "I'm sorry, miss," Val said to the young woman. "My friend doesn't speak English. He'd like a vodka."

The attendant smiled. "Of course, sir. I'll be right back."

Val knew giving him one or two vodkas would mellow Federov out. More than two and he'd be dancing in the aisle, singing Russian love songs. He sat back and looked out the window at the clouds speeding by. It was going to be a long day.

Marina Sokolov couldn't wait for her flight to get into LA. She'd been doing a tour for the benefit of 'Welcome Home'. She spent most of her time these days working with the veteran's organization. Normally, she would have been doing publicity for 'Countdown', her movie with Peter Kane. But the studio decided that would be in poor taste considering Kane was now awaiting trial for trying to kidnap and kill her. Despite giving explicit directions that Kane was not a topic she would discuss, many reporters insisted on bring him up. Persistent reporters aside, the trip had been a success, raising over one million dollars. She'd also made some valuable connections with sponsors who would provide materials for the group's construction projects.

She couldn't wait to get home to Frank. They'd been together six months, ever since her brother, Jake, had contacted him when she was being stalked. Frank was the one who figured out that Peter was the stalker. They'd been apart two weeks and it was driving her crazy. They spoke every day but it wasn't the same. Marina discovered she didn't sleep well unless she was in his arms.

The airline always let Marina get off the plane first for her security as well as that of the airline. The last thing anyone needed was a crowded concourse of screaming fans.

"Ms. Sokolov, security is waiting for you at the gate," said the flight attendant.

"Thank you," she smiled and extended her hand. "It was an excellent flight."

"Oh," said the startled woman. "I'm so glad you were pleased."

"I was." She was always surprised at how a small gesture from her, like a thank you, made such an impression on people. Marina put on her baseball hat and large sunglasses to cut down the possibility of being recognized. The security guard drove her in the small cart to the end of the concourse. She smiled at the most wonderful sight she'd ever seen. Waiting at the edge of the concourse was a ruggedly handsome man carrying a bouquet of roses. She whispered a quick thank you to the guard as she ran towards him. She pulled him into a quick kiss.

"I missed you, sweetheart," Frank whispered as he handed her roses from his garden.

"I missed you too, babe." She inhaled the beautiful fragrance of the flowers. "Let's go home."

Marina was so glad to get home. She'd moved into Frank's house and put hers up for sale. The only thing she missed about her house was the pool. She loved Frank's rose garden. She kicked off her shoes the second she walked in the door. "Oh, thank God. I'm so glad I'm home."

Frank pulled her into his arms. "So am I," he said before giving her a deep kiss.

"Ummm, that's what I call a welcome home. Now if you have anything other than airport food in the fridge you will be rewarded in many creatively decadent ways." She walked into the kitchen and went straight to the fridge. When she saw what was in the fridge she squealed with delight. "Atomic wings and champagne!" She threw her arms around him. "You are officially the best boyfriend ever."

"Well, that's nice to hear," he gave her a quick kiss. "Why don't you get comfortable. I'll heat the wings."

Marina patted his chest. "You're the best, babe." She grabbed her bag and dashed up to their bedroom. After a quick shower, she changed into a her favorite jeans and the strap t-shirt Frank liked. She ran back downstairs but stopped dead when she saw what he'd set up. He'd dimmed the lights, arranged her roses, and set up the champagne.

"Wow," she said. "This is a lot of ambiance for atomic wings."

He handed her a glass of champagne. "Here you go," he said.

"Okay, what did you do that you're apologizing for?"

"What?" he smiled. "I missed you, babe."

"I missed you too, but all I did was but on the t-shirt you love pulling off me." She pointed to the table. "This is an 'I ran over your cat' apology."

"We don't have a cat."

"Okay, Josiah. Spill. What did you do so I can come up with how you'll make it up to me."

He pulled her into a hug. "I didn't do anything." He sat down and pulled her into his lap. The only thing I did was miss you." He gave her her a kiss. "I want to talk to you about something."

"Now I'm officially freaked. What's going on?"

He switched to Russian. "Marina, I love you. You are the most amazing person I've

ever known. You are brilliant, loving, funny, beautiful, and a pain in the ass diva. I love every day I spend with you. I want to spend the rest of my days with you." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box. "Marina, will you marry me?" He opened the box and she gasped. A beautiful round diamond sat in the middle of two twisted bands of diamonds.

"Oh my God," she whispered. She broke into a wide smile and started crying. "Yes, Josiah, yes." He slipped the ring on her finger and gave her a deep kiss. Marina looked at her ring and smiled. "It's so beautiful. Did Mike design this?"

"Of course."

"How long has she known?"

"A couple of weeks."

"And of course she told Jake."

"I would imagine so."

"It must be killing them to keep quiet."

"Do you want to call them?" he asked.

She smiled and took him by the hand. "Later," she said as she led him upstairs.

Jake Sokolov was starting to make dinner when he heard the front door open. He couldn't believe he was getting married in a few weeks. Six months ago that seemed a very unlikely scenario. That was until he met Michaela "Mike" Turner. She was everything he'd ever wanted in a partner. For the first time in his life, he was more than ready to commit.

"Jake, I'm home," called Michaela.

"I'm in here," he called.

She walked into the kitchen and gave him a quick kiss. "You're making dinner? You're the best. I'm starving. It was a hell of a day and I didn't get a chance for lunch."

"What happened?"

"Lots of foot traffic and one customer who insisted I size her rings right away. Between her and the other work I had to finish my back is killing me."

"You want a back rub?"

"Definitely, but after dinner," she smiled. "If you start that we won't get dinner until midnight."

"True, he smiled. "You get changed and I'll finish up here."

"You're the best," she said. She started toward the bedroom and stopped. "I still get the back rub?"

"Absolutely," he said. He turned the flame down on the sauce and put the pasta in the boiling water. He was setting the salads on the table when Michaela came back into the kitchen. Her hair was damp from her shower and she'd changed into jeans and a one of his Marine t-shirts.

"Stacy and Karen are covering my shifts for the wedding and honeymoon," she said as she reached for the salad dressing.

"My leave is cleared so I'm good to go. I think we have everything covered."

"When is your mother coming in?"

"She'll come in the day before the rehearsal. I've booked her at the St. Regis."

"Isn't that where Val is staying."

Jake snickered. "Yeah."

"Sibling rivalry rears it's ugly head," she laughed.

"Speaking of siblings when are your brothers arriving."

"Two days before. I think they want to size you up."

Jake stopped mid bite.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. They aren't that difficult to deal with," she said. "most of the time," she muttered.

"God help me," he muttered in Russian.

"Reminder, Marine. Your family speaks Russian, my family does not."

"Sorry."

"Marina should be back by now. Do you think he's asked her yet?"

"She hasn't called."

"Well, Frank better hop to it. It's killing me to keep this a secret. About our wedding, I had an idea."

"Am I going to hate it?"

"I don't think so."

"Will it cost us a lot of money?"

"Not at all."

"Okay, you're off to a good start. What's your big idea?" Jake smiled as she told him what she wanted to do. He thought, "I really do have excellent taste in wives."

Val checked into his suite at the St. Regis. He tossed his bag on the bed and hung up his garment bag. They had a court date with the studio tomorrow at ten and he'd have his suits steamed while he reviewed Federov's file for what felt like the millionth time.

A knock at his door was followed by a loud Russian voice. "Vasily, open up."

Val sighed and muttered a few curses. Federov blew into his room. "What do you need, Anton?"

"I need to get out. Come on Vasliy. Let's go have some fun, have a few drinks," he smirked. "a few women."

Val felt the need for a long shower just for standing this close to Federov. "Anton, why don't you order something from room service and check out the pay per view."

Fedorov snorted. "Sokolov, I swear you're older than I am. Come on, were in LA, land of sun, sand and big boobed blondes."

"Anton I will remind you we have our first court date tomorrow morning. You need to be sharp, not hungover."

"Ahh," he grumbled. "You're hopeless. And boring, very boring."

Val stared at the closed door. Why should it bother him Federov called him boring? He wasn't boring. Working hard wasn't a crime. He had a very successful career. Of course, he was fifty four years old and had no wife or children as his mother pointed out during every Sunday dinner. He called for the concierge to pick up his suits and jumped into the shower.

He threw on a sport jacket over his jeans and black t-shirt. Rather than get a table in the hotel restaurant he grabbed a booth at the bar. He was reviewing the menu when a waitress came to his booth. The young woman's long blonde hair was pulled back and her crisp white blouse adhered to her very noticeable curves. She couldn't have been more than twenty five.

"What can I get you?" she said with a smoky voice and big smile.

He returned her smile. He was old, not dead. "Stolichnya straight up and a mushroom cheeseburger."

"Interesting combination."

"Not really. I'm Russian American."

"Oh really," she said giving him a side glance.

"Really." he said then added in Russian, "and you are very lovely," knowing she didn't understand what he said. She grinned and promised to be back quickly. True to her word, she returned in a few minutes with his drink.

"Let me know if there's anything else I can get you," she said.

Val smiled and decided he'd give her a big tip. He would never take the young woman up her offer no matter how tempting. The last woman he'd seen was Carolyn Beckett, an interior decorator. Her services were in great demand by the rich and famous, which was how they met. She'd been redoing the loft of a client when they fell into a very comfortable arrangement. They accompanied each other to events, had the occasional dinner and were, just as infrequently, lovers. She was just as busy with her career as he was with his. He realized the last time they'd gotten together was three months ago. Not exactly a dynamic relationship. He finished his first drink as the waitress brought him his burger.

"Can I get you another?"

"Definitely."

She picked up the empty glass and hesitated. "Can I get you anything else."

Val smiled, "I don't think so, but thank you for asking." He was oddly pleased at her disappointed look. He took a bite of his burger and thought this was going to be a long trip.

"Hey Marine, you almost ready?" asked Marina.

"Just about," he said.

"What is taking you so long?" she asked. Frank was standing in front of the full length mirror, adjusting his tie. "Let's move it, Marine. I'm starving."

"You're always starving." Frank caught her looking at him with a wicked gleam in her eyes. She ran her hand up his arm and smiled. He was still flattered and a little amused that Marina was so attracted to him. He gave her a quick kiss. "Down girl," he smiled. "Jake and Mike are waiting for us."

"Mmmm," she said as she slipped her hands around his neck. "So, we're a little late."

"Three words. Death by Chocolate."

She patted his chest and head toward the door. "Let's move it, Marine."

He laughed at how fast she shifted gears. Marina loved Arcaro's chocolate cake almost as much as she loved him. Maybe a little more.

Frank wasn't surprised to find Arcaro's owner waiting for them at the door. Dominick treated Marina like a daughter. He ushered them into a private dining room where Jake and Mike were already seated. Mike and Jake stood and looked at him for direction. He gave them both a big smile. "She said yes."

Mike squealed and gave her soon to be sister-in-law a big hug. Jake switched to Russian as he extended his hand to Frank. "Well done, brother."

"Thank you, Jake. That means a lot to me." He saw tears in Jake's eyes as he gave his sister a hug.

"I'm very happy for you, baby sister."

"Thank you. I'm happy for me too." She looked at Frank with a warm smile. "He's so good for me, Jacob. I love him so much."

Mike coughed. "Ah, people, do you mind switching back to English? My Russian isn't that good yet."

"I love my ring, Mike. You did a beautiful job."

"I'm so glad you like it."

"Keeping it a secret must have been killing you," she smiled. Marina and Mike had hit it off immediately and they spoke often.

"You have no idea. I have the matching band ready when you are."

"We talked about it but I don't know when. If we want a wedding and not a media circus we'll have to fly under the radar. Something quiet."

Frank saw the look on Marina's face. She was right about the security but he could tell she was disappointed.

"I had a thought about that," said Mike. "What do you think about a double wedding?"

"What?" asked Marina.

"People know you're going to be my maid of honor. Your family will already be here for Jake. All we have to do is invite Frank's family."

Marina looked at Frank with a hopeful expression. "I'm good with it, sweetheart. They only thing that's important to me is we end up married."

"Jake are you good with this?"

"I am. I feel the same way Frank does. So long as Michaela and I wind up married I'm good."

"Mike, this is supposed to be your day."

"Marina, I would be very happy to share this day with you. You're my sister and I love you."

Marina looked at Frank with a smile and tears in her eyes. "It looks like we're getting married in three weeks." He leaned in and kissed her.

"It looks like we are," he whispered.

"Oh, God. I'll have to get a dress. And how are we going to..."

Frank covered her hand with his. "Sweetheart, I promise we will figure all of it out. For now, let's just have a nice dinner."

Marina smiled and nodded. "Speaking of weddings, we have your wedding gift." She pulled out an envelope out of her bag and handed it to Jake.

"Oh my God," he gasped.

"What is it?" asked Mike.

"It's the deed to the cottage." It was Mike's turn to gasp.

"I approached the Meyers with an offer. They spend very little time at the property and they were happy to sell. The property includes enough ground to expand. You two are so happy there. I couldn't see you living anywhere else."

"This had to cost a fortune," said Jake.

"Jake, you know the sci fi series of movies I did?"

"Yeah. I liked them. They were really good."

"Those movies made five billion world wide. I get a percentage of that." Jake's mouth dropped open. "Don't get too excited. I bought the Meyers house too." She leaned in and grinned. "We'll be weekend neighbors." She sat back and gave Jake her best baby sister trouble maker smile. "I was thinking Mama would like it too."

Frank laughed at Jake's panicked expression. This would go down as the most expensive sibling prank in history.

Val looked at his watch with exasperation. They had to be in court in ninety minutes and Federov wasn't answering his door. He'd finally called the concierge and who was using the master key to let him in Federov's suite. Val was not surprised at what he found. Federov was sprawled out on his bed, still in the clothes he had on last night. At least he wouldn't have to deal with whatever female he'd picked up.

"Anton, get up," he shouted.

"Go away," he muttered.

"If you don't pull yourself together you're going to lose a lot of money."

Federov bolted upright. "What?"

He knew that would get him. "Get you're ass in the shower now." Val picked out a suit and waited for Federov come out of the shower. He was grateful that he was coherent enough to be wearing a towel. "You have ten minutes to get dressed. I will be waiting in the other room."

A few minutes later Federov came out of the bedroom looking surprisingly put together. Val handed him a large glass of water and two aspirin. "Take this. The car is waiting."

Thirty minutes later they were sitting in a court room across from The studio representative, the producer and a team of lawyers. They were bringing out the big guns.

An hour later they were no further along than when they sat down. The studio was arguing freedom of speech and claiming their character was in no way based on Federov. Val was confident he'd made his case that their character was based on his client without admitting any criminal activity. Federov owned a number of businesses in New York, restaurants, jewelry stores and a few apartment complexes. He had a reputation for being a ruthless business man and he may have bent a law or two but Val had never seen him break one. The judge finally intervened into their argument.

"I've been doing this long enough to recognize an impasse when I see one. This case has been going back and forth for months. I'm ordering mediation on this suit. The

court will assign a mediator. They will contact you when they are ready for a meeting." The judge hit his gavel on his desk. "Court's adjourned."

Val's shoulders slumped. He'd been hoping to wrap this up but no way in hell he was going to spend God knew how long babysitting this aging playboy. Federov wasn't at all troubled by the need to extend his stay in LA. It would allow him to enjoy himself without the watchful eye of his wife.

"Anton, I'm going to go spend some time with my sister. The court has my contact information when they're ready for us."

"Fine, old man."

Val held his tongue but decided the substantial retainer wasn't worth it anymore.

"Frank, where are you hiding?" called Marina.

"I'm in the office."

Marina walked into the bedroom they'd converted. It was easy to figure out whose desk was whose. Frank's was as neat and orderly as a Marine's footlocker. You couldn't see the top of her desk with all the stacks of papers and books.

"Val just called. His case got postponed and so he wants to show up a little early. Are you good with that?"

"Yeah, it's fine. I have to meet him sooner or later. Might as well do it now."

She pulled him to his feet and slipped her arms around his waist. "Don't worry, babe. He'll love you as much as I do."

"I'm sleeping with his baby sister. He won't love me, but I'll take subdued tolerance."

Val hadn't seen Marina since last year when she flew in for their mother's birthday. Even then she had to fly out the next day to a movie location. He was curious to meet this guy she was living with. Jake said he was a good guy but he'd reserve judgment. She'd insisted that he stay with them rather than go back and forth to the hotel. After spending time in LA traffic, he agreed. He had an overnight bag and a suit in case, by some miracle, the mediator called.

"Vasily!" shouted Marina. She ran down the driveway and threw her arms around him. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too."

"Come meet Frank. I know you'll love him."

"Frank, this is my brother, Vasily. Val this is Frank."

Val put out his hand to shake it. Why hadn't Jake warn him? This guy was Val's age. "English, Marina. We don't want to be rude."

"That's not necessary," Frank replied in Russian.

Surprise number two. "Frank was stationed with Jake in Moscow," said Marina.

"Your brother taught me well."

"Apparently."

"Did you bring it?" she asked.

"Of course."

"Yes! Where is it?" Val pointed to his overnight bag.

"She only gets that excited for food," said Frank.

"This isn't just food," Marina said as she unzipped the bag. She pulled out a large flat box. "This is a little bit of heaven." It was a box of salt water taffy. She grabbed a piece and held it out for Frank.

"Not now, sweetheart."

Val spotted the ring on his sister's hand. "Marina, do you have something you want to tell me?" He pointed to the ring. Marina smile was even bigger than it was for the taffy.

"We got engaged a couple of days ago. We haven't really told anyone except Jake and Mike."

"Mike?"

"Michaela. Jake's says she's too beautiful to be called a boys name."

"Jake said that?" Marina nodded. "Our brother got all..."

"Mushy?"

"Yeah. Wow. Things really have changed."

"There's something I want to talk to you about. You know how my life can be a media circus. I don't want that for our wedding. So we're going to make it a double wedding."

"Double?" he said not quite believing what he was hearing. His baby sister was marrying this old guy he barely knew in a couple of weeks.

"Double. Jake and I will both be getting married. We won't be telling anyone but you, Mama and Frank's parents when they arrive. It will be the best way to keep it the way we what it."

"It will be easier to secure," said Frank in perfect Russian, which was unnerving him.

"Secure?"

"Frank is a security expert. That's how we met. Frank was the one who figured out Peter Kane was stalking me." Val knew about what happened with Kane. It made national headlines. Marina had called them after it happened to tell him and their mother that she was safe. But she hadn't shared any of the details. He would pry the details out of her before he left.

"There is something I need to ask you." She took Val's hand and he saw tears in her eyes. "Val, will you please walk me down the aisle?"

"Of course, sweetheart. I'd be honored. I'm supposed to be Jake's best man. I don't want to disappoint him."

"I'll walk down the aisle with you behind Mike and then you'll stand next to Jake."

"It looks like I'll be walking you down the aisle."

Marina squealed and threw her arms around him, just like she did when she was a little girl. Then as now, he could never deny her anything.

Val sat across the table from Frank as Marina poured tea. "How old are you?"

"Vasily!" said Marina.

"It's okay, sweetheart." Frank looked at Val and held his gaze. "Fifty-five."

"The age difference troubles me," said Val. He did have some grudging respect for the fact that Frank was still speaking Russian, but he'd never tell him that.

"It troubles me too. I worry about what the future will bring." He looked at Marina and smiled. "But your sister is a very determined woman."

"What does that mean?"

Marina sat down and took a sip of her tea. "It means I kept trying to jump his bones and he kept pushing me away."

"Marina!"

"Val, I'm thirty eight years old. I've had relationships before." She looked at Frank and smiled. "Just never one like this." She turned back to Val. "So ease up."

"I'm just looking out for you. Have you drawn up the pre-nup? I'd be happy to take care of it for you."

"Val stop it. I don't want or need a pre-nup."

Frank put his hand over Marina's hand. She looked at him and he smiled. He'd never seen the look that passed between them. Not on his sister and certainly not on himself.

"Val, you have no reason to trust me. If I were you I'd be asking the same questions. All I can tell you is I love your sister more than I could ever say. I would die to protect her. I'll spend the rest of my life trying to be the husband she deserves."

Marina squeezed his hand. "Let's try and avoid the part about dying."

Frank smiled. "I'll do my best, sweetheart."

Val sat back and sipped his tea. "Fine. I'll back off."

"Thank you," said Marina with a smile.

"Yeah, you're going to have enough to deal with when Mama gets here." Val snickered when he saw Frank go a little pale.

Val looked out the window while he sipped his coffee. He'd never seen a garden like this one. The garden appeared to be primarily roses in a variety of colors. Some were neatly trimmed bushes, some crawled up trellises. They must have a great landscape designer.

"Good morning," said Frank, this time in English.

"Good morning. I made a pot of coffee," said Val.

"Terrific, thanks. You're up early, did you sleep okay?"

"I slept fine. I'm still on New York time." He pointed out the window. "I was admiring your garden. I've never seen one like it for a home. You have a great designer."

"Thanks. It's my hobby. I enjoy it."

"You did all that?"

"Yeah. I spent a lot of time in grey places. I like the color."

"Good morning," said Marina as she walked into the kitchen wearing an old t-shirt and shorts. "Are you two playing nice?"

Frank gave her a quick kiss. "Best behavior. Tea?"

"Yes please."

Val watched as Frank put the kettle on and Marina pulled a box of danish out of the fridge. "Val?" she asked as she held up a plate.

"No thanks. Coffee's fine." He watched as Frank and Marina padded around the kitchen looking completely comfortable with each other. Light touches, quick smiles, they reminded him of his parents. He remembered how it was to watch his father, Maxim with his mother, Anna. The looks, the smiles, he never had any doubt how much his parents loved each other. That was the real reason he was so worried about Marina and Frank.

He saw what happened to his mother when his father died. His father died at fifty eight from a heart attack, not much older than he and Frank were now. His mother was devastated. Twenty years later she still grieved. Jake and Marina were only home for visits. He still lived close and could see how she was affected. He would catch her looking at his father's picture with tears in her eyes. Val didn't want that kind of pain for his sister.

"I was admiring your garden," said Val.

"Isn't amazing? Frank's really gifted." she turned and looked at a calendar on the wall, then Frank. "It's the first Thursday of the month. Isn't it your turn to host the club?"

"Oh, crap. I forgot."

"Don't worry. I'll run out and get some cakes and I already made sure there were enough dishes. They're in the china cabinet."

Frank sighed with relief. "You're the best, babe."

She gave him a quick kiss and smiled. "Tell me something I don't know. Val, you come with me and help carry the cakes. They maybe little old ladies but they love their cakes."

"Okay, somebody's is going to have to tell me what club, what little old ladies."

"It's my garden club. We talk roses, what fertilizers work, new varieties, that kind of thing."

"We'll drop off the cakes and take off. Those women hate me."

"They do not hate you," said Frank.

"Why would they hate you?" asked Val.

"I took away their stud." Val smiled a bit at Frank's blush. "They all have a crush on him."

"They do not," he said, still blushing.

"Yes they do," she smiled. "Okay, let me get my tea and will be off."

Frank greeted the ladies and ushered them into the garden.

"Where's your girlfriend, Frank?" asked Abigail Jennings.

"Did she leave you for another movie?" asked Mary Sealy with a smile. Maybe Marina was right.

"No she's out with her brother. He just flew in for their brother's wedding."

"Oh, that's nice," said Mary sounding decidedly unhappy.

Frank directed the conversation to the discussion of the latest rose variants. They showed pictures of their latest blooms, discussed their successes and failures. Frank took notes and made a diagrams of where he wanted to put a garden bench. "I'm going to start the tea, ladies."

"Oh, your such a nice boy," said Mildred Hawkins. She patted his cheek and smiled. Mildred was an eighty year old LA doyenne with a sharp tongue but a quick wit. He liked Mildred. She was an elegant woman but didn't take crap from anyone.

"Mildred, I bet you say that to all the boys."

"No. Only you. You remind me of my late husband. Smart as a whip and hot as hell," she smiled.

"Mildred!" exclaimed Sarah Perkins.

She waved a dismissive hand toward Sarah. "I'm old, I'm not blind. The man is gorgeous."

Frank bent down and kissed Mildred's cheek. "Thank you, Mildred. I think you're pretty cute too."

"Ah, you should have seen me in my twenties. I was dynamite."

"You still are, Mildred." Frank gave her a little wink as he moved toward the kitchen. He was surprised to see Marina and Val standing at the open slider. She touched his cheek and gave him a kiss.

"Just when I think I couldn't love you more."

It had been great to spend a couple of days with Marina. Val had made her tell him everything that happened with Peter Kane. He was angry she'd kept the details from him for so long but glad she'd kept their mother in the dark. He had to admit a grudging respect for Frank's part in ending a terrible situation.

Touring Marina's 'Welcome Home' office was enlightening. He'd begun to worry the reason Marina had put her career on indefinite hold was Frank. Now he realized she was genuinely happy with her work with the veterans. She was doing amazing things and he was even more proud of her than he was for her first starring movie role.

He was reviewing a legal matter for one of the 'Welcome Home's' vet's when his cell phone rang. "Sokolov."

"Mr. Sokolov, my name is Katherine Davenport. I'm the court appointed mediator for your case against CMC Studios."

He smiled at her smoky voice, then mentally chastised himself. She was probably an aging chain smoker. "What can I do for you Ms. Davenport?"

"I've reviewed your case and I believe I have a settlement both parties can agree on. Can you meet me at my office tomorrow morning at ten a.m.?"

"Of course. I'll call my client."

"I'd rather you didn't."

"Excuse me?"

"I find these things go much more smoothly when only the counselors are involved. I will lay out my proposal and you take it to your client. When they sign the paperwork you can get it back to me."

Val smiled. "You seem to be very confident of the outcome."

"Mr. Sokolov, I've been doing my research on both you and opposing counsel. You are a superb counselor with a reputation above reproach, despite some of your clientele. I'm sure once you see my proposal you'll agree it's fair to all concerned."

"Then I guess I'll see you tomorrow at ten."

"Excellent. I will text you the address."

Val disconnected the call, looked down at the new text on his phone and smiled.

Val arrived fifteen minutes early as usual. He found people who were kept waiting were more likely to be more inflexible in negotiations. He approached the receptionist and smiled. "Hello. I'm Vasily Sokolov. I have a ten o'clock with Ms. Davenport."

A sharply dressed woman in her fifties acknowledged him. "I'll let Ms. Davenport know you're here." She spoke into her phone. "Ms. Davenport, Mr. Sokolov is here." She hung up and smiled. "You can go right in."

Val walked into the office marked Katherine Davenport, Esq. expecting a chain smoking hard ass, Wilfred Brimley in drag. He closed the door behind him. "Good morning, Ms. Davenport." The desk chair turned and he had never been more wrong about anything. Ever.

Katherine stood to greet him, extending her hand. She was at least five foot eight with long dark brown hair and green eyes. Her skin was a delicate English Rose. She wore a simple navy dress that covered, in his estimation, remarkable curves. And her legs, dear God, those legs. "Mr. Sokolov, Thank you for being so prompt. I have rather a full calendar today." She indicated the chair in front of her desk and Val sat. "Would you like some coffee?"

"No, thank you. I'm fine."

She looked at him and gave him a smile. "Okay, moving on." She handed Val a file and he started to review her proposal. "I've reviewed the documents as well as viewed the movie. It was quite good. There is little doubt that the writer modeled his character after your client." He looked up from the file and smiled. "That being said, it will be impossible to prove. Your client has already spent a lot of money on what must be your considerable fee. As wealthy as your client is, he does not have the resources of the studio. My proposal is your client accept a settlement of five million dollars. There will be no admission of responsibility from the studio. Your client will be paid from one of the studios holding companies. People may assume he won since he came back from California with five million but he will not proclaim victory. If he does so he will forfeit the five million and incur a twenty percent penalty."

Val shook his head and smiled. "You seem to have all your bases covered."

She returned his smile. "I always do, Mr. Sokolov. The studio has already agreed to the terms."

"They're willing to give Anton five million?"

"They are willing to pay five million to have this thorn pulled from their corporate side. If you can have your client sign, he will have five million within three days." Katherine sat back and gave Val a smile that was nothing short of electric.

"This is an interesting offer. I will consult with my client." Val slipped the file in his briefcase. "I do have a one question."

"Go on."

"That spinning chair reveal you do, do you find it very effective on those who've never met you?" She smiled and Val knew he was right. She'd done it on purpose.

"Some yes, some no." Her smile was knocking him off balance. "Which category would you be in, counselor?"

He stood and extended his hand. "I will get back to you soon."

"I look forward to it." Katherine held his hand a little longer than he expected. Nothing about Katherine Davenport was what he expected.

Marina was curled up on the couch reading a script that Stan had sent over. It was a great story, strong female lead, great producer and director on board. She glanced up when she saw Frank walk into the room.

"Did you talk to your parents?"

"Yeah, they'll be here the Thursday before the wedding. They're anxious to meet you. My sister and her husband were tougher. It's hard for her and John to get away from the hospital."

"Oh, Frank, they have to be here."

"Don't worry, they will. I whipped a little sibling guilt on Caroline. I reminded her how many times she asked me to come home for Mom and Dad. She folded."

"Well done, Josiah," she smiled.

"What are you reading?"

"Stan sent over a script. It's good."

"Are you going to do it?"

Marina shook her head. "No, I can't."

"Why?"

Marina smiled. "Love scenes. I told Stan not to send me anything with love scenes but he asked me to make an exception. It is as good as he said, but I still can't."

"Is it because of what happened with Peter?"

"Not really."

"Are you saying no because of me?"

Marina smiled. "In a way."

Frank sat next to her on the couch. "Sweetheart, you know I would never stand in your way. If this is something you want to do then you should."

She brushed her hand over his cheek and smiled. Her Josiah would always support her, no matter what. It was one of the many reasons she loved him. "I can't do it because the idea of anyone other than you touching me makes my skin crawl. I just can't" She gave him a soft kiss. "I'm yours," she whispered in Russian. "No one else can touch me. I belong to you." She kissed him deeply. "Only you," she whispered over and over as she pulled him close. She pulled him over her. "Touch me, Josiah. Touch me." Frank slid his

hands under her shirt and caressed her. "Love me, Josiah," she whispered.

Frank yanked his shirt over head and stood long enough to shed his jeans and boxers. Marina loved looking at him like this. His toned chest and strong arms, his beautiful tattoos. He quickly relieved her of her clothes. He paused to look at her and Marina could see the passion in his eyes. He covered her and took complete control. He overwhelmed her senses with kisses and nips. He traveled down her body worshipping her breasts, then her long legs. He took her in his mouth and drove her mad. She screamed his name as she flew apart. He took her hard and she wrapped her legs tight around his waist. He drove hard until he shuddered and moaned for her.

He looked at her and whispered, "I belong to you."

She gave him a soft kiss. "Damn straight, you do."

Laying together, naked on the couch, they both laughed.

Val was relieved that Federov had accepted the settlement. He'd clearly explained the penalty clause. If Federov violated it and had to pay the penalty that was his problem. Val had already cashed his last retainer check.

He had to admit that the intriguing Ms. Davenport had put together an excellent settlement. He was on his way to her office to deliver the signed papers and take care of any details. As glad as he was to get shed of Anton Federov, he'd wished he would have had more opportunity to spar with Katherine Davenport.

Katherine Davenport looked out her office window and thought of the fascinating Vasily Sokolov. She'd reviewed his career to determine what kind of man she'd be dealing with. His services were in demand not because of his ties to the Russian community or the fact his sister, Marina, was a famous actress. He was just a damn good lawyer. The one thing she couldn't understand was why a man as handsome as Vasily Sokolov was single.

She laughed, mentally chastising herself for being so shallow. But damn, he was good looking. When she turned her chair around and saw him standing there her heart didn't just skip, it danced. The knock at her door brought her back from her less than professional musings.

"Come in."

"Good morning, Ms. Davenport"

"Good morning, Mr. Sokolov." Katherine fought for control as her heart went from dancing to trying it's best to leap out of her chest. He was wearing a steel grey suit that highlighted his trim frame and salt and pepper hair. "Please have a seat," she said as she sat at her desk. "I assume you have the file."

"I do." He pulled the settlement papers out of his briefcase. "Mr. Federov has agreed to the settlement and has signed the agreement." He smiled. "I have to admit you were right. It was the best outcome possible for the situation."

Katherine smiled and nodded. "High praise, thank you. I've familiarized myself with some of your cases. You do excellent work, Mr. Sokolov."

"Thank you," he smiled.

They spent a few minutes going over the details and arranged for the money to be transferred directly into Federov's account.

"Since our business is concluded I think it would be okay if you called me Katherine."

"Very well, Katherine. I'm Val."

She liked him using her name. She had a sudden wish to hear him whisper it when they were in bed. "I'm sure you'll be glad to get home."

"Actually, I'm staying in town for a couple of weeks. My brother and sister both live here so I decided to spend some time with them. My brother is getting married at the end of the month so I'm staying through the wedding."

"Well, hopefully, you'll get a chance to enjoy yourself while your here."

Vasily stood and extended his hand. "I will do my very best, Ms. Dav...Katherine."

She walked around her desk and stood in front of him. "You know, Val, you should loosen up a bit."

"Oh yes?" he smiled. "Do you think I'm too...tight."

She chuckled. "A little bit. Let yourself have some fun." She moved closer than she should but she was enjoying herself too much. She spoke softly and slowly, emphasizing every word. "After all this is LA, not Brighton Beach." Before she knew what was happening he put his hand behind her neck and pulled her into a deep kiss. Her gasp of surprise allowed him to take full advantage of mouth. His tongue warred with hers, until she surrendered.

He finally pulled back and smiled. "That loose enough for you?" he asked softly.

She gave him a sly smile. "It's a start."

Val chuckled. "Oh, this is going to be good."

"You think so?" asked Katherine with a smile.

"Absolutely." He stroked her hair.

"Now what?"

"Now you give me your cell phone number and address so I can pick you up for dinner tonight."

Katherine looked at him for a moment, as if she hadn't already made up her mind. She grabbed a business card from her desk and flipped it over. She picked up a pen and

wrote on the back. "What time?" she asked.

"Seven."

She slipped the card in his hand then pulled him closer to give him a gentle kiss. "I'll see you then." Val closed the door behind him and Katherine leaned against it and smiled. "Oh, this is going to be good."

Val slipped his sport coat over a polo and khakis. They spent all day in business suits so when he called Katherine to confirm he said he wanted to keep it casual. The concierge had recommended a restaurant a few miles up the coast with great food and a beautiful view. Val knocked on Katherine's apartment door at six forty five. When she opened the door he couldn't help but smile. She was wearing a light peach colored dress with thin straps and just enough of a plunging neckline to make him catch his breath. "You look lovely," he said as he kissed her cheek.

"Thank you. Please come in while I get my jacket."

Val walked to the balcony and looked out at the view of the city. "Great view."

"I like it," she said. He helped her on with her light jacket and held on to the lapels while he gave her another kiss. He wanted to deepen the kiss but he pulled away before he forgot about dinner.

"Shall we?" he asked.

"Definitely," she smiled.

Val was going to have to give the concierge a hefty tip for the recommendation. La Plage was set a stone's throw from the beach. They'd arrived just in time for a spectacular view of the sunset. They sipped a very nice chardonnay while they waited for their entrees.

"How long have you been in practice?" he asked.

"I've had my own practice for twenty years. Before that I was an associate with an entertainment firm for six years. What about you?"

"Thirty years. I do a little bit of everything but mostly contract law."

"In my research I saw you have a large number of Russian clients. I assume that's not just because of your location. Do you speak Russian?"

"Yes, I do. I grew up in my grandparents house. We only spoke Russian at home. I didn't learn English until I went to school."

"That must have caused you some issues."

"At school it did. I struggled with it at first, but kids pick up language quickly. I helped my brother Jake so he wouldn't have such a hard time when he started school. We both taught our sister Marina when she was little so she was a bilingual pain in the ass from

the age of two."

"Isn't that the job of younger sister?"

Val smiled. "She made it an art form. But I can't help but love her. She's has a great heart. What about you? Any siblings?"

"No, spoiled rotten only child. My father is an English ex-pat." Her smile dissolved. "My Mom was a nurse. She was killed in a car wreck about fifteen years ago."

"Oh, I so sorry."

"I was rough. Actually, it still is." She forced a smile. "Dad's still doing great at seventy five. He does a lot of gardening."

"He'd love Marina's boyfriend. He has an incredible rose garden." Val shook his head. "Wouldn't have expected it from a guy like him."

"Why's that?"

"He's an ex-Marine security consultant."

"My Dad was in the Royal Grenadiers," she smiled. "But the English are mad about gardening."

Their conversation over dinner was relaxed, like they'd been friends for years. They discussed their law school experiences, she was Stanford, he was Harvard. They laughed about their mutual love of science fiction and Chinese food. Val smiled when Katherine said she'd take him to her favorite Chinese restaurant for their excellent dim sum.

He pulled into the parking garage at her apartment building and turned off the engine. "I had a great time tonight, Katherine."

"So did I," she smiled.

He leaned over and gave her kiss that quickly turned passionate.

"Val, you're only going to be here a few weeks."

He gave her a soft smile. "That's true. I understand if you don't want to get involved."

Katherine brushed her hand over his cheek. "Actually, I was going to suggest we not waste any time." She pulled him into a deep kiss, her tongue twisted and danced with his as he ran his hand up her waist. "Val," she whispered. "Would you like to come upstairs?"

"There is nothing I'd like more."

Katherine let them into her apartment and locked the door behind them. "Would you like some wine?" she asked.

"No thanks, I'm good."

She slipped her jacket off and tossed it on the couch. She walked behind him and pulled the jacket from his shoulders and hung it in the hall closet. She walked toward him and ran her hands up his chest and his arms and whispered, "Mmmm. Very nice." She looked at him and smiled. "There's something I've wanted to do since I met you."

Val slipped his arms around her waist. "What would that be?"

Katherine slid her fingers up his face laced them through his hair. She leaned into kiss him but stopped and ran her fingers back and forth, messing up his perfectly groomed hair. "Much better."

"Why is that better?" he smiled.

"You're just so, I don't know, precise. I wanted to blur your edges."

"Precise?" He got a wicked gleam in his eyes. "Precision may be a good thing." He slid his hands down her back and slipped them under her skirt covering her ass with his hands. He pulled her tight against him and she could feel how much he wanted her. Katherine unleashed a kiss so fiery he thought he might burst into flames. He finally came up for air. "Bedroom," he gasped. She took him by the hand and led him down a short hallway. He took control and yanked the dress over her head. He had only a heartbeat to appreciate her beauty when she slid her hands under his polo and pushed it over his head. Katherine pulled down the covers on her bed as he shed his khakis and boxers. He was amused with the smile on her face when she saw him naked. He stood still as she slipped off her thong and bra.

"My God, you're beautiful," he said in Russian. He followed her as she slipped backwards on the bed. He murmured in her ear how much he wanted her, the things he wanted to do with her, but all in Russian. Some things he could only express in Russian. He kissed her, nipping at her lower lip. He followed her moans as a path to her pleasure. She loved when he nipped at her neck and shoulder. She gasped when he placed kisses on her breasts, then followed his kisses with his tongue. She started begging for him as his hand slipped between her legs.

"Please Val, I need you inside me."

He rose above her and held her gaze for a moment. Her pale cheeks were flushed, her breathe was rapid, her eyes dark with the same passion he felt for her. He thrust hard inside her as she locked her legs around his waist. He rode hard as she cried out for him. He could feel her muscles tighten around him as she arched up and cried out. He buried his head in her shoulder as he cried out in Russian, words she couldn't understand. Once he regained his senses he rolled on his back and pulled her close.

Katherine propped herself up on her elbow and smiled. "Okay, you're right. Precision is a good thing."

Val stirred and saw Katherine curled up next to him. It had been an amazing night. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a night like that. Katherine was an incredible woman, smart, funny, beautiful and very passionate. He smiled at the thought of just how passionate. He still couldn't believe how he'd grabbed her in her office and kissed her. He'd never done anything like that before. She'd unleashed something in him.

"Mmmm. Good morning," she whispered.

"Yes it is," he smiled before kissing her.

"Do you have to meet with Federov today?"

"No, I gave him his paperwork yesterday afternoon. He should be flying back to New York today."

"Should be?"

"Anton enjoys relaxing without the watchful eye of his wife. He may stay a few days."

"I don't have anything on my schedule this weekend. Would you like to do something?"

"Absolutely," Val grinned before he pulled her over on top of him.

After a quick trip back to Val's hotel to change Katherine took him to a cafe for lunch. He glanced over the menu and concluded Californians put avocado in everything. They had a relaxed meal, just like dinner last night. Talking to Katherine was easy. He realized he hadn't felt this good in years. It wasn't the blistering hot sex. Okay, it wasn't the only reason. She was right, he was wound too tight. He needed people like Federov out of his life. He needed to smile.

"In New York we'd walk around after a meal like this," he said.

"Great. I've raised window shopping to a fine art," she smiled.

Taking her hand in his felt like the most natural thing in the world. They browsed through a jewelry store, an art gallery and an antique bookstore where Val bought her a first edition of Peter Rabbit.

They were walking back to his rental car when his cell phone rang. "Hey, Marina. What's up?" he asked in Russian.

"Dinner's at seven. Jake and Mike are driving in for it, so don't be late. She's very nervous about meeting you, so you need to be on best behavior."

"What do you mean? I'm always nice."

"Vasily, if you interrogate Mike the way you did Frank I will tell Mama who broke her Waterford bowl."

"You wouldn't." he said. Her laugh told him she definitely would. "Marina, hold on for a moment." He muted the call and looked at Katherine. "I have a dinner with my brother and sister tonight. I'm supposed to meet my brother's fiance."

Katherine forced a smile. "I understand. We still have plenty of time."

"No, I was wondering if you want to come with me. They're actually quite nice. I'll understand if you'd rather not." He said softly. "It's just I'd rather not say goodbye to you unless absolutely necessary."

"I'd love to," she said. This time her smile was genuine.

Val smiled and took his off mute. "Marina," he started, switching back to Russian. "I'm going to bring someone with me. Are you okay with that?"

"Oh, Val. You're not bringing that client are you?"

"No. Her name is Katherine."

"What?"

"Her name is Katherine Davenport. She's an attorney."

"And you like her?"

Val was very glad Katherine didn't speak Russian. "Yes, baby girl. I like her."

Marina laughed. "I can't wait. I'll see you both at seven."

Val disconnected the call and smiled. "They're expecting us at seven."

"I should stop for a gift."

"That's not necessary."

"Normally I'd bring a bottle of wine, but since this is the first time you're meeting his fiance, maybe an engagement gift."

Val smiled. "That's a great idea but there is something else happening. It's very top secret."

"Okay, counselor. Spill."

"Seriously, you can't tell anyone."

"I've spent twenty five years keeping secrets. I'm good at it."

"Fine. It's a double wedding. Marina is getting married too. Being who she is we're keeping it secret so they're not overrun with paparazzi."

"Okay." She shrugged as if hearing the scoop of the paparazzi century was something she heard everyday. "Two gifts."

Val kissed her and took her hand. "Let's go shopping."

Marina set down her phone and squealed. "Oh my God!"

"What's wrong?" asked Frank.

"Nothing," she said with a huge smile. "Val's in love."

"Did he say he was?"

"No. He probably doesn't even know yet. He's bringing her to dinner tonight. Her name is Katherine and she's an attorney."

"Is she from New York?"

"No, I would have heard from Mama by now if she was. He must have just met her."

"He's only been here a few days."

"Exactly," she walked over to him and rubbed her hands down his arms. "My heart knew the moment I laid eyes on you. The rest of me took a few days." She gave him a kiss and smiled. "It's how we Sokolov's roll."

Frank laughed. "Is that right?"

"Absolutely."

Marina had become a pretty good cook since she'd stopped working. She was glad she'd made her ziti and sausage dish. There'd be plenty for everyone even with an extra guest. Frank had made sure the house was in order and set the table. She stood in the doorway and watched as this hard muscled, tattooed man placed a beautiful arrangement of his roses from his garden on the dining table. He turned and caught her staring.

"What? Too many? Do you want me to thin it out?"

Marina walked to him and slipped her arms around his neck. "No, they're perfect." She stroked the back of his neck and whispered in Russian, "I love you, my Josiah."

"I love you too angel," he said just before he kissed her.

The knock at the door may have interrupted them but she was glad Jake and Mike were early so she could fill them in. Hugs and handshakes were followed by getting comfortable with drinks in the living room.

"Where's Val?" asked Jake. "I thought he was coming."

Marina got a big smile. "He'll be here soon and he's bringing someone."

"A female someone?"

"Yup. I think this is the one."

"Seriously? Val? Did he say so?" asked Jake.

"No. I don't think he knows yet. Her name is Katherine and she's an attorney."

"Is she from New York?" asked Mike.

"No. If he'd been seeing anyone in New York Mama would have told us."

Jake sipped his vodka. "True. Do you think they just met?"

Marina smiled. "Yes I do."

"Uh oh," smiled Mike.

"What?" asked Jake.

"They just met. He's bring her to meet us. Val's in love," said Mike.

Marina smacked Frank's arm. "See. I told you."

Jake smiled and finished the rest of his drink. "It's already a double wedding. What's one more?"

Frank rolled his eyes as the women immediately began deciding what alterations

to the plan would be needed to accommodate a third bridal party. "Girls, stop. We haven't even met her. We don't know if he's serious about her."

Marina touched his arm like he was a foolish child. "Sweetheart, Val has never brought a woman to a family dinner. Ever. He wouldn't be bringing her if he wasn't serious."

Frank smiled and finished his drink. "Well, that is how you Sokolov's roll."

Val pulled into Frank and Marina's drive and stopped the car. He leaned over and gave Katherine a soft kiss. "I'm glad you're here with me."

"So am I."

"Here goes nothing," he thought as he knocked on Marina's front door.

"Val, come in," she said in Russian. "Does Katherine speak Russian?" Val shook his head. Marina turned toward Jake. "You see, Jacob. A good brother gives you a heads up if someone speaks Russian." She switched to English. "Hello, Katherine. I'm Marina."

"It's very nice to meet you." She pointed between Marina and Jake. "What was that about?"

"When I first met Frank, Jake didn't warn me he spoke Russian. I had no idea he understood everything I was saying."

Frank walked toward them. "She would call me a goon with the cutest smile." He extended his hand. "Frank Nash."

"It's nice to meet you Frank. Val told me about your garden. My father is a big gardener."

"Frank will show you after dinner. Any chance to brag about his blooms," said Marina.

"I do not brag," he said with a stern face. He turned back to his guests. "Drinks? Wine, vodka?"

"Wine would be nice, thank you," said Katherine.

"Val, I assume you want a vodka rocks."

"You assume correctly."

Marina steered them toward Jake and Mike. "Val, this is your soon to be sister in law, Mike."

Val extend his hand and then pulled her into a hug. Marina and Jake looked at each other with surprise. "It's great to meet you, Mike. I know my brother has never been happier since he met you."

Mike's eyes teared. "Thank you, Val. That means a great deal to me."

"Katherine, this is my brother Jake and his fiance Mike Turner."

She extended her hand. "Jake, I'm very glad to meet you."

"I'm glad to meet you too," he smiled and looked at Val. "Really glad."

Katherine looked back and forth between the brothers. "No mistaking you're related. Wicky strong DNA in this family." She turned toward Mike and shook her hand. "It's nice to meet you, Mike?"

"Michaela," said Marina. "But the only one who calls her that is Jake."

"Michaela Turner, the jewelry designer?"

"That's me," smiled Mike.

"I love your work. I own one of your necklaces. It's little garnet flowers mixed with diamonds."

"Oh, I remember that piece. I'm so glad you like it."

"And now I feel a bit silly with what I brought, considering the kind of work you do."

Marina put her arm around Katherine's shoulder. "Don't worry. We're a pretty relaxed group."

Katherine sat on the couch next to Mike and opened the gift bag she was carrying. She handed her a small flat box wrapped in silver with silver and white bows. "It's a little engagement gift."

"That's so nice of you," said Mike. "Can I open it now?"

Katherine smiled. "Sure."

Mike pulled off the ribbon and tore the paper. She unfolded the tissue and smiled. She held up a silver frame that was engraved with delicate flowers. "This is lovely. Jake look."

Jake smiled. "That's real nice of you. Thank you."

Mike smiled and gave Katherine a warm hug. "Thank you so much."

"That's really pretty," said Marina.

"I'm glad you like it." Katherine looked at Val and smiled. She pulled another box

wrapped like the first from the bag. "I got you one too. Val told me about you and Frank." She saw a flicker of panic on Marina's face. "Don't worry. I'm very good at keeping secrets."

Marina smiled and opened her gift. "Frank look, our first gift." Frank looked at the frame and smiled.

"That's really nice. Thanks Katherine."

Val stood back and watched as Katherine received hugs from his family. He'd lay money that none of her colleagues had ever seen her like this. She looked up at him and smiled. He nodded and raised his vodka in a quiet toast. He'd never would have believed it when he first met her. Katherine Davenport was sweet.

A dinner with the Sokolovs was always loud, long and fun. Everyone was talking about wedding plans and honeymoons between enjoying Marina's cooking. The brothers reenacted a roll tossing fight from their childhood. That was until Marina caught a roll in mid flight and chastised her brothers in Russian. They looked properly chastened for a moment until they broke out laughing. Jake and Marina enjoyed spilling stories about Val. Marina mentioning a Waterford bowl made Val grimace. Jake talked about Val's high school exploits as quarterback and homecoming king.

"Homecoming king?" Katherine smiled.

"Mama still has the picture hanging on the wall."

"I would love to see that," she laughed.

"Siblings," Val grumbled, which made everyone laugh. "Mike, tell me how you met my brother."

"He asks in a desperate attempt to get the topic of conversation off him," said Jake.

"I get a lot of foreign tourists in my shop. He overheard me struggling with a Russian customer and he came to my rescue." Mike looked at Jake and smiled. "He got me more money than I'd asked."

"A knight in shining armor," Val chuckled.

"I thought so," Mike said quietly. He saw the look on their faces. He was teasing. She was completely serious. Jake was her hero. This was the real deal and it turned Val inside out. He realized he wanted Katherine to look at him like that.

"How long have you been together?" asked Katherine.

"About six months," said Mike.

"Wow, getting married after six months." Jake and Mike smiled. "What am I missing?"

"Jake and Mike got engaged less than a week after they met," said Marina.

"Well you and Frank got together just as fast," said Mike.

"We didn't get engaged until last week."

"How long before you moved in with him?" asked Mike.

"Eight days," said Marina with a sly smile.

Katherine looked at Val with a mix of amusement and what he thought was a slight look of panic. "Frank, I'm going to take Katherine out to see your garden," said Val.

"You just want time alone with your girl," said Marina. Thankfully she said it in Russian.

"Yes, I do," he replied in Russian. "You're scaring the crap out of her. Now give us a minute before she freaks out and bolts." He took Katherine by the hand and led her outside as Frank flipped on the garden lights.

"You weren't exaggerating. The garden is amazing."

"Yes it is but that's not why we're out here. I could tell their stories were making you uncomfortable." He took her by the hand and gave her a soft kiss. "That's the last thing I want."

"I will admit their stories are unusual but I'm that's not what was concerning me."

"Talk to me, sweetheart. What's going on?"

Katherine smiled. "That. Calling me sweetheart. Holding my hand in a garden."

Val dropped her hands. "I'm sorry. I know this all feels a bit sudden."

She took his hand back in hers. "That's not what I mean. What's happening between us is confusing me. I'm someone who likes to understand. Things need to make sense to me and we don't. Being with you, your family. It all seems so...natural. I've never had anything like that in my life. It's was always just me and my parents. But sitting with them, laughing, telling stories, it felt," she searched for the words.

"Felt like what?"

"It felt like I belonged."

Val felt a sense of relief wash over him. "You do belong. They like you."

"I like them too. Marina and Jake obviously love you. Frank and Mike seem like great people. But they found other so quickly. It's so unusual."

"Actually it wasn't that quickly. Frank, Marina and Jake have never been married. Mike was married when she was just out of high school but it didn't last long." He smiled. "Despite how childish my sister can be, they aren't kids. So you see, it took them their whole lives to find each other."

"But when they did, they knew," she said.

"Yeah, they knew." He knew the look he was seeing. He'd seen it on countless clients. People who were afraid to reveal the truth.

"We've only just met," she said softly.

"Yes, we have."

"Val, I've dated. Dinners, shows, getting together with friends. But none of it felt like this, like you and I."

She looked at him and he saw what he knew no one else saw, the sweet woman, kind and loving. The woman he wanted in his life. "My life has been the same. I'd be hard pressed to remember any details, they all just blended together. Nothing has ever felt like you and I."

Katherine looked through the window at Val's family, still at the dining table, laughing. "Val, are we like them?"

He pulled her into his arms and whispered. "I think there is a very strong possibility we are."

Frank started clearing the table while Marina put away the food. "So have we freaked out Katherine? I'd really like not to tick off my new brother in law." he asked.

"Nah, we're good," Marina smiled as she wrapped up what was left of the dinner.

"What's going on?" asked Jake as he and Mike brought in their dishes.

"Frank's worried we've chased off Katherine and Val will take his revenge."

"How can you be sure we haven't?" Frank asked.

She nodded toward the window. "Take a look."

Frank looked toward his garden and saw Val and Katherine kissing with a passion

he recognized. "Okay, five bucks says it's a triple wedding."

Jake looked out the window and smiled. "Sucker bet."

Val tried not to smile too broadly when he and Katherine walked into the kitchen. He was sure they'd been watching them in the garden but there was no need to fuel the inevitable teasing.

"Frank, your garden is really beautiful. My father would love it."

"Thanks. Maybe he could come by sometime."

"He loves talking to anyone who knows the difference between floribunda and grandiflora," said Marina. Frank smiled but looked very surprised. "What? I've been living with you for six months. I'm bound to pick up a few things." He gave her a quick kiss and put away the last of the dishes.

"She's right. I belong to the local garden society. Maybe he'd like to join me. I could use a buffer."

"Excuse me?" asked Katherine.

Marina laughed. "Frank is the only man in a group of women. I think the youngest one is sixty five." She slipped her arms around his waist. "They were very unhappy when I came a long."

He gave her ass a playful smack. "It's a good thing you're so damn cute."

"Yeah, and she knows it," said Val. "She's been using that since she was two years old."

"Ah, but you love me anyway, big brother."

"Yeah, I do."

"How about coffee and I've got the best chocolate cake on the planet," said Marina.

"Death by Chocolate?" asked Mike.

"Oh yeah," she said with a grin.

"Count me in," said Mike.

"Sounds great," said Katherine. She looked at Val and asked quietly, "Do you mind if we stay a while?"

"Oh, spend the night," said Marina. "We have plenty of room. Jake and Mike are staying."

Katherine looked at Val obviously embarrassed. "She has the hearing of a bat," he said with a smile. "I'm on vacation so I'm fine. Do you have any clients requiring your

attention tomorrow."

"No. My Sunday's are usually my own."

"Okay, I guess we're staying," said Val.

"Great. I have some things you can change into, Katherine. We look to be about the same size," said Marina. She looked at her brother and switched to Russian. "I'm assuming you won't require two bedrooms." Val glared at his sister, but shook his head no. Everyone but Katherine and Mike started laughing. Mike put her arm around Katherine's shoulder. "This happens a lot. I thought at first I should learn Russian, but I'm beginning to think sometimes I'm better off not knowing."

Val closed the door on the guest bedroom as Katherine set down the clothes Marina and Frank had given them on the bed. He picked them up and set them on the chair. He pulled her into his arms and gave her a deep kiss. "We won't need those until morning."

"Your sister and brother in law are across the hall."

He smiled and nipped on her ear. "Your point?"

"They'll hear us."

He nibbled on her shoulder. "No they won't. Besides they're too busy doing it themselves." He slid his hands under her top and pulled it over her head. "Mmmmm, that's better."

Katherine grinned. "Two can play this game, counselor." She pulled his polo shirt over his head and tossed it. She rubbed her hands over his chest and smiled. She held his gaze while she unzipped his khakis and pushed them to the ground. She helped him step out of his clothes as she walked around him. She rubbed her hands up his legs. "You have great legs," she said. "Almost as great as your ass."

"Is that right?" he laughed.

"Oh yes," she purred as she ran her hands over his ass and gave him a playful slap.

"Oh you want to play, do you?" Katherine squealed as Val grabbed her and tossed her on the bed. He tugged off her jeans and quickly removed her underwear. She smiled trying to scoot to the other side of the bed. He grabbed her ankle and pulled her toward

him. "Oh no you don't. You can't get away from me."

Katherine stilled then said quietly, "You'll never have to worry about that."

The night's bright moon cast enough light for Marina to see Frank's garden through their bedroom window. He came up from behind her and rubbed his hands over her shoulders.

"It was a good night, sweetheart. Everyone had a great time." It was then he noticed tears in her eyes. "What's wrong?"

She turned toward him and took comfort in his arms. "Nothing. I was just thinking about Val. You know everyone thinks Jake is the more serious one but he's not. It's Val. Val has always looked out for Jake and me. He takes his responsibilities as the man of the family very seriously. I know he's put his own life second to making sure Mama is okay. But tonight I saw him smile more than I've seen since Papa died. He's happy, Frank. Truly happy." She rested her head on his chest. "Things have changed so much. Jake is more open and relaxed than I've ever seen him. Last year I felt like I was in a prison of my own making." She looked up at him and smiled. "Now I'm a few weeks away from marrying the best man I've ever known. My best friend."

Frank smiled. "If you told me last year that today I'd be worrying about which of my roses would look best in my bride's bouquet I'd have thought you were crazy."

"Your roses in my bouquet?"

"Of course. The florist is putting it together but I told him he's using my roses."

Marina touched his cheek and whispered in Russian. "My Josiah. I could never tell you how much I love you." She got a wicked gleam in her eyes. "But I am about to show you."

Being an entertainment lawyer meant having dozens of clients who needed an extraordinary amount of hand holding. Katherine and Val had spent as much time as possible with each other over the last two weeks but it had been a strain. Today she was trying to finish and get out early so they could drive to Jake and Mike's in Carmel for the weekend. Her assistant, Margaret knocked before walking in the door. She could tell from the look on her face what ever she was about to say wasn't good.

"Margaret, I don't care if God is calling. I'm going away for the weekend."

"It's worse than God. It's Michael Peterson."

"Jesus Christ! What the hell does he want now?" Michael Peterson was a twenty something flavor of the month in Hollywood. A pretty boy with a nice body and limited brain activity.

"He says his creative vision is being ignored and he wants you to come to the set."

"Creative vision! It's a movie about dinosaurs taking over LA. Is he still on the line?"

"No, he said he'd expect you at the set in thirty minutes."

"Get him back," she growled. A moment later her line buzzed. "Michael, what the hell is your problem?"

"My problem? My problem is a director who doesn't respect my process. I want him fired and I want you to see to it. And I want it done now!"

"Michael whatever your problem is allow me to remind you that you are being paid twenty million dollars to dance around in front of a green screen. No one gives a damn what you think. You're a prop for the dinosaurs. Remember that less than two years ago you were a gym rat with limited prospects. I suggest you thank your lucky stars and your incredibly gifted lawyer, namely me, for getting you a contract that will insure your financial future. Now get your diva ass back to the set and get back to work." Slamming down her phone was satisfying to her in a way you couldn't have with a cell phone. She grabbed her purse and walked toward the outer office.

"Margaret, I want you to call Peterson's agent and tell him we will no longer represent their client. Once you've finished that take the rest of the weekend off. Tell the service I am only to be contacted if one my clients is...No. Tell the service to have any clients who call to contact their agents, managers or anyone else who is willing to hold

their hands. After that, take a long weekend. You deserve it."

The older woman sat stunned at Katherine's tirade. Then she began to laugh. "Good for you. Have a great time with that handsome man of yours. You deserve it too."

Val knocked at Katherine's apartment shortly after noon. "Hey, are you ready to go?"

She gave him a quick kiss. "Yeah, I'm good. Let me get my bag."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm just anxious to get going."

"Bull. Stop and tell me what's going on."

"Well, I did just blow off one of my biggest clients and cost my practice potentially millions in fees over the next few years. Other than that, it's been a just another day."

"What happened?" he asked quietly.

"Michael Peterson."

"Who?"

"Star of the Revenge of the Past movies. I got sick of his ridiculous demands so I hung up on him before having my assistant call Peterson's agent to tell them to find another lawyer."

"You had a good reason for cutting the client loose. So why are you so upset."

"Because a month ago I wouldn't have given Peterson a second thought. I would have gone to the studio and tried to smooth things over. Then I would do the same thing for all my other pain in the ass clients."

"But now?"

"Now I don't want to waste time on idiots."

"What else?"

"What do you mean what else? I just told you."

"Something's going on with you."

Katherine tossed her bag back on the floor. "What? Something has to be going on with me because I don't want to put up with an idiot, even one as rich as Peterson?"

"I know you. This isn't like you."

"Do you know me, Val? Really? We've been together a little more than two weeks."

Val took her by the shoulders. "What the hell is going on? For God's sake talk to me."

Her eyes welled. "The wedding is less than two weeks away. After that you'll go back home. We'll burn a lot of frequent flyer miles going back and forth and we'll have the best intentions. But a case will make one of us cancel a trip but will say it's only a delay. But it won't be. It will be a weekend here and there until..." Val pulled her close. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I promised myself I wouldn't do this."

He tilted her face toward his. "Don't be," he said as he gave her a kiss. "I'm not going back."

"What?"

"I was going to talk to you about it this weekend. I've decided to stay in California. Marina has asked me to become in house counsel for 'Welcome Home.' Vets with legal issues don't always have the access to the help they need. I've looked into getting my credentials transferred here. I've represented far too many Anton Federov's. I'm tired of cleaning up their messes. I want to go back to why I went to law school in the first place. I grew up in an immigrant community. Hard working people who didn't always get a fair shake because they didn't speak enough English. Or they'd been taken advantage of because they were desperate to make a life here for their families. It's been a long time since my practice had any resemblance to what I started out to do. Working with the veterans will get me back to where I've wanted to be."

He slipped his hands in hers. "But, the truth is I could do all of that in New York. The biggest reason I want to stay here is to be with you." He stroked her cheek. "I need to know, Katherine, do you want me to stay?"

She smiled and nodded. "More than anything," she whispered.

He gave her a relieved smile. "Ya tebya lyublyu."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I love you."

She gasped, then whispered, "I love you too."

Val laughed. "Well, that's a relief. Otherwise this conversation could have taken an awkward turn. Years from now I will still be boasting that I was right."

"Right about what?"

"That this was gonna be good."

Val looked over at Katherine who'd dozed off after they'd gotten lunch. They'd been on the road for about four hours and had another hour to go. He'd been incredibly relieved the way their conversation had gone. This weekend could have gone in a whole different direction.

Katherine stirred in her seat inhaling the sea air. She glanced over at Val as he was driving them up the PCH. Everytime she looked at him her heart skipped. His strong jaw, bright blue eyes and the beautiful smile that lit up his face. He was an amazing man, smart, funny, kind, and most amazing of all, he was in love with her. Her whole world had turned upside down and inside out in the last two weeks and she couldn't be happier.

Val glanced over at her and smiled. "You're awake."

"Sorry. It was a long morning."

He reached over for her hand. "No problem." He pulled her hand to his lips for a kiss. "We should be at Jake's soon. Their place is small so we'll be staying next door."

"Next door?"

"Jake rented his cottage from the owners next door who were rarely there. He'd been a student of Jake's students so Jake would look out for the property and their dog. Marina bought both houses."

"Marina bought Jake's house?"

"She gave it to him as a wedding present."

"Nice present."

"Nice sister," Val smiled.

Jake checked his watch while he was changing from his uniform into civvies Val and Katherine would be here soon. Marina and Frank were already set up in their new weekend house. He couldn't believe Marina had bought both houses from the Meyers and given the cottage to him and Michaela as a wedding gift. He knew his sister had done well with the movies but he hadn't understood how well until he'd seen the deed in his and Michaela's names. He'd miss Dan and Becky but they weren't there that often. He'd never admit to anyone who he'd miss most was Hershey, their chocolate lab. He took care of Hershey when they were traveling and he'd grown very attached. He finished dressing and grabbed his wallet and keys.

He knocked once and walked into the large sunny foyer of his sister's home. He'd seen Val's car so he assumed everyone was there. "Hey, where is everyone?" he called.

"We're in here," called Marina.

He walked into the kitchen and saw Marina and Katherine with a tablet, looking at pictures of resorts. "We need someplace off the grid if we're going to have any time to ourselves," said Marina.

"I've sent a couple of my clients went to The Sandcastle Resort on Molokai. They have these great private bungalows." Katherine tapped the screen a few times and pulled up the web site.

"Oh, this looks perfect. Frank, what so you think?" He looked over Marina's shoulder and smiled. "Looks great. If that's the one you want, let me know and I'll book it."

"I don't know if we'll be able to get a reservation on such short notice." said Marina.

"I've done some work for the owner. I could give Tom a call and see if he could do something."

"That would be great," said Marina.

Jake stood back with Val and Frank, watching the scene. Katherine was placing a call to the resort owner while Marina looked at more pictures on the web site. He looked at his brother and smiled. "They really like each other," he said in Russian.

"Yeah, they do," said Val. "It's like they're..."

"Sisters," said Frank.

"Are you sure you want to do this now, Val?" asked Jake.

"Yeah, I do."

Marina looked up and smiled. "Remember that line," she said in Russian.

Katherine disconnected her call and smiled. "You've got a week in a private bungalow for the dates you want."

Marina squealed and gave Katherine a big hug. "You're a godsend!"

Frank gave Marina a hug. "Thanks Katherine."

"You're welcome," she smiled. "Hey. Where's Mike?"

"We're going to meet her at her store before we go to dinner."

"Great. I'd love to see her shop. I got my necklace from a shop in LA."

Mike welcomed everyone to her shop as she locked the door behind them. She showed everyone her work area and the necklace she had just finished. It was a delicate weave of diamonds with blue sapphire pear shaped drops.

"Oooo. Pretty," cooed Marina.

"Down girl," said Frank. "It's belongs to a customer."

Mike grinned. "Actually. It's a new design for the case." Marina giggled and clapped her hands. Frank rolled his eyes. "Fine. You just picked out you're own wedding gift."

Marina slipped her arms around Frank's waist. "I do have excellent taste."

Val took Katherine by the hand. "Let's see if we can find some earrings to match that necklace of Mike's you own."

She smiled at the other women. "Presents! Yay! Mike, I think Jake will owe you one."

"I have something already picked out," said Jake.

"You do?" asked Mike with a smile.

"Never you mind, nosy." He waved toward the front of the store. "Val and Katherine are waiting."

Val was walking past each case with Katherine as she pointed and smiled at different pieces. "Mike do you have the earrings that match Katherine's necklace?"

"Yes. I put them aside for you." Mike reached into the case and pulled out a small

earring box. She opened the box and showed them a pair of delicate flower shaped earrings made of dark red garnets with diamond centers.

"They're a perfect match," said Katherine.

"I'll take them," said Val.

Katherine gave him a big smile and a quick kiss. "Thank you, sweetheart. They're beautiful."

"You're welcome," he said quietly. "Mike do you have that other piece you were showing me?"

"Yes I do, Val," she said with a barely suppressed grin. She reached back into the case and pulled out another box. She handed it to him before retreating to the back of the store with the others. Katherine gasped when she saw it was a ring box.

Words usually came so easily to Val, but this was not a closing argument. This was more important. He took Katherine's hand and smiled. He wished he could say this in Russian, but his English would have to do. "Katherine, I love you. I've waited fifty four years to find you but you were worth the wait. I can't imagine another day without you." He opened the box and revealed an oval diamond ring with triangle shaped diamonds on either side of the center stone. "Will you marry me?"

"Oh my God. I can't believe this," she whispered as she stared at the ring.

Val panicked he'd made a giant misstep. "I know this is happening fast and before you ask me, I'm not doing this because of what happened with Jake and Marina. I'm asking you because I love you."

She looked at him and smiled. "I can't believe this because I've waited fifty one years for you to find me. I can't believe this because I love you too. I can't believe this, because I'm going to say yes."

"Really?" he said sounding more like a little kid than a high powered attorney.

"Really," she whispered. She smiled at the slight tremble in Val's hand as he slipped the ring on her finger. "I love you Vasily."

"I love you," he said as he pulled her into his arms for a kiss. The applause and shouts from the back of the store reminded him they weren't alone. He turned and waved his family toward them. "Well, come on."

Marina through her arms around her brother. "I'm so happy for you, Val. She's

perfect for you."

He smiled and nodded. "Yes, she is."

She gave him her mischeivous little sister grin. "Who's going to tell Mama?"

Jake put up his hands and smiled. "Don't look at me. I've already done my part."

Val shook his head. "Oh boy. This is going to be interesting."

The Sokolov's always had fun when they were together. Laughing and teasing mixed with a healthy dose of vodka marked all their celebrations. This gathering was the best yet, celebrating all three siblings being engaged at the same time.

Frank, always in some level of security mode, glanced around the dining room, as he'd been doing since they'd arrived. Marina's stalker may be in jail and she may have been out of the spotlight for a few months, but she was still one of the most famous women in the world. He would never let his defenses down. Not when it meant protecting the woman he loved.

"For God's sake, Frank, relax. Mike told us this place is used to a celebrity clientele," said Marina.

"They are, Frank. I promise," said Mike. "I've brought a lot of my clients here."

Frank looked at his watch. "We've been here for hours. Maybe we should think about going."

Mike laughed. "Honestly, for Marina, they'd stay open all night."

"You're the one who brings them business," said Marina.

"You look better in a bikini."

"Ugh," she replied as she downed the last of her drink. "You know, it wouldn't take much to add a third bridal party." Katherine nearly spit out her champagne. She gave Val a panicked look.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. I know this is all moving fast. We will get married when ever you're ready." He took her hand and smiled down at her engagement ring. "I'll wait as long as you want."

"Do you want to wait?" Katherine asked softly.

"Sweetheart, I'd marry you tonight if I could."

"We'd have to add people to the guest list."

"Don't worry about that," said Marina. "Once Frank and I decided to get married too we booked the top floor of rooms at the hotel and made sure they'd be ready for last minute guests."

Val could tell she was trying not to smile when she said, "I'd need a dress."

Marina piped in again. "Alfonso is on standby. My last fitting is Monday. You could

come with me."

"You haven't even met my father," she said.

"We can fix that quick enough." Val said. He glanced around the table, seeing big grins on the faces of his family. He leaned in and focused on only her. "What do you want? That's the only thing that matters to me." Her lawyer brain was analyzing the scenario for what could go wrong. He hoped logic would take a back seat.

"What I want is to be married to you. It looks like the wedding I'd love to have but would dread planning is already set up. So, if you can get a tux, I'll get a dress and we'll get married in two weeks."

Val pulled Katherine into a deep kiss. "I love you," he whispered over his family's cheering.

"I love you too," she smiled. "But as soon as we get back we call my father."

"Absolutely." He looked at his smiling family. "All things considered, I think I'll ask Mama to come out early."

Anna Sokolov hung up the phone and glanced at the picture of her husband, Maxim. He'd been gone more than twenty years but she still felt his presence with her. Maybe it was just that her sons looked so much like him, especially Vasily. After Maxim died Vasily stepped into the role of patriarch, not so much for Jake but definitely for Marina. Her girl could test Anna's patience but never Vasily's. He handled what ever crisis the eighteen year old put them through. She reached out and touched the image of her husband, running her finger over his strong jaw. "Just like you would have, my love."

She smiled when she looked at the last picture of all of them together. Anna was overwhelmed sometimes at how famous her baby girl had become. She feared for her baby but Marina was such a good girl and a smart woman. Marina never got caught up in the Hollywood craziness, except for this last business with that actor. She was sure she hadn't gotten the whole story. But Marina had a good head on her shoulders, just like her Mama. She sighed and smiled. "They are up to something, Max. I don't know what, but they're all in on it." Anna placed a kiss on her fingertips and then touched them to the picture of her husband. "Don't you worry. I'll find out what's going on." she said as walked into her bedroom and began to pack.

"Do you think she'll like these?" asked Frank as he arranged some of his roses in tissue for Marina's mother.

"She'll love them. Now stop fussing. We'll be late. Jake and Mike are waiting in the limo. We still have to get Val and Katherine at the St. Regis."

She smiled as he buttoned his jacket, then picked up the magnificent bouquet. She took a moment to thank God that this beautiful, fierce, loving man was all hers. He caught her staring.

"What's wrong?"

She gave him a smile and a soft kiss. "Not one damn thing."

Marina had arranged for the limo service and a security drop off so she wouldn't have to be trek through most of the terminal to meet her mother's plane. Frank reached for her hand as she reached for the limo door and shook his head.

"What the hell are you doing?" Marina demanded. She noticed the bulge under his jacket that wasn't muscle. "Are you armed? To meet my mother?"

"We are in an area with thousands of people all of whom will recognize you on sight. There is no way I can keep you safe in a situation like this. My carry permit will only let me go so far inside the airport. You and I will stay here while the others meet your mom at the gate."

"Not a chance in hell, Marine."

"Marina, you know he's right," said Val.

"He is," added Jake. "I'll text you as soon as we meet up with her."

Marina would expect something like this from her brothers but she could see from the look on her future sisters in law faces they agreed. No help there. "Fine."

Frank took her hand in his. "Thank you, sweetheart."

She pointed to her slightly traitorous family. "You sprung this on me now because you knew they'd back you up."

"Absolutely," he smiled.

Val laughed. "You know, Frank, you may be just the husband she needs," he as he shut the door.

"Wow, was that the same brother who looked like he wanted to kill me a couple of weeks ago?"

"You grow on people."

"Like athlete's foot?"

"Just as persistent but not as itchy."

"Good to know," he said as he pulled her hand to his lips and kissed it.

"You're still going to pay for this."

"I look forward to it."

Anna didn't like flying but she didn't mind traveling first class. The food was good and the vodka was half decent. Whenever she traveled anywhere Vasily made sure she was comfortable.

She glanced at the electronic reader Jacob had given her, loaded with the Russian version of all her favorite books. Of all her children, he was the one child that was most like her. He was happiest when he was reading and she understood better than most. There was nothing quite like losing yourself in the other worlds inside books.

She'd spent most of the flight absorbed in the latest Nora Roberts novel. She'd never admit to how many romance novels she'd loaded on the reader. It was not something a woman who'd spent twenty five years teaching the classics would admit to anyone, let alone her children. She turned off the reader as the pilot alerted them of their pending landing.

Anna was aching to hold her children in her arms. They may be grown men and women but they were still her babies. It had been nearly two years since she'd seen Jacob in person, not since his last leave from Moscow. The last time she'd seen Marina in person was at her birthday six months ago. Talking to them through the computer was better than over the phone, but it couldn't match holding them close.

It wouldn't just be her children there. Jacob was about to marry a woman who appeared to be good for him. He smiled more and even called her more often.

Marina had gotten herself involved with her bodyguard but Jacob assured her he was a good man. He was a good deal older than Marina and that troubled her. Anna had spoken to both Michaela and Frank through the computer but she'd decide for herself

after meeting them.

Vasily wouldn't tell her why he wanted her to come to California a week early for the wedding. Something was going on with him. He thought he was so clever but he should know by now he couldn't hide anything from his Mama. Anna smiled as she gathered up her things. She'd have her answers before lunch.

Anna walked down the concourse looking for her children among the crowds of people meeting the flight. Jacob and Vasily waved from the crowd and called out to her.

"Mama, here we are."

As soon as she spotted her sons she had her answer as to what was going on. Jacob was standing next to Michaela. She was a little taller than Anna had thought, but very pretty and smiling nervously. Standing next to Vasily was a dark haired woman, almost as tall as her son and also smiling nervously. Whoever this woman was Vasily thought her important enough to bring her to meet her.

"There are my boys," She smiled and put her arms out to Vasily and the Jacob. She patted Jacob's cheek. "You're not as skinny as I thought you'd be."

"Michaela has been feeding me well." He patted his stomach. "I have to work hard to keep in shape. I'm not as young as I used to be." Jake turned toward his fiance. "Mama, this is Michaela."

Mike extended her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you in person, Mrs. Sokolov."

Anna paused for a moment, keeping Mike off guard, before giving her a small smile and a kiss on the cheek. "Please, call me Mama. Everyone does." Anna smiled to herself at the noticeable sigh of relief.

"Thank you, Mama," Mike smiled.

Anna turned to her oldest who was also visibly nervous. She was a bit proud that she could still have that much influence over her children despite their age. She glanced at Katherine and back to her son. "Well, Vasily, explain." She found being direct with people was both efficient and intimidating. As Vasily would call it, "a win win."

"Mama, I'd like you to meet Katherine Davenport."

Katherine extended her hand. "I'm very happy to meet you, Mrs. Sokolov."

"How long have you known my son?"

"A few weeks," she replied.

Quick and direct Anna thought. Didn't glance at Vasily for direction. She glanced down and spotted the the ring on her left hand. She couldn't help but spot it. It was dazzling. "Vasily? Is this why you asked me to come out early?"

Val straightened his shoulders. "Yes, Mama, it is. Katherine and I are engaged."

Anna looked back and forth at her sons. Jacob was nervous, obviously because he knew about this. "The middle of an airport is not the place for this discussion. Where's your sister? She said she would be meeting me too."

"She's waiting in the limo," said Val.

"Waiting? What? Is she too famous to meet her mother's plane?"

"Actually Mama, yes she is."

"Excuse me?" Anna appreciated direct but this was too much.

"Mama, Frank pointed out that even with sunglasses and a hat all the people you see know who Marina is."

"So this is his idea." Anna pointed her hand toward baggage claim. "Let's get this show on the road."

"Yes, Mama," said both men in unison. Mike and Katherine both withheld snickers.

Frank was glancing out the window for the million time when Marina announced they were on their way to the car. He tried to calm himself. He was meeting his future mother in law but he was also acting as security for Marina. He kept an ear out for the driver who'd been told no phone calls or texts while they were passengers. Frank wouldn't risk a mob scene because the driver had to tell his girlfriend who his passenger was. He glanced at the bouquet he'd put together for Anna and hoped she'd like it. He picked some of his favorites.

"Calm down before you give yourself a heart attack."

Frank looked over at Marina and smiled. "I'm fine."

"Bull. You're a nervous wreck. My mother's tough but you've faced worse."

"Somehow I doubt it."

"Well then for God's sake fake it. Focus on something pleasant. It's what I do before I do a talk show."

"What do you think about?"

"I used to think about Dominick's chocolate cake. Now I just think about you," she said with a smile. She leaned over and gave him a quick kiss. "Just think when you crawl into bed tonight, I'll be there too. Naked."

Frank gave her a broad smile. His phone beeped and a text from Val said they'd be there any moment. He got out of the car to stand at the door. Marina was trying to join him. "Stay put." He smiled at her growl but he would do anything to keep her safe. He waved at Jake and Val and they approached the limo. He'd spoken to Anna through FaceTime and he thought he was ready to meet her. He was wrong. He could see where Marina got her presence. Despite the hundreds of people on the sidewalk Anna Sokolov stood out. She was tall, like her daughter, with crystal blue eyes and silver hair tied into a neat bun. He had a thought that this was Marina in forty years. She walked straight toward him and stood nearly eye to eye with him.

"So you keep my daughter from me."

"No, Ma'am. I keep your daughter safe. Nothing is more important to me. Not even you." Frank heard a collective gasp from the rest of the family. He opened the door and tried to power through the moment.

"Mama!" cried Marina. Anna climbed into the limo and hugged her daughter while Frank helped Jake with the bags.

"Dude, that was...direct," said Jake.

"You said she likes straight shooting." he replied as he closed the trunk.

"That was straight shooting alright, with a howitzer."

Anna sat back in the limo, holding tight to her baby girl's hand. Frank sat down across from her as he hit the intercom and gave the driver the signal to move. He picked up a large bouquet of the prettiest roses she'd ever seen.

"These are for you, Mrs. Sokolov. Welcome to LA."

"Aren't they beautiful, Mama? Frank grew them himself. You will love our garden."

Anna inhaled the beautiful scent and gave him a slight smile. "They're lovely. Thank you." She glanced down noticed the engagement ring on Marina's hand and glared at her daughter. "Marina Valentina, do you have something you need to tell me?"

"Yes, Mama. Frank asked me to marry him and I said yes."

She looked at all three of her children, who despite their ages, looked like they did when Vasily broke her Waterford bowl rough housing. "You couldn't call me?"

"We haven't been engaged that long, about a week or so. Mama, you know what my life is like. I couldn't risk the news getting out. I didn't want the wedding turning into a circus."

"The wedding?"

"Yes, their wedding," said Marina.

"No. You said the wedding. You mean your wedding, don't you?"

Her daughter smiled. "Yes, Mama. We're going to get married too. This way everyone we love will be there and we can have the wedding we want without all the craziness."

"So, all three of my children are engaged." She looked at her eldest who was looking particularly guilty. "Will you be getting married then as well, Vasily?"

"Yes, Mama," he said quietly. "I know this is sudden,"

"Vasily, I've been praying for you to be married for thirty years, so sudden, it's not." She turned her gaze toward Katherine. "How did you meet my son?"

"Mama, Katherine and I..."

"Hush, Val. Your mother is talking to me. I was the court appointed mediator on the Federov case. After the case was concluded he took me to dinner. We've been together ever since. I've been an attorney for twenty six years. I'm fifty one. I've never been married and I have no children."

"After all these years being single you decide my son is the reason change?"

Katherine looked at Val and smiled. "Yes. I knew as soon he grabbed me in my office and kissed me."

"He did what?" asked each woman in the limo. The men just blushed.

"He was so...precise," she said with a giggle. "He was wound so tight, I told him he needed to loosen up. That's when he grabbed me and kissed me."

"My Vasily was impulsive?"

Val grinned through his blush. "Well, the case was concluded, and she is so beautiful..." He grabbed Katherine's hand and kissed it. "Mama, I know all of us getting

engaged so quickly is unusual,"

"Not really," she said with a smile. "I knew on the first date I would marry your father. It took your father a little longer."

"How long?" asked Marina.

"It took him a full week."

Watching her children sitting around the table laughing and telling stories made Anna happier than she'd been in years. Jacob was smiling at Michaela and telling everyone about their first date when he had to rescue her twice. She could hardly believe her quiet little bookworm was the same Jacob she saw now. Michaela was looking at him with a soft smile. She could see how she would be good for her boy. Anna could see what they had together was loving but comfortable. They looked like they'd been together for years.

Comfortable was not what she would call Frank and Marina. She knew her baby girl could be a handful. She was a good girl, but her big personality could be overwhelming. Jacob had filled in details on Frank's career that Frank himself had glossed over. It was no doubt he was a brave man, strong and hyper protective of Marina. Even more so than her brothers were and she hadn't thought that was possible. Jacob had also given her the details of the incident with that actor. She knew now why Marina had never told her everything. She'd have been on the first flight out to be with her. Frank had a commanding presence but when he looked at Marina she saw a softness in his eyes. When she looked at Marina she saw a change she'd never expected. There was a quiet in Marina she'd never had before. It was as if the hyperactive life she'd loved was the furthest thing from her mind. She'd found what she'd been looking for all those years. She prayed that would be enough.

Vasily was looking at Katherine like a man in love. There was no denying it. She'd never seen him look at any woman this way. She'd wondered if he'd ever find someone but apparently he had. Katherine was a strong woman, like she was. She could tell from the look in her eyes that she didn't intimidate her. What she did see was respect. This woman understood what it was like for a parent to love their child.

"Tell me about your families," Anna said, putting a quick end to the trip down

memory lane. "Michaela, you begin."

"My parents passed a long time ago but I have two brothers, Paul and Matthew. We're very close. They live in New York so they met Jake through FaceTime. They are flying in a few days before the wedding."

"That's nice, you're close. What do they do?"

"Paul is a builder and Matthew just retired from the Army. He was a computer big wig. I don't understand half of what he did."

Anna smiled and nodded at Frank. "Your family?"

"My parents, Jonas and Florence, still live in South Carolina. They owned a restaurant but they sold it when they retired. My sister Caroline is married. She and her husband are both trauma surgeons in Charlotte. They are arriving in a few days. None of them know about the wedding yet."

She nodded and gave Frank a small smile. She knew he was making a point so she let him have it. "Katherine?"

"My mother has passed but my father, George, is retired. He spends most of his free time in his garden. I'm sure he and Frank will have lots to talk about. He's coming here for dinner tomorrow night."

"Vasily, have you met her father?"

"Not yet. Tomorrow."

"At the dinner, in front of everyone? No."

"Excuse me?" asked Katherine.

"That may be fine to meet a sibling but a parent? No. Katherine, I'm surprised at you. I assumed you would know better." Anna saw Katherine's cheek color. Vasily was about to chime in but Katherine stopped him. "Vasily, you are about to marry this man's daughter. You need to show him that his presence is respected, not an afterthought."

"Mama," Val started.

"She's right," Katherine sighed. "We should go to his house early. Lunch time. Give us a chance to talk privately."

Anna nodded. "Take a gift, Vasily. Katherine says he likes flowers. Frank could help you pick out something." She gave Val a firm look when he was about to contradict her. It worked when he was a child and it worked still. He tossed his napkin on the table and

sighed.

"Yes, Mama."

Anna set down her napkin. "Fine, now that's settled," she waved toward Val and Jake, "You lot clear the table. Frank and Marina come with me."

"Mama?" asked Marina.

All she needed was a look and her daughter stood and took Frank's hand. She walked toward the livingroom, out of earshot of the rest of her children. She sat on the sofa with Marina next to her and Frank next to Marina. "I want to talk to the two of you about this marriage." She took Marina's hand in hers. "I need to know if you're prepared for what will happen."

"Mama, I love Frank."

"Oh, I know you do. I can see it in your eyes. He is your world."

"He is, Mama."

Anna looked at Frank and gave him a sad smile. "He loves you just as much. I see it in how he looks at you, like my Max looked at me." She took a breath and sighed. "The truth is he will most likely leave this world long before you do. And you will grieve. The pain of your grief will be almost unbearable, too painful to even breathe. The pain will last. You will go forward, because you're strong," she patted her daughter's hand. "Strong like me. But there will never be another for you, just like there will never be another for him. I need to know you understand."

"Mama, are you telling he might die before me? That's why I shouldn't marry Frank?"

"No angel. I'm telling you that's why you should marry him. A love this strong is a gift from God, even for a day. Make the most of it. Don't waste time on useless arguments. Understand what you have is precious."

Marina smiled through her tears. "Yes, Mama. I understand," she said softly.

Anna straightened her shoulders and stood. "Good." She pointed toward Frank. "You, don't take foolish risks with your work. Stay safe for my girl."

Frank stood and took Anna in his arms. "Yes, Mama. I promise to keep us both safe," he said quietly, in Russian.

"Now, show me to my room. It's been a long day and I'm an old woman." Anna

smiled at Frank's loud laugh when he said, "Hardly."

Val wasn't this nervous about his first case. He hadn't been nervous about meeting George Davenport before Mama had made such an issue of it. Frank had arranged with a local nursery to have a special rose bush waiting for him this morning. Frank assured him that it was rare enough to make an impression on his soon to be father in law. He pulled into the driveway and parked.

Katherine covered his hand with hers. "Val, I want you to calm down. My father is a very nice man. He's sweet and not nearly as terrifying as your mother."

"My mother is not..." Val stopped and laughed. "Yeah, I can't say it with a straight face. My mother could scare the crap out of the devil."

"Daddy, we're here," called Katherine as they walked into the front room of Katherine's childhood home as Val set the plant on the floor. It was a modest two story colonial that reminded Val of the tract homes in New Jersey.

"There's my girl." George Davenport walked out of the kitchen, tossing a gardening magazine on the coffee table. He stood tall, well over six feet, with a shock of silver hair and the same dark green eyes as his daughter. At seventy five he was still a very handsome man. He pulled his daughter into a tight hug.

"Daddy, this is Vasily Sokolov. Val."

Val extended his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir. We've brought you a little something." He handed George the plant and he broke out into a wide smile.

"Is this a Shropshire Lad?" He examined the plastic label spike in the plant's dirt. "It is. Where did you find such a gem?"

"My sister's fiance has a big rose garden. He assured me this would be a variety you would enjoy."

"He was correct. Why don't we go out on the deck?" George set the plant down making sure it was in direct sun. "Can I get you anything?" George watched Katherine shift in her seat trying to hide her left hand. "Alright little girl, you're twitching like you did right before you told me you got suspended in high school. What's going on?"

"You got suspended?"

"Another time," Katherine said. "Yes, Daddy." She extended her hand toward her father. "Val asked me to marry him, and I said yes."

"Well," he said quietly. "This is sudden. That's why you asked to come over before dinner tonight."

"Yes, sir," said Val.

"You're from New York. Will you be taking my girl away?"

"No sir. My sister runs a veterans support center. She's asked me to be in house counsel. I'll also open my own practice here."

"Well, that's something." He noticed she was still shifting. "What else, Katherine? I'm still your father and I still know when you're hiding something."

"Daddy, I told you Val's brother Jake is getting married next weekend."

"Yes," he said with the emphasis that he knew what was coming next.

"Val and I are going to get married too. So is his sister. They'd already had everything set up and it won't take much to add our guests to the list. Of course, I want you to walk me down the aisle."

George stood and looked at both of them. "I need a minute." He walked out into the middle of the enormous garden Val had barely noticed before.

"I'll talk to him," said Val.

"No. He does this when he needs to think. Right after Mom died he spent hours there."

"Are you sure? He looks like he's talking to himself."

"He's talking to Mom."

"My mother does that, talking to my father."

After twenty, nerve racking minutes Val would never want to live through again George came back up on the deck, taking his daughter's hand. "This seems to have happened awfully fast. Are you sure?"

Katherine looked at Val and smiled. "I've never been more sure of anything. Daddy, you know I'm not impulsive. I know this is happening quickly but I'll ask you to trust me and my judgment."

"Mr. Davenport, you don't know me, but you know your daughter. She's one of the smartest people I've ever known." Val looked at her and smiled. "When I first met her I told her she had covered all her bases. The settlement she'd come up with covered every contingency. Katherine is not a woman who does anything half way. That's how she is

professionally and that's how she personally. She gives all of herself, holds nothing back. How could I not fall in love with her?" Val paused and refocused his attention on George. "I will tell you that I love Katherine with all my heart. I want her to be a part of my life and my family. I'd like it if you were too." He glanced back at Katherine who had tears in her eyes.

"Well, Mr. Sokolov, that was quite the speech."

"Daddy..."

"No, Katherine. Let your father speak."

"You're right, I don't know you, but I know my girl. When she sets her mind to something nothing and no one can stand in her way. She's been that way her whole life. So I am going to trust my daughter's judgment."

"Thank you, Daddy," she whispered.

"I look forward to you proving her correct," he said.

Val stood and extended his hand. "I look forward to it too, sir."

"George," he said.

"Val," he smiled.

Val closed the car door and sighed. He looked over at Katherine and smiled. "Well, that went...okay?"

"It was fine, sweetheart. I think he was happy with your answers, especially the part about not moving me to New York."

"Oh crap!" he yelled.

"What is it?"

"I never told my mother I'm moving here."

"Well you better do it before my father shows up for dinner."

Val shook his head as he backed out of the driveway. "Oh, this is going to be interesting."

"Marina, calm down," said Frank. "We have everything covered."

"Is the roast big enough?"

"Sweetheart, it's fine."

"What's going on?" asked Anna.

"Your daughter is having a meltdown."

"Frank, I'll take care of this. You go set the table."

"Bless you, Mama." Frank took Anna by the shoulders and kissed her forehead before fleeing to the relative calm of the dining room.

"Tell me what's going on"

"I'm worried I don't have enough."

Anna looked in the oven and checked the pots on the stove. "Eight people, yes? Marina, you have enough for twice that many people." Anna picked up a wooden spoon and stirred a pot. "You made plov?" She took a taste and set down the spoon. She patted Marina's cheek and smiled. "I couldn't have done better myself."

Frank stood in the kitchen doorway and watched as Marina hugged her mother. Anna Sokolov may be tough nails but she was also a great mother. She looked up and spotted Frank watching.

"Did you finish the table?" asked Anna.

"Yes, Mama," he said with a smile.

"What can we do?" asked Mike as she and Jake joined them.

"Nothing, really," said Marina. "We're good."

The front door opened and Val asked, "Where is everyone?"

"We're in the kitchen," Frank called.

Anna accepted kisses from Val and Katherine and watched as they greeted the rest of the family. Val may have been a grown man, a successful attorney, but his mother could still read him as well as she did when he was a boy. "What's going on, Vasily?"

He looked at Katherine and looked back at her. Both looked guilty.

"There is something I need to talk you about."

"We should..." Jake started to lead the others out of the kitchen.

"No, that's okay," said Val. "Mama, things have been a bit crazy, lots of activity."

"Did you break another crystal bowl?"

Val was startled, then smiled. "No, Mama. After the wedding, I'm staying in California."

"You're what?"

"Marina's asked me to be in house counsel for Welcome Home."

"You couldn't tell me this sooner?"

"I'm sorry, Mama. I'd honestly forgotten until Katherine's father asked me."

Anna glared at her son. "So he knew before me."

"I'm sorry, Mama. You know I meant no disrespect. We've been so focused on the wedding and getting everyone here."

Anna walked passed everyone and opened the liquor cabinet. Pulling out a bottle of Stolichnaya and sat at the dining room table. "Frank, could you please pour one for me and I think Vasily could use one too."

Frank smiled at Val's emphatic nod yes. Val joined his mother at the table and they both took healthy sips of vodka.

Anna stared at him and sighed. He'd earned a few extra nervous moments. All her children would be married soon, something she'd always wanted. They'd found partners that suited them. Jake and Marina had always traveled but now Vasily would be gone too. She would be alone with a lifetime of memories.

"Mama, what do you think?" asked Val.

Anna finished her drink and held it up to Frank for a refill. "I think I won't miss the snow."

"What?" they asked in unison.

"We'll you don't think I'd stay in New York with all my children out here?"

"Oh, Mama!" Marina squealed. She ran over and hugged her mother around the shoulders. "I'm so glad." Marina glanced up at Jake and smiled. "I own the beach house next to Jake's. You'll love it."

Jake glared at his sister. "Didn't I see a house for sale down the street from here? This is a very nice neighborhood." Marina returned his glare.

Frank poured drinks all around as Val looked at his mother and smiled. He held his glass up in a silent toast and Anna smiled and did the same.

Marina finally joined the rest of the family for drinks in the living room. "How did it go with Katherine's father, Val?"

"Good," said Val. "Frank, he loved the plant." He looked at his mother, who was looking over the edge of her drink and smiling.

The knock at the door caused Katherine to jump to her feet. "That's Dad."

Val stood and took her hand. "It's fine, sweetheart." He walked her to the door as Marina and Frank followed behind. He opened the door to George Davenport. He was wearing a dark blue sport coat over a bright blue shirt and jeans. Val had the thought for a retired man who spent most of his time gardening, he looked like he'd stepped off the cover a senior edition of GQ. "George, I'm glad my directions were okay."

George handed him a bottle of wine. "They were fine, Val." He gave his daughter a kiss. "Hello, angel."

"Dad, this is Val's sister, Marina and her fiance, Frank Nash."

Val noted that George seemed unphased meeting Marina. Either he didn't know who Marina was, which was unlikely or he'd met enough celebrities through his daughter's practice that his sister was just one more famous face.

"Thank you for having me to your home."

"I'm very glad to meet you, Mr. Davenport," said Marina.

"Please, call me George."

"This is my brother Jake and his fiance, Mike." George shook hands. "And this is my mother, Anna."

Val's mother stood and extended her hand. "Mr. Davenport."

"George," he said with a sly smile.

"Anna," she said. "Sit. Join us." George sat on the couch next to her. "What would you like to drink?"

He saw the glass in front of Anna and nodded. "Vodka rocks."

Anna smiled and nodded at Frank. "Vodka rocks would be fine."

"I hear your accent. English?"

"Yes, but I've been here since sixty one. My family and friends call me Yank when I go back. They say I sound American."

"I've been here most of my life but my family still knows we are Russian."

Instead of being offended George smiled. "What do you think about our children getting married?"

"Katherine is a lovely woman. My Vasily is not given to impulsiveness so I will trust his judgment."

George looked at his daughter and smiled. "My daughter is a wonderful woman. Your son is a lucky man."

"Your daughter is just as fortunate to have captured my my Vasily's heart," she said quickly.

Marina jumped out of her seat. "Dinner's ready. Why don't you all take a seat in the dining room? Val, Jake, you can help me serve." The men looked startled at their sister's request but followed her to the kitchen. "Val, keep a rein on that man," she said as she shoved a bowl of mashed potatoes at him.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"That man is flirting with our mother."

"No he's not," said Jake as he started carving the roast.

"Yes he is. I don't want Mama upset."

Val looked out into the dining room as the rest of the family got settled at the table. George was holding Anna chair and she was looking up at him and smiling.

"What is happening?" whispered Val.

"What?" said Jake as they joined Val at the doorway. George had taken the seat next to Anna. They all gasped when he leaned in and whispered something to her that made her smile and blush.

"Uh, oh," said Jake.

"No," said Val.

"Oh God," said Marina.

"This is going to get complicated," said Val.

Frank arranged some roses in the bedroom his parents would be using. He'd already set a small bouquet in his sister and brother in law's room. This was the room Anna had been using but she moved to the St. Regis insisting Frank needed alone time with his family. Anna Sokolov was as tough as any Marine drill instructor he'd ever had but she had a good heart.

"When are you leaving for the airport?"

He looked up to see Marina standing in the doorway. "Twenty minutes."

"I should be there too."

"We've already been through this. I need to meet them at the gate."

"I can wait in the limo like I did for my mother."

"And I was with you. No."

"You are such a pain in the ass." Marina turned on her heels and stormed down the hall.

Frank snickered to himself at her tantrum. He knew she understood, but she felt compelled to bitch anyway. Everything was in place for the wedding. He'd picked up his dress uniform, confirmed his family had rooms at La Playa, where they were having the wedding. He'd confirmed the honeymoon reservations and his luggage was packed. Now he just had to tell his parents that he was marrying one of the world's biggest movie stars in three days. Piece of cake.

Frank stood at the beginning of the concourse and kept an eye out for his family. He hadn't seen them since last year's fourth of July barbecue. Even though they'd sold the restaurant when they retired, his father still liked to cook for his family. Jonas Nash's ribs were the stuff of legend in South Carolina.

"Dad, over here," he called when he spotted his father. He smiled as his parents moved toward him. He was grateful that his parents at seventy five and seventy eight were still in excellent health. Of course, having two doctors in the family didn't hurt. Caroline was a wonderful nag at getting their parents to do the needed checkups. His father pulled him into a tight hug.

"Oh, it's good to see you, son." Jonas pulled back and looked his son up and down.

"I see the California life hasn't made you soft."

Frank smiled. "You say that every time, Dad." He gave his mother a hug and kiss on the cheek. "Hi, Mom."

"Hello, baby," she said as she patted his cheek.

"Mom," he said with four syllables and a blush, "I'm not a baby. I get the senior discount at Denny's."

"You will always be my baby, Franklin."

"Yes, Ma'am." Knowing he would never win the debate with his mother, he turned to his sister and brother in law. "Hey, Caroline, John. I'm so glad you could get away. It's really important to both of us."

Caroline laughed. "I still can't believe your girlfriend is a movie star."

Frank shook his head as he led them toward baggage claim. "Sometimes, I can't believe it either."

"A limo?" asked his mother as the driver opened the door.

"It's easier than trying to fit all of you and the luggage in my car."

"Is this Marina's car?" asked his father.

"No, Dad. It's a car service, like the one that picked you up for the airport. We don't have limos or servants. We live in the house I bought before I met her."

His mother put her hand on his knee. "Don't get defensive, dear. We're just curious."

"I'm sorry. When we're at home I don't even think about who Marina is to the rest of the world. But out in the world the movie star thing comes up a lot. You know I met her when I was tracking down a stalker."

"I couldn't believe it was Peter Kane," said Caroline.

"Neither could anyone else. When we're out I still act as her security, which is why she's not here to meet you."

"I wondered about that," said his mother.

"Oh, believe me, she's pissed at me for not letting her come. If she were to be spotted in a crowded airport it could be a mob scene."

"We understand, son," said Jonas.

"Thanks, Dad." He hesitated and then smiled. "I bought the fixings."

"Did you now?" his father said.

"I've been bragging about your ribs and Marina is dying to try them. I have a nice barbecue setup in the backyard. Besides, if you feed her she might forget how mad she is at me for not letting her come to the airport." Frank smiled and shook his head. "The woman loves to eat."

"Well, we can't have your girl upset with you."

Frank let out a sigh of relief. "Thanks, Dad."

"Marina, we're home," he called as he walked into the living room. Marina came out to the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel which she tossed at Frank.

"Hi, everyone. I hope your son explained why I wasn't there to meet you."

Florence walked forward and took her hand. "He did, dear. Not to worry. We understand." She pulled Marina into a hug. "It's good to meet you in person, finally."

Marina smiled. "It is good. Facetime just isn't the same." She gave hugs all around. "I was just getting lunch ready." She pointed toward the dining room where she'd set the perfect luncheon service. Frank smiled and shook his head. Even Mildred and the ladies of his garden club would be impressed.

Frank sat at the head of his dining table and watched. Marina sat at the opposite end, passing dishes and laughing with his family. Their family. He had a profound moment of peace, as if this was a moment he'd always been waiting for but never knew it.

"So tell us about this ball we're going to," said his mother.

So much for peace.

"Ah, about that," he started. Everyone stopped eating and looked at him.

"We're not going to the ball? Do you know how hard it was to find a dress on my schedule, Frank?" asked his sister.

"No, no, there's a big event, it's just not the Marine Ball." He paused and took a breath. "It's a wedding."

"What?" his mother gasped.

He glanced at Marina who smiled but let him know this was all on him. "Marina and

I are getting married." More gasps, more shocked expressions and Marina was smiling while he floundered. He made a note to get her back later. "Actually both of Marina's brothers will be getting married too."

"Okay, somebody needs to draw me a map," said John.

Marina took pity on him and jumped in. When my brother Jake and his fiancée, Mike first planned their wedding I was to be maid of honor. Maybe someone might want a picture of it but it wouldn't be a big deal."

"Mike?" asked Florence.

"Michaela Turner. Everyone calls her Mike." Marina noticed what passed as a sigh of relief on Florence.

"Michaela Turner, the jewelry designer?" asked Caroline.

"That's her."

"Wow. I love her work. Lots of famous people wear it."

John coughed and nodded toward Marina.

"Oh, yeah. I forgot about that."

Marina gave her a big smile. "Thank you, Caroline. That's a very nice thing to say." She looked over at Frank and he nodded, more like pleaded, for her to continue. "Mike and I are very close, like sisters. When Frank and I became engaged she offered to make it a double wedding. My brother Val came out a few weeks ago for work and was planning to stay for the wedding. That's when he met Katherine."

"A few weeks ago?" asked Jonas.

"Yeah, well," said Frank, smiling at Marina "That's how Sokolov's roll. When they know, they know."

"Jake and Mike were engaged less than a week after they met. It took your son a bit longer to pop the question."

Florence covered Marina's hand with hers. "You knew right away, didn't you?"

"Yes I did," she smiled.

Frank touched his ring finger and pointed at her naked finger "Where is it?"

"I'll be right back." She darted up the stairs to their bedroom and came back with her engagement ring in it's proper place. "I didn't want to spring it on anyone before we had a chance to talk."

Caroline gushed over the ring. "Did Michaela Turner design it?"

"Yes she did, but call her Mike. Everyone does."

John looked at Frank and rolled his eyes. "I'm going to be buying a very expensive piece of jewelry before I go home, aren't I?"

Frank smiled and nodded. "Oh yeah."

"I still don't see why you couldn't tell us, Franklin. It's not like we would gossip."

"Of course not, Mom but people know Marina and I are a couple. If anyone saw my family getting clothes for a wedding it would be all over the news. If it got out the venue would be over run with reporters."

Florence sighed. "I suppose that's true."

Jonas stood and extended his hand to his son. "Congratulations, son"

He rose from his seat and took his father's hand. "Thanks, Dad." His father pulled him into a tight hug.

"You picked a good one."

He looked at Marina and smiled. "I sure did."

The smell of barbecue ribs filled the back yard as everyone sat around the picnic table. His father spent hours watching over the racks of ribs and refusing the help Marina had offered. Dad never let anyone in on his sauce recipe. They'd laughed and told stories of Frank's adventures as a boy. When his father brought the first tray of ribs over Marina looked like a kid on Christmas morning.

"Frank has been telling me about these for months," she said as she held out her plate.

Everyone grabbed a serving and continued passing the cole slaw and baked beans. "Who wants a drink?" asked Frank. "John, a beer?"

"That'd be great, thanks."

"Sweetheart, you want something to drink?" Marina's eyes were closed and she was smiling. "Marina, honey. Do you want a beer?"

"Not now, Josiah. I'm having a religious experience." She reached for her napkin and wiped the sauce from her chin. "Oh my God, Jonas these are amazing."

"Thank you, dear," replied his father. Frank thought he saw a blush on his cheek.

"Josiah?" asked his mother.

Frank shrugged. "She likes my name." He passed drinks around and everyone was enjoying their meal, but he caught them glimpsing at Marina as she demolished rib after rib. When she reached over for her third serving Caroline leaned over and whispered,

"Does she always eat like that?"

"She has the metabolism of a hummingbird."

"Huh. Medically it's fascinating. Personally I'd hate her a little if I didn't like her so much."

Frank laughed. "Yeah, she gets that a lot."

Jake and Michaela stood at the end of the concourse waiting for her brothers. He was meeting them in person for the first time and his nerves were on edge. Michaela pointed and squealed. "There they are!" She waved at two tall men walking toward them. One was six foot two with dark brown hair shot with silver. The other was six foot three with blonde hair. Michaela ran toward them and pulled first the dark haired man first, then the blonde.

Michaela came toward Jake pulling both men with her. Aside from Paul's blonde hair Jake saw the strong resemblance to Michaela. Matt shook his hand but held it a bit too long as he looked Jake up and down. Jake knew Matt was a retired Army major and expected a bit of service rivalry.

"It's great to meet you in person," he said, forcing a smile.

"Nice to finally meet you too," said Paul. Matt just grumbled.

"Let's get your bags and we can get you set up at the hotel."

La Playa was a small but elegant resort in Malibu. Jake and Michaela had originally planned on thirty guests but the list now had grown to one hundred. Fortunately, both Val and Marina had kept their guests to the immediate family and the closest friends. Thanks to Marina, twenty rooms at the resort were reserved for their guests. Jake and Michaela got her brothers settled and returned to their suite.

"He hates me," said Jake as he opened the sliding door to their patio.

"Who hates you?" asked Michaela.

"Matt."

"He does not."

"He barely spoke to me."

"He's trying to intimidate you. He feels as my big brother it's his job."

"Well, he's doing a damn fine job of it."

Michaela turned him to force him away from the beautiful view. "Jacob Sokolov are you telling me that the kick ass, rock solid, brilliant Marine I'm about to marry is afraid on my brother?"

Jake looked at Michaela and held up his hands. "Hell yes."

"For God's sake why?"

"I know how close you are to your brothers. I don't want there to be any problems between us because Matt thinks I'm not good enough for you."

She smiled and slipped her hands behind his neck. "You listen to me, Marine. I love my brothers. They're really good guys despite their posturing. But make no mistake, Jacob. You are my man. I love you more than I could ever say. Nothing and no one, not even my overly protective brothers will ever come between us."

"Oh yeah?" he asked quietly.

"Hell, yeah," she said. She gave him a soft kiss that quickly turned passionate.

He smiled. "Good to know."

Dinner that night at La Playa meant taking over the entire restaurant. Frank had insisted on tight security despite the fact that as far as anyone knew Marina was only a bridesmaid in the wedding. She knew by now to never argue with Frank on security issues because she would never win. Marina had arranged for any other guest who was inconvenienced by the wedding events to have their entire stays paid for.

Marina easily took the role of hostess making sure that their guests were properly introduced to each other. She looked up and smiled when she saw her designer, Alfonso, walk through the restaurant doors.

"Marina, sweetheart, there you are." He walked towards her and kissed her cheek as Frank joined them.

"Oh, and there's the hot and hunky gr...boyfriend," he said.

"Watch it," she warned.

"They still don't know?" he asked looking around the room at the guests.

"No, just our immediate families and you."

He smiled and put his hand over his heart. "Don't worry sweetheart. I'll keep my lovely mouth shut." He reached in his jacket and pulled out an envelope. "Speaking of which, this is for the happy couples."

Marina smiled and opened the envelope. Frank looked over her shoulder and gasped. It was a donation to Welcome Home for one hundred thousand dollars.

"Holy crap!" said Frank

"Alfonso, this is incredibly generous of you."

"It's a wonderful charity doing great work." He smiled softly. "Marina, darling, you have been my favorite girl for ten years. You wearing my designs gave me a level of recognition I would have never had without you." His voice got a bit misty. "You aren't like anyone else in this town, sweet girl. You are lovely, kind and generous. I love you, girl."

Marina put her arms around her friend and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "I love you too."

Frank extended his hand to Alfonso then pulled him into a tight bro hug. "This means a lot to both of us. Thank you."

Alfonso smiled broadly and looked at Marina. "Damn, girl. He's built like a brick bunker. No wonder you're always smiling."

Marina giggled at Frank's blush. "Sweetie, you have no idea."

Mike walked towards them and linked her arm through Marina's. "Everyone looks like their having a good time."

"They are, Mike. Relax," said Frank.

"I'm worried about my brothers. They don't know anyone here."

Marina laughed. "Your brothers are two gorgeous, single men. They are going to meet at least a dozen single women here."

"Are you sure?"

Marina smiled and pointed to two circles of women with a Turner man in the center of each. "As far as the women are concerned your brothers are the best party favors ever."

Frank checked his watch and checked the door. He hadn't invited too many people to the wedding other than his family. His associate, Jerry Sterling was here but he was coordinating security with the hotel. Susan Spencer, his office manager, had already arrived with her husband. He hadn't worried about confiding in his people. Working security for so many years meant they were used to keeping secrets. He noticed a redheaded woman in an emerald green dress he didn't recognize walk into the restaurant. He was ready to escort the woman out when she was joined by the guest he had been waiting for.

"Cabe! Buddy!" called Frank as he walked toward his friend. He shook his hand and pulled him into a hug. He hadn't seen Cabe in about a year. They'd run into each other at security conferences which wasn't unusual since Cabe was a Homeland Security agent.

Before reconnecting in LA a few years ago, they hadn't seen each other since their early days in the Marines. They'd been in the same platoon and didn't really know each other until people started mistaking them for each other. Everyone said they could pass for brothers. It happened so often they finally got together over a couple of beers. Cabe was a great guy and they'd become good friends. They'd run into each other a few years ago when Frank had a case working for a Chinese diplomat that crossed paths with Homeland.

"Frank it's good to see you, it's been too long." Cabe smiled at the woman next to him. "I'd like you to meet my wife, Kate."

"Wife?! Congratulations. When did this happen?"

"Nearly a year."

"It's very nice to meet you," Frank said. As he shook her hand she stood still, staring.

"Cabe said you used to get mistaken for each other but this is amazing," she said.

Frank put his arm around Cabe's shoulder and smiled. "We got that a lot."

"You said you had an issue," said Cabe quietly.

"Yeah, I need to talk to you." Frank turned to Kate and smiled. "I hope you will excuse us for a moment."

"No need," said Cabe. Kate opened her clutch to show a Homeland agent badge.

"Okay then, we'll find a quiet place to talk but first I want you to meet someone."
He turned and waved to Marina to join them.

"Isn't that Marina Sokolov?" asked Kate.

"Yes, it is," he smiled.

"Is she the issue?" asked Cabe.

"You could say that."

Marina got close and then stopped. She looked back and forth between Frank and Cabe, then let out a few colorful Russian invectives. "Frank, what is going on?"

"Marina, this is the Marine buddy of mine I invited, Cabe Gallo."

Marina extended her hand to Cabe. "It's nice to meet you."

"And this is his wife, Kate."

Kate smiled at Marina. "Don't worry. I'm in shock too."

Frank took Marina's hand. "Let's go find a quiet place to talk." He led them to a small conference room down the hall and closed the door.

"Is someone stalking Ms. Sokolov again?" asked Cabe.

Marina looked at Frank and let loose with a few more colorful phrases in Russian.

"Please tell me neither of you speak Russian," said Frank. Cabe smiled and shook his head. "Good." He looked at Marina. "Let's stick to English, shall we?"

"Fine. Just explain yourself," she huffed as she took a chair and indicated the others should too.

"I asked Cabe to come because I would like his help with security."

"Security is fine. Jerry and the hotel are on it."

"Marina, we could go round and round about this but have you ever won a security argument with me?"

"No," she pouted.

"So let's cut out the preliminaries so we can all get back to the party."

"Fine." She looked at him with an evil grin and added in Russian. "You will pay for this later."

"I have no doubt," he replied before switching back to English. "I explained on the phone that it was a big event. The event is a big wedding, three couples are getting married tomorrow."

"I can see that's a big event but why would you need big gun security like Homeland?" asked Kate.

"Because of who the couples are. Marina's brother Jake is marrying Michaela Turner, the designer. Her brother Val is marrying an LA entertainment lawyer, Katherine Davenport." Frank smiled, "And Marina is marrying me."

Cabe broke out in a big smile. "Wow, congratulations."

"Thanks. The only people who know about Marina being anything but a bridesmaid at this thing are our immediate families.

"And my designer, Alfonso," Marina added.

"We felt it was the easiest way to have a nice wedding without the paparazzi descending like locust."

"Logical," said Cabe. "What do you need from Kate and me?"

"My associate, Jerry Sterling is coordinating security with the hotel. Normally I would be overseeing, keeping an eye on things, seeing if anyone looked out of place."

"But you'd be distracted by the fact it's your wedding too," Kate said.

Frank smiled. "Exactly. Cabe, I was hoping you'd be my extra set of eyes this weekend."

"Of course, Frank. Kate and I will work the floor and see if there any issues. You should bring your associate in so he knows who we are."

"If you didn't bring your sidearm I'm sure Jerry can take care of you."

"No need. Kate and I are armed."

Cabe stood and extended his hand to Frank. "So this is why you told me I should bring my dress blues. Congratulations."

"Thanks Cabe. I'm really glad you're here."

"So am I, brother."

Kate and Marina stood next to each other watching their men. "So this is just as weird for you as me?" asked Marina.

"God yes," said Kate, then she smiled. "I do owe you for one thing. I've never seen him in his uniform. He didn't wear it at our wedding."

"When Frank wears his he looks...delicious." Marina made a sound like she was enjoying Jonas's ribs.

Jake looked out his balcony window at the surf. The sky was bright and sea was calm. It was a beautiful day for a wedding. Everything seemed to be going as planned. Frank had security pretty tight, making sure no one got wind that Marina was getting married too. The last thing he wanted was a media circus. It had been Michaela's idea to share their day with his sister and his brother. He loved her for it but this was their day too. He thought for a moment about the day his life turned upside down. He'd been translating for people his whole life but it was the first time he'd used his language skills to pick up a girl. The perfect girl for him. He smiled as he felt Michaela's hands slip around his waist.

"What are you looking at?"

"The ocean. The weather man said it's going to be a beautiful day."

"Even if it rained buckets, it's still going to be a beautiful day," she said.

Jake gave her a quick kiss. "It certainly is." He was ready to take the kiss further when he was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Daniel!" He gave his former student and landlord a hug. He looked every inch an officer in his dress blues. Jake had gotten to know Major General Daniel Meyers during his tours at the Pentagon. He'd taught the Russian language and culture that the General had considered essential in his work with intelligence. After he retired he'd insisted Jake called him Daniel. It took him a little longer to stop saluting. Daniel and his wife, Becky rented Jake their cottage to him for next to nothing. Now it was Jake and Michaela's home.

"Congratulations, Jake."

"Thank you. I'm so glad you're both here," he said as he ushered him into their suite.

"Becky you look lovely," said Michaela.

"Thank you, dear. We are so happy for the both of you."

Michaela smiled and touched Jake's arm. "So are we."

Daniel reached into his jacket and pulled out an envelope and handed it to Jake. "We saw in lieu of gifts you were asking for donations to 'Welcome Home'. It's a terrific organization."

"I agree. My sister has devoted a lot of time to it." He held up the card. "Thank you

for this. We really appreciate it."

"You're very welcome," said Becky.

"Hey, how's Hershey doing?" asked Jake.

"That's the other thing we wanted to talk to you about," said Daniel.

"Is he okay?"

"Physically, yes. But there's no two ways about it, the dog is depressed," said Daniel. "Our apartment in LA is much smaller than the beach house. It's fine for us but Hershey is used to running on the beach. We travel so much that we would have to kennel him and we know he'd hate that. We love him and we want what's best for him. That's why we wanted to know if you would be willing to adopt him."

Jake got a smile like a kid at Christmas. "Seriously?"

"Yes," said Becky. "You always took such good care of him when we were away and he loves you and Mike. We know he'd be much happier living with the both of you."

Jake looked at Michaela with a hesitant smile. "What do you think, sweetheart?"

She laughed. "Of course we want him." She smiled at their friends. "I assume you'll want visiting rights."

"Of course," said Becky.

"We'll pick him up as soon as we get back from our honeymoon."

"Where are you going?" asked Becky.

Michaela put her hands on her hips and shot Jake a look. "He won't tell me. All he'll say is we'll be gone for two weeks."

Jake gave her a sly grin. "It's a surprise."

Val opened the sliding door to the balcony of their suite. Katherine was sitting at the small table looking out at the ocean. "I thought you might like one of these. He smiled and handed her one of the champagne flutes filled with orange juice he was carrying.

"Mimosas? Thank you."

"You're welcome," he said while giving her a quick kiss. He sat down on next to her and took a sip of his drink. "It looks like the weather is going to hold."

"It's going to be a beautiful day," she said with a sigh.

"Are you nervous?" Val asked.

"I should be. This happened so fast, but honestly, I'm not nervous. Not at all." She reached for his hand. "This feels right."

He pulled her hand to his lips and kissed it. "Yes it does."

"So, will you tell me now?" she asked.

"Later, at breakfast."

"Oh, come on. All you told me is I need my passport."

He leaned in and gave her a kiss. "Patience, counselor."

Katherine leaned back against her chair and took another sip of her drink. "Fine." She glanced down at a ground level patio below them. There was a group of people, a curly, dark haired man, a man with a scruffy beard and a hat and a larger, younger man with glasses. A familiar figure joined them. "Val, do you know who those people are Frank is with?"

He glanced over at the group and saw a red headed woman join them. "I don't know them but that's not Frank."

"Are you sure? It looks like him."

"Pretty sure because he just copped a feel of that red head's ass."

"Come on, Marina. Breakfast is waiting and I'm hungry," shouted Marina.

Frank came out of the bathroom and grabbed his jacket off the bed. "You're always hungry." The wedding couples had decided to have a breakfast with just the six of them. The Sokolovs were more than siblings, they were friends. Their new spouses had also become very close. They'd decided to have one meal together, just the six of them, before the wedding and reception. Before they went on their separate honeymoons, they would get together one more time.

Val opened the door to Frank and Marina. "Hey, come on in."

Val and Katherine had set up a breakfast for all of them in their suite. Jake and Mike were already sipping Momosas. Val turned toward Katherine and pointed at Frank. "See, I told you it wasn't him."

"Excuse me?" asked Frank.

Val walked toward the balcony and pointed toward the group on the porch below. Frank looked over the balcony and smiled. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed. The man Val pointed to answered his ringing phone.

"Gallo."

"Hey Cabe, it's Frank. Look up, top floor, two o'clock."

The man turned and spotted and waved. "Hey Frank. You ready for the big day?"

"More than ready. Who are all those people?"

"My team is helping me with security."

"You didn't bring in a Homeland team, did you?"

"No, this is the private team I work with, Scorpion."

"Holy crap! Scorpion?"

"You've heard of them?"

"In our business, who hasn't? What are they doing here?"

"I consulted with them on the best way to keep this little shindig private. They are monitoring a cell phone trap they put on the resort and surrounding grounds."

"They're listening in on phone calls? Cabe, I want to keep this private but I don't want to get anyone arrested for illegal wiretaps."

"Ahhh...it's not exactly a wiretap. How I understand it is they are monitoring communications for key words involving Marina and the wedding. They will only intercept communications that the program deems a possible breach."

"Okay, I don't want to get any of your people arrested."

Cabe laughed. "Don't worry. They've got this."

Frank saw Kate join Cabe on the porch and waved. She smiled and waved back.

"Tell Kate I said hi."

"Will do. See you in a couple of hours."

Frank disconnected his phone and looked to see the others staring at him.

"Frank, do you have a brother you failed to mention?" asked Katherine.

"No, that's a Marine buddy of mine, Cabe Gallo. He works for Homeland. He's helping me with security."

"And the dead ringer aspect?" asked Mike.

"Yeah, everyone says that. I don't see it."

"Well for a moment this morning I thought I saw you grabbing a redhead's ass," said Katherine.

Frank smiled. "The redhead is Cabe's wife Kate. She's a Homeland agent too. I'll introduce you all later at the reception."

"Fine, now that we've determined my future husband is not grabbing strange women's asses, can we please eat?" asked Marina.

The breakfast buffet had been set up in the kitchen area of the suite. Val topped off everyone's drinks as the sat around the dining table. He stood and looked around the table. "As the oldest I think I should say something. I... God, sometimes I don't have the English. Apologies to Katherine and Mike, but I need to do this in Russian." He took a breath and smiled at his brother and sister. "So much has changed, but one thing has remained the same, the three of us. Jake, you may have been my little brother but I have always looked up to you. I've always admired your sense of purpose and your loyalty. Marina, Jake and I started out as your guardians and guides to the English speaking world. You were our pain in the ass little sister, and you still are," he smiled. "But you are also a kind, loving soul. You've used your fame to benefit others, not yourself. I couldn't be more proud of you. If you weren't both my siblings, I would choose you as my friends." He smiled as both Jake and Marina wiped tears from their eyes. "Okay, I think it's time I switch to English. I am so happy to have a new brother and sister. Frank, well, despite the fact that you're an old man like me, " he smiled as everyone snickered. "You are exactly the right man for our little sister. Mike, you brought out a side of Jake I've never seen. I want to thank you, Mike, for making the rest of us a part of this day. Somehow it seems right that we are taking this step together." He stopped and looked at the woman who would be his wife in only a few hours. "Katherine, you know how I feel about you." She smiled and nodded. "I know all this crazy family stuff is really different for you but you've become a part of this family." Marina reached over and squeezed Katherine's hand. Val stopped to wipe his own eyes. He raised his his glass. "I want to propose a toast to the Sokolov Nash family. To us."

Everyone raised their glasses. "To us."

"If it makes you feel any better, Frank is older than you by ten months. He's the old man of the group now."

Frank shook his head. "Such respect from my soon to be wife. You love this old man, diva."

Marina smiled and leaned in for a quick kiss. "You bet your ass, I do." She glanced at her brother and smiled. "That was beautiful, Val, but can we eat now? I'm starving."

Everyone laughed and Val smiled. Yeah, he wouldn't change a thing.

Marina started stacking dishes on the bottom of the food service cart. "Is everyone finished?"

"Yeah, I'm done," said Val.

"Not yet, counselor. You promised you'd tell," said Katherine

"Tell what?" asked Marina.

"Where we're going on our honeymoon. All he would tell me is I needed my passport."

Mike smacked Jake on the shoulder. "Jake did the same thing to me."

Val smiled and reached into his jacket pocket. He pulled out boarding passes and handed them to Katherine.

"Paris!" she shouted. "Oh my God. Paris!" Katherine threw her arms around Val.

"You said it was a place you'd always wanted to go."

"I said that on one of our first dates," she said.

He shrugged and smiled. "I remembered."

Katherine kissed Val hard enough to make his siblings start coughing uncomfortably.

Mike put her hands on her hips and looked at Jake. "Well, Jacob?"

Jake smiled. "Val told me he was doing this now." He reached into his jacket and handed Mike boarding passes. "Stuttgart?"

"That's where we land, then we're going here." He showed her a folder with a picture of a medieval castle. It's called Castle Altstadt."

"Why do I know that name?" asked Mike.

"They have a museum inside the castle."

"Oh my God! This is the place that has the largest collection of medieval jewelry in Europe."

"I thought you'd enjoy touring it for inspiration."

Mike threw her arms around Jake and gave him a big kiss. "This will be amazing for me, but what about you?"

"We'll be staying inside the castle. Medieval life with indoor plumbing. They have a big collection of medieval armour and weapons. Plus it's in the heart of the Black Forest. It's supposed to have some beautiful trails through ancient woods."

"Wow," Mike whispered. "It sounds amazing."

Marina looked over Mike's shoulder at the brochure. "Wow, it really does. Frank and I will be toasting our buns on a beach in Hawaii."

"Ah, don't you do that on the weekends in Carmel?" asked Val.

"Yeah, but it's private with cottage service so it's good," said Marina.

Frank put his hand on Marina's shoulder. "Turns out that's where Cabe took Kate on their honeymoon. He told me about some great activities there, like horseback riding."

"Horseback riding?"

"Yeah, Cabe said to trust him. It would be the highlight of the trip."

"Ladies, Ladies," called Alfonso. "You are truly my best work to date. You're perfect." He looked at the three brides in the gowns he'd designed for each. The seamstresses who made the gowns had been told they were for a new collection. One trusted seamstress accompanied Alfonso for the last minute alterations.

Katherine's dress was an elegant satin with a deep v neck. It was draped and clipped at her hip with a sparkling jeweled flower. Her dark hair was pinned in a loose bun at the base of her neck with small white jasmine flowers.

Mike's dress was a Grecian style strapless gown with a sheer overlay that hung over her left shoulder and acted as a train. Her hair was styled in a smooth twist. She wore a pair of delicate pearl drop earrings she'd designed herself.

Marina's dress was as stunning as the bride herself. The strapless sheath was covered with an intricate lace overdress which had a deep scoop neck and lace sleeves. Intricate matching appliques lined a three quarter over skirt. Her long chestnut hair flowed in loose curls down her back. She wore a shoulder length matching lace mantilla.

"Oh my."

The brides turned to see Anna standing in the doorway of the suite.

"Mama," Marina whispered.

Anna fought the tears in her eyes. This was a day she thought she'd never see. She touched her baby girl's cheek. "You look like an angel," she whispered in Russian. She straightened and smiled at her future daughter in laws. "You all look wonderful. Perfect."

"Thank you, Mama," the women said.

"Mama, this is Alfonso. He designed our gowns."

Alfonso extended his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Sokolov. Your daughter has been my favorite client for years. She is a wonderful woman."

Anna looked at all the beautiful brides. "All my daughters are wonderful women." The women smiled and fought their own tears.

"Indeed," he said with a smile. "I'll leave you to have a moment with your girls."

Anna smiled. She was a bit nervous about what she was about to do but she'd

never let them see. "I brought you each a little something, for your something old." She pulled three velvet bags from her purse. "Katherine, this one is for you."

Katherine smiled and opened the bag. Inside was a small silver locket. "Oh, Mama. It's lovely."

"It was my mother's. She brought it with her when she came to this country. Open it," she said.

Katherine gasped. "Is that?"

"Vasily, he was such a beautiful baby."

"He became a very handsome man," she said with a smile.

"I don't expect you to wear it, but I thought you might carry it."

Katherine smiled and opened the clasp. She handed Anna the necklace and turned around. Anna hooked it around her neck. "Thank you, Mama." she said, touching the locket. "I'll treasure it."

Anna kissed her cheek. "You're very welcome, dear."

"Michaela, I know you design jewelry but I thought you might like this piece. My father gave it to my mother when they got married."

Mike pulled a small bracelet from the bag. It was a twisted gold filigree with a few small diamonds set inside the curled metal. "Oh my God, Mama. It's exquisite." She looked at Anna and held out her wrist. "Would you?" She nodded and clasped the bracelet.

Anna took a breath, determined to get through this without weeping. She looked at her daughter and smiled. "For you," she said as she handed her the velvet bag. Marina looked into the bag and then looked back at her mother. "Mama, these are your diamond earrings. You never let me touch them."

"You wanted to wear them to school."

"They were so pretty."

"You were eight," she said with a smile.

Marina pulled them from the bag and showed the others. They were mine cut diamonds in a flower setting. They were mounted on looped clasps.

"My Max gave them to me for our wedding."

"Mama, are you sure?"

Anna touched her girl's cheek and let just one tear fall. "I'm sure, angel."

Marina hugged her mother and handed them back to her long enough to take the pearl studs out of her ears. She put them in the velvet bag and put on her mother's earrings. She glanced in the mirror and smiled. "Oh, Mama, thank you." She pulled her mother into a tight hug.

Anna pulled away before she lost her composure. She looked at the three women and felt a sense of peace. This was how it should be. They were a family, all of them. They would be there for each other even when she no longer was. "I'm going to go now. George is waiting for me."

"George?" asked Marina.

"Daddy?" asked Katherine.

Mike stifled a laugh but her shoulders were quaking.

"Yes, that George." She gave the women a sly smile. "He's a very handsome man and he's asked for my company. It would be rude to keep him waiting." She gave each of her daughters a kiss on the cheek. "I will see you all out there."

"Mama?" she heard Marina ask as she closed the door behind her. She stood for a moment and smiled. It was good to keep her children off balance. And George was a very handsome man.

Val looked out on to the resort's large patio where all but a few guests thought they were here for the wedding of Jake and Mike. He and Marina had both invited few friends from New York and LA, telling them they would be their guests at a great party.

"You ready to do this?" asked Jake.

He looked at his brother who was every bit the squared away Marine in his dress blues. "Definitely. How about you, Frank?"

Frank was adjusting the collar of his dress blues and turned to his new brothers and smiled. "Let's do this."

Jake looked toward the other side of the hall to see Alfonso standing outside the women's dressing room. He'd assisted them as a wedding planner, making sure guests were seated and keeping everyone away from the brides. He nodded toward Jake indicating the women were ready. "Okay. It looks like it's time."

Jake walked toward the judge performing the ceremony. He was an old friend of Katherine's who had been sworn to secrecy. Val, looking very dapper in his tux, stood next to Jake and Frank lined up next to Val. Alfonso nodded toward the string quartet who began the wedding march. Alfonso opened the door to Michaela and her brother Paul. Jake knew he was grinning like a goofball but he couldn't help it. His Michaela was so beautiful. Paul delivered her to his side and shook his hand.

"Be good to her," he said with teary eyes.

"Always," he replied. Breaking protocol he gave her a soft kiss. "You look perfect."

"So do you, Marine."

When the quartet began playing the wedding march again the confused crowd looked at each other and whispered. Alfonso opened the door to Katherine and her father. Val got the same goofy grin as his brother when he saw his bride. He couldn't take his eyes off her until George extended his hand.

"Welcome to the family, son."

Val smiled. "Thanks, Dad." He never noticed when George took his seat he sat next to Anna, and took her hand in his.

Val kept smiling at Katherine until she nodded toward the back of the room. "Oh

yeah." He turned to the crowd. "I'll be right back," he said and dashed down the aisle. The crowd broke out in loud whispers until they heard the wedding march start up for a third time. Alfonso opened the door for him and he saw Marina waiting for him.

"Oh, baby girl," he said in Russian. "You look magnificent."

"Do you think Frank will like it?" she asked looking uncharacteristically nervous.

"I guarantee it." He walked his sister up the aisle to more surprised whispers and big smiles. He reached his hand out to Frank, "Congratulations, brother," he said in Russian.

"Thank you, brother."

"Oh sweetheart," Frank whispered in Russian. "You truly are the most beautiful woman in the world. I am so lucky you chose me."

"I love you, Josiah"

Val rejoined Katherine as the judge waited for the guests to settle down. "We are gathered here today to join Jacob and Michaela, Vasily and Katherine, and Marina and Franklin in matrimony.

The brides and grooms all shifted nervously and held each others hands until it was time to recite their vows.

"Jacob, please begin," said the judge.

Jake turned to Mike and smiled. "Michaela, you are the piece of me I didn't know I was missing. Being with you has been the best part of a pretty great life. I can't wait to see what the rest of life has in store for us. I love you." He took a breath and began, "I, Jacob take you, Michaela, to be my lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, in sickness and in health, for as long as we both shall live."

"Michaela," prompted the judge.

Mike smiled and took a breath. "Jacob, you are every dream of love I've ever had," she began. Jake gasped because she was speaking her vows in a passable Russian. "You are my knight in shining armour, my best friend, the man I will love for the rest of my life. I, Michaela, take you Jacob to be my lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, in sickness and in health, for as long as we both shall live." Mike smiled as Jake wiped a tear from his cheek. "Marina coached me," she whispered.

"Vasily," said the judge. "Please say your vows to Katherine."

Val took Katherine's hand and smiled. "The moment you turned your chair around, the moment I first met you, my heart started to race and it hasn't stopped. You are amazing, smart, talented, beautiful. You bring me joy. You are quite simply the love of my life." He pulled her hands to his lips and kissed them. "I, Vasily, take you Katherine, to be my lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, in sickness and in health, for as long as we both shall live."

Katherine smiled as she wiped a tear from her cheek. "Vasily, when I met you, you took my breath away," she said, also in passable Russian.

Val glanced at his sister who mouthed "You're welcome."

"You are brilliant and handsome, kind and loving. You made me a part of your wonderful family. You give me everything. Today, I give you my heart. I, Katherine, take you Vasily, to be my lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, in sickness and in health, for as long as we both shall live."

"Franklin, please say your vows to Marina," said the judge.

"Well, here we are, diva," Frank said in Russian. "About to jump off into a future neither of us could have imagined a year ago. One thing is for sure. Our life will never be dull."

The Russian speakers in the gathering snickered.

"There is a magic in you. Your true beauty is your heart, your soul. You amaze me every day. The fact that you love me is the most amazing thing of all. I promise you today to try my best to be worthy of your love. Marina, I love you with all that I am. I, Franklin, take you Marina, to be my lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, in sickness and in health, for as long as we both shall live."

"Marina," said the judge.

"Well, here we are you big goon," she said in Russian. Frank smiled. "The moment I laid eyes on your my heart knew you were the one I'd been looking for my entire life. You are everything a man should be. I will be forever grateful you took a chance on us. I don't have the words to explain how much I love you, but we have the rest of our lives for me to try. I, Marina, take you Franklin, to be my lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, in sickness and in health, for as long as we both shall live."

"By the power vested in me by the state of California, I now pronounce you

husbands and wives. You may now kiss your brides." After some rather passionate vow sealing the judge continued. "Ladies and gentleman, I present to you, Major and Mrs. Jacob Sokolov, Mr. and Mrs. Vasily Sokolov and Colonel and Mrs. Franklin Nash."

The couples walked down the aisle to a traditional Marine honor guard of raised swords. Jake walked down first with Mike, smiling at his Marine brothers. As Mike passed the last guard he tapped her behind with his sword. When she gasped in surprise Jake leaned in and said "It's tradition."

Val tried to step aside from the guard. "It's okay," said the sergeant in charge. "You're family."

"I'm not a Marine."

The sergeant smiled. "If you won't tell, we won't."

Val looked at Katherine. "Let's do it," she smiled. They walked down the honor guard and Katherine accepted her tap on her behind.

Marina looked at the sergeant in charge and smiled. "Patrick." Patrick Monohan was her right arm at Welcome Home.

"Major Sokolov let us know about the ceremony and arranged for us to be here. I'm so glad we were here for you and the Colonel too."

"So am I," she whispered trying to hold back her tears.

"Shall we?" asked Frank. They walked down the marine guard seeing the faces of men they'd worked with at the veteran's charity. After Marina got her sword tap they let out a large "Oooo Rah."

Frank looked to see the other grooms were kissing their brides. He thought it an excellent idea and kissed his bride to the sound of more Marine cheers.

Anna watched her children as they sat at the head table laughing and joking with each other. Watching her children so happy, so much in love, gave her great joy. She'd only wished it hadn't taken them so long to find each other. She'd always wanted grandchildren. She glanced at her dinner companion and smiled. He was watching them too.

"George, are you crying?"

He wiped his cheek. "I always worried about her," he said quietly.

"Katherine? Why?"

"It's only been the two of us for so long. My wife was an only child. What little family I have is still in England."

"She's very charming. I'm sure she has a lot of friends."

"That's not the same as family. Now she has a real family to lean on when I'm gone."

Anna covered his hand with hers. "George, are you ill?"

He smiled and patted her hand. "No. My doctor says I'm healthy as a horse. But I'm seventy five years old. One day I'll be gone and the thought of my girl alone," he used his napkin to wipe his cheek. He looked at Anna and smiled. "I'm sorry my dear. It's been an emotional day."

"No need to apologize. I was thinking the same thing today." Anna looked back at her children. "I couldn't have chosen better spouses for them."

"But you'll never tell them that," he said with smile.

Anna laughed. "God, no."

Val looked over at his mother, who was seated next to his father in law. George leaned in and said something to which his mother smiled and laughed. "Katherine, what is your father doing?"

"What?" she glanced over at their parents.

"He's talking to your mother."

"No. He's flirting with my mother."

"Well, if he is she's flirting too."

"She's blushing. Good Lord."

"Vasily Sokolov do you have a problem with my father?" Katherine demanded as she clenched Val's hand in a death grip

"No, not at all, sweetheart," he said quickly. He sighed with relief when his wife unclenched. "He's a good man."

"So what is your problem?"

"Do you realize that if they get together you would be my stepsister and I would be your stepbrother?"

Katherine's head snapped back to where their parents were sitting. Anna said something to him and her father laughed out loud. "Good Lord," she said.

Frank looked out at the gathered crowd and saw nothing suspicious. His associate, Jerry, had assured him that security was in place. Cabe and Kate had a Scorpion team monitoring the situation. He couldn't help but have a maddening sensation that he was missing something and he knew why. He couldn't focus. He looked at Marina as she spoke with Val. She always looked beautiful, whether she was wearing blue jeans or an evening gown but today she was breathtaking. She smiled at him when she caught him staring.

"What? Do I have something in my teeth?"

He brushed her cheek with his hand. He leaned in and whispered, "You look so beautiful I can't stop staring."

She gave him a soft kiss. "You look very handsome too, Colonel."

He grabbed her hand. "Come with me."

"Frank what are you doing?"

He took her out a side door and back to the now empty dressing room the men had used. He closed the door behind them and pulled her into his arms. He gave her the kiss he'd wanted to all day. He finally pulled back and smiled. "I couldn't wait any longer for that."

"You can pull me aside for that any time you want, Colonel," Marina smiled. She looked him up and down. "You really do look great, babe." She traced her fingers over his ribbons and medals and stilled. She looked at him with a quiet smile. "Frank, you know

I've been around Marines long enough to know what these represent." She pointed at a small ribbon with a red stripe in the center on a field of white and two blue stripes on either end. "I know this is a silver star."

Frank took her hand and kissed her palm. "Maybe one day." Marina nodded. She understood he'd tell her how he got them when he was ready. "We should get back to the party."

Frank saw Cabe and Kate at their table as he and Marina reentered the reception. Cabe and Kate stood as they approached.

"Congratulations, brother," Cabe said as he shook his hand then pulled him into a quick hug.

"Thank you, brother."

Cabe extended his hand to Marina. "Congratulations, Mrs. Nash."

Marina smiled broadly. "Thank you, Major."

"Congratulations, Frank."

"Thanks so much, Kate. I really appreciate you two being here. I hope you've had a moment to enjoy the party."

She extended her hand to Marina. "Congratulations. It's a wonderful party. Your dress is amazing."

"Thank you. Alfonso worked a miracle making all three gowns in a few weeks."

Kate opened her purse and handed Marina a card. "A little wedding gift."

"Oh, you didn't have to do that. You didn't even know this was going to be a wedding."

"Welcome Home does wonderful work. We're happy to do it."

"Come over to the table. I want you to meet the others." Frank leaned closer to Cabe. "We had a bit of confusion earlier as to who was grabbing Kate's ass."

"Oh Lord," said Kate.

They walked toward the head table and the conversation stopped. "Everyone, this is Cabe Gallo and his wife Kate."

"Congratulations, everyone. It's a great wedding."

"Are you sure you're not related?" asked Val.

"It's incredible," said Katherine.

Cabe smiled. "We used to get that a lot."

Jake stood and extended his hand. "Thank you for coming, Major. Frank has told us you and Kate are assisting with security."

"Is everything okay?" asked Mike.

"Everything is fine. My team has a handle on things."

Kate touched her ear and looked to the side. "We'll be right there."

She looked back at the suddenly concerned group. "Frank, you'll want to come with us."

"What's wrong?" asked Marina.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. You visit with the guests. I'll be right back."

Cabe and Kate took Frank a room they were using as a base of operation. Frank's associate, Jerry, had joined the Scorpion team along with the manager of the resort. Sitting in the middle of the team was a very pale man in a waiter's uniform.

"What's going on?"

A tall man with dark, curly hair approached. "Colonel Nash, I'm Walter O'Brien. We intercepted a communication from Mr. Jones to a tabloid. It was a photo of Ms. Sokolov in her gown."

"Were you able to stop it from being transmitted?" asked Frank.

"Colonel, we're Scorpion."

"That means yes," said Kate.

"Why would you do this?" Marina was standing in the doorway. "Do you know what would happen if this got out?"

Frank took her by the arm. "Sweetheart, you shouldn't be here."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Sokolov." It was the first thing the man had said.

"My name is Mrs. Nash," she growled. "How much are you getting to ruin my wedding?"

The manager of the resort stepped toward the man. "I can't believe you did this, Stuart. You were always such a good employee. You're fired." The man paled even further and began to weep.

"This explains it." A thin man with a scruffy beard and a pork pie hat handed Walter his tablet. "Stuart has a daughter, Rose. She has leukemia. The medical bills have bankrupted him and their medical insurance is maxxed out." Kate reached for the tablet and showed it to Cabe.

"That's no excuse," said the manager. "Stuart, you're still fired."

"Don't do that," sighed Marina. "Nothing got out so no damage has been done." Frank took her hand in his and nodded.

Cabe pulled a card from his wallet and handed it to the man. "Take your daughter to Mercy General, Amanda Gallo Pediatric Center. Dr. Verna Cox is an excellent pediatric oncologist. She'll take care of you."

The man looked at the card, then up at Cabe. "But my insurance..."

"That's not a problem. Make the appointment. She will be expecting your call."

The man wiped the tears from his cheeks. "I don't know what to say." He extended his hand and Cabe shook it. "Thank you." He turned toward Frank and Marina. "I'm sorry. Really I am." He glanced at his boss. "Should I go back to work, or home."

The man sighed. "Get back to work." Stuart smiled and all but ran out the door. He looked at the gathering. "He's always been a great employee but he never said anything about his kid. I'm very sorry about all this."

Frank nodded. "It's fine. We should get back to our guests."

Marina and Frank left the room followed by Cabe and Kate. Marina stopped in the hallway and put her hand on Cabe's arm. "The center?"

"It's named for my daughter, Amanda. She died when she was six. Kate and I sponsor the center and fund raise for it through the year."

"Cabe, you never said anything," said Frank.

Marina gave Cabe a hug. "I'm so sorry."

"Thank you," he whispered.

"You did a good thing in there," said Frank.

Marina gave them her best movie star smile. "I say it's time to go back to the party and have some fun."

Kate took Cabe's arm. "A handsome Major promised me a dance."

He gave his wife a loving smile. "A Marine never goes back on his word."

Once the dinner was finished, first dances began. The newlyweds danced, then changed partners to parents and siblings.

"Are you having a good time, Mama?" asked Val.

"It's a wonderful party, Vasily."

"You seem to be enjoying my father in law's company."

Anna smiled. "George is a very charming man. Did you know he was in the Royal Grenadiers?"

He glanced over at George dancing with Katherine. "Yes, Mama. I knew that. Once we get back from our honeymoon I'll help you with moving out here. You can stay at our apartment until we get back."

"Oh, I'm staying at Frank and Marina's. He needs someone to look after his garden."

"Mama, you don't know anything about roses."

"George volunteered to help me."

Val stopped dancing. "Oh he did, did he?"

Anna smiled. "Yes, he did. It will be nice to have some company while the rest of you are away."

Another song started and George approached with Katherine. "I believe my daughter would like to dance with her husband." He turned to Anna and held out his hand. "May I have the pleasure?"

"You may," Anna said with a bright smile. They walked away leaving their stunned children behind.

George smiled "Anna, your son looks like a stunned fish."

Anna laughed. "Your daughter looks equally perplexed."

"Where you teasing your son about me?"

"Possibly," she grinned. She looked over to see Jake and Marina standing next to Val. All of them were staring at Anna and George. She looked back at George and laughed. "I may have mentioned you offered to keep me company while they were away. He can assume what he wants."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you,"

"George, I haven't had this much fun in years. They don't need to know you're just being nice to family."

George smiled. "Is that what you think?"

"Well, of course."

"Anna, you are a beautiful, intelligent woman. I enjoy your company. I want to spend time with you and get to know you. The only remaining question is would you like to spend time with me?"

"Yes, George. I think I'd like that."

"Well, in that case. Let's make the kids crazy." George took Anna's hand and kissed it, before he led them back to their table.

Frank came up from behind Marina and slipped his hands around her waist. He kissed her neck and whispered. "It feel like the party is winding down. Will I now get some alone time with my wife?"

She covered his hands with hers. "Patience, Marine."

"I can only have so much patience when you look like this. No man could," he said before nipping at her ear.

Marina turned and smiled. "I love you too." She was about to give her husband a wildly inappropriate kiss in public when Patrick Monahan approached them.

"Hey Marina, Colonel."

"Patrick, call me Frank."

The blonde man smiled. "In civvies, maybe. Dressed like that? Not possible, Colonel." He indicated the small accordion folder in his hand. "I have the checks."

"What checks?" asked Frank.

"Since Patrick would be handling the checks at Welcome Home eventually, I asked him to take the wedding cards for us. He can let us know who sent what later."

"Yeah, about that."

"Is there a problem?"

"No, not at all. That check from your designer was amazing, but most of the checks are one thousand and up. All except this one. I thought you'd want to see it now." Frank

and Marina both gasped. "Is this for real?" They were looking at a check from Cabe and Kate Gallo for two hundred thousand dollars.

"Frank, How do a couple of Homeland agents have that kind of money?" asked Marina.

"I don't know. What do you say we find out." Frank and Marina found Cabe and Kate gathering their things.

"We were just about to come find you," said Kate.

"Everything is still secure. The team will keep the place on lock down until the guests clear out," said Cabe.

"Thanks, Cabe. We really appreciate your help with this."

"You're welcome, brother," he said as he shook Frank's hand.

"There is one more thing. The check you gave us? It's, well, surprising."

Kate laughed. "And you know government employees don't make that kind of money. Don't worry. The check is good. My father founded Rimark Computers. I still own it."

"Founded it on Kate's programming," Cabe said. He looked at Kate and smiled. "She's a computer genius."

"Hush, Gallo," Kate said blushing.

"That's incredibly generous of you both. Thank you," said Frank.

Marina gave them each a tight hug. "It's going to do a lot of good. Thank you. If there is anything we could ever do for you, please don't hesitate."

"Well," Kate started.

"Kate, no buttonholing the bride and groom," Cabe chastised.

"Tell me," said Marina.

"There's a big fundraiser next month for Amanda's center. It's at Mercy Hospital. If you could stop by, someone of your fame would be a huge draw."

"I'd be delighted. Call Frank with the details." Kate gave Marina another hug. Marina smiled. "We should get together sometime, both being Marine wives and all."

"I'd love to."

The party moved back to Val and Katherine's suite. Val popped a cork on a bottle of champagne and began handing out glasses to everyone. Katherine checked on a few trays of appetizers. "I assumed most of us wouldn't get a chance to eat much so I had them bring us a few trays."

Marina smiled. "Katherine, you're a goddess. Gimme. I'm starving."

"You're always starving," said everyone in unison.

Marina kicked off her shoes and plopped down on a sofa, looking less than graceful in her designer gown and bare feet while shoving a stuffed mushroom in her mouth. "It was a nice wedding, wasn't it?" she asked.

"The best," said Frank as he handed his wife a glass of champagne.

Marina looked at Jake and Mike heads together near the balcony, whispering and smiling to each other. She had never seen Jake this happy. He'd found his perfect partner. Marina stood and held up her glass. "I would like to propose a toast," she started. "To Mike." Mike looked at her startled. "Oh, I love you, Mike, but not enough to put my shoes back on for this." Everyone smiled as she took a breath. She'd spent a lifetime giving speeches, but never one like this. This mattered. "Mike, this was supposed to be your day, just yours. But you shared it with us. You let me and Frank have the wedding we could have never had on our own. You let Val and Katherine share in this day and make it special for them. You are a remarkable woman who makes my brother very happy," Jake smiled and rubbed his hand down his wife's back. "We have finished up here, all of us married, because of you. I am very glad you're my sister. To Mike."

"To Mike," everyone repeated.

"Okay, my turn," said Val.

Marina groaned. "You don't have to play older brother anymore. I told you. Frank is the old man now."

"You'll pay for that later diva," said Frank in Russian.

"Promises, promises goon," she replied in Russian.

"Hush, baby girl," said Val before continuing in English. "It has been a remarkable day, a remarkable few weeks." He put his arm around his wife. "Somehow, we found each other. You can call it lucky coincidence, a miracle..."

"Mama praying twenty four seven," said Jake.

Val smiled. "Yeah, it could be divine intervention. There is one thing you were wrong about, Marina. We haven't finished up here." Val looked around the room and smiled at the people he loved most in the world. "We are just getting started. To us," he said and raised his glass.

"To us."