

Adventures in Parenthood : The Nashes

By Kate Simon

Chapter One

Frank Nash rounded the corner to his street, finishing the last mile of his run. He alternated his workouts between running, weight training and boxing. Most people thought he kept in shape because of his work as a security expert. The truth was he worked out to keep up with his much younger wife and their three children.

He hit the buttons on the alarm pad and let himself in the side door. He walked in the kitchen and found Marina serving their daughter, Anna, her breakfast.

"Hey. Did you have a good run?" asked Marina as she looked him up and down. She smiled and walked closer. She yanked on his t shirt and pulled him close.

"Careful. I need a shower. I stink."

She gave him a kiss and whispered in his ear. "You smell like my man. As soon as I get the kids get off to school, I'll join you in that shower."

"Why are you always doing that, Mama?" asked Anna. Six year old Anna was insatiably curious and always asking questions.

"Doing what?"

"You're always touching Papa and kissing him."

Marina smiled at Frank. "You want to field this one, Papa?"

He held up his hands in surrender. They had decided early on to let the kids see they had a dynamic relationship. "This is all you, Mama."

"Anna, I love Papa very much. I love kissing him."

This answer seemed to satisfy her as she focused on adding too many blueberries to her cereal. Frank pulled the fruit bowl away. "That's enough, princess," he said in Russian. "Leave some for the rest of us."

"Fine," she replied in Russian.

He couldn't help but smile at his princess. She was a natural with Russian, in language and attitude. She had the big personality of her mother and grandmother but he took secret delight in her love of all things mechanical. He'd bought her a bike that looked like a Harley with a bell that sounded like revving engine. She loved riding it up and down the street wearing her Harley jacket.

"Where's your brother? He's going to be late for school," asked Marina.

"He's probably still reading that book Uncle Jake got him. It was all about rocks."

"Geology," said Frank.

"Whatever," she replied with a mouth full of cereal.

"Go get him," said Marina.

"Fine," Anna said. She walked out of the kitchen and they heard their daughter yelling in Russian from the foot of the stairs. "Jonas. Mama says you're going to be late. Hurry up."

Frank smiled. "Do you notice they speak to each other in Russian a lot?"

Marina cracked a few eggs to start the breakfast they would have as soon as the kids got off to school. "They do. They speak to Jake in English. What's up with that?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe a twin thing?"

Anna returned to the kitchen and demolishing the family's supply of blueberries. "Mama, what's divorced?"

Marina dropped the whisk she was holding and stared at Frank. She shook her head, unable to reply. Frank took a breath and answered. "It's when people who are married decide not to be married anymore. Why do you ask?"

Anna suddenly looked terrified. "Are you getting divorced?"

"God, no, sweetheart." Marina sat next to her daughter and put her arm around her shoulder. "Why would you think that?"

"Mrs. Wilks said movie stars all get divorced and she said you're a movie star."

Frank could see Marina turning from confusion to blind anger. This would not be pretty. He raised his hand slightly to indicate she should temper her reaction in front of their child.

"Anna, sweetheart, I love Papa, very, very much. And Papa loves me."

Frank smiled and reached for Marina's hand. "That's right, princess, I do. Very much."

"Papa and I are not getting divorced. Don't you ever worry about that."

"But Mrs. Wilks said..."

"Mrs. Wilks was wrong," Marina replied a bit louder than she should have.

"Princess, I promise you. Mama and I are fine. Now go upstairs this time and get

your brother."

Anna smiled with the resilience that only a six year old has. "Okay." She got to the kitchen doorway and turned. "Mama are you a movie star?"

"We'll talk about that tonight. Now go get your brother," said Frank as he gave his daughter a gentle push out the door. "Who the hell is Mrs. Wilks?"

"The former assistant principal!"

"Calm down, diva. We'll handle this."

"Can you believe that bitch? Telling our child we'll get divorced!"

"Calm down. You don't want to get the kids upset. I'll go grab that shower and we'll both take the kids to school today."

Anna came back into the kitchen with Jonas trailing behind. "Good morning, Jonas." said Frank. His son walk past him and put his new book on the table as he reached for his cereal. "It must be a very interesting book to ignore your Papa," he said in firm Russian.

"Sorry, Papa," he replied. "It is very interesting."

"You'll be forgiven for a kiss." He leaned over and his son gave him a kiss on the cheek. He ran his hand over his son's dark hair and smiled. He remembered that first kiss Jonas had given him when he was just six months old. He knew that one day those kisses wouldn't come so easily, but he hoped it wouldn't be too soon.

Frank drove Marina and the twins to their school. Their nanny, Sara, had taken five year old Jake to his playdate with a child in their neighborhood so he had until lunchtime to calm his wife down. He'd be cutting it close. He parked their car and helped Jonas out of his carseat as Marina unhooked Anna.

"Why isn't Sara taking us?" asked Anna.

"Because she took Jake to play with Charlie," said Frank. "Don't forget your bag." Anna grabbed her bag and followed behind Jonas. They gave them each child a kiss as they walked into their classroom. Frank and Marina initially considered putting Anna and Jonas in separate classrooms, which is commonly offered to parents of twins. They decided against it. Beside being the children of a celebrity they also spoke Russian to each other and it might become a problem for them. Frank wasn't concerned for Anna. Her outgoing personality would serve her well but Jonas was another story. Quiet and bookish, Frank was worried about his son being bullied. He knew his little princess was a tough cookie who would stand up for her brother.

"Hello Mr. Nash. It's so good to see you," said Ms. Ariel, the children's teacher. Her smile dulled a bit when she realized Marina was standing next to him. "Hello Mrs. Nash."

"Hi."

"Is everything okay? Did you want to speak to me?" she asked with too big a smile.

He felt Marina lean forward as if to strike. He grabbed her hand and squeezed. "No, we're just dropping the children off. Everything's fine."

The young woman picked up on Marina's aggression and paled. "Oh. Okay. Well, it was nice to see you but it's time for class to begin."

"Good to see you," he said. "Let's go dear. The children have to get to work." He held on to Marina as the teacher closed the door behind her. "What the hell was that?" asked Frank as they walked down the hall. "You were about to pounce. She's not the one who mentioned divorce."

"No but she's the one who was drooling over you."

Frank stopped and looked at her. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, please. Don't pretend you didn't notice." Marina affected the young woman's voice. "Oh hello Mr. Nash it's so nice to see you."

"You're being ridiculous,"

"And you're being oblivious. She'd have done you in the hallway if I wasn't standing there."

Frank smiled and glanced back at the door. "Really?" Marina growled and punched him in the shoulder. "I'm kidding. Marina, sweetheart. I love that you think so but I'm old enough to be her grandfather."

"That wouldn't stop her," she muttered as they walked toward the principal's office. "Ariel. Who names their kid after a mermaid?"

Frank knocked on the door that read 'Principal Hanson'. Another upside to being a celebrity or married to one is you didn't need an appointment to interrupt a private school official.

"Mr. and Mrs. Nash. It's good to see you," said Sophia Hanson. In her mid-forties, she was an enthusiastic woman whose innovative views on education had convinced them to enroll their children. "Are we registering Jacob for next semester?"

"Not today," said Frank. "We have an issue."

"Mrs. Wilks," Marina said as if her name was a curse.

"Apparently Mrs. Wilks told our daughter that we are getting divorced," said Frank.

The principal's smile dissolved. "What?"

"We had to explain to our child that her parents are not getting divorced," said Marina. "I want to know who in God's name this woman thinks she is!"

The principal picked up her phone and hit a button. "Janice. My office. Now." It was only a minute before a woman with a designer suit and too much perfume entered. "Sophia, I was in a meeting."

"So am I," she said with an icy tone. The woman blanched when she realized who was sitting in the chairs opposite her boss. "I am hearing some disturbing things, Janice. Did you say Mr. and Mrs. Nash would be getting divorced?"

"What? No. Of course not."

"Then why did my daughter ask me if I was divorcing my husband because I'm a movie star and that's what movie stars do?" Frank held on to Marina's hand for support, but mostly to make sure she didn't launch herself at the woman.

The woman smiled and waved a dismissive hand. "Oh you know how children are."

Frank felt himself tense. "No, how are they?"

"Let's just say they're given to exaggeration."

"What?" asked Marina.

Frank stood. "Did you just call our daughter a liar?"

The woman blanched, "Of course not. All I was saying is children tend to take an innocuous statement and make it more that it was."

He took a step forward. "Sounds like a lie to me."

"Our daughter didn't even know what a divorce was. She does now thanks to you," said Marina.

The principal saw the conversation was spiraling out of control. "Everyone let's take a breath. Janice, exactly what did you say to Anna Nash?"

The woman bit her lower lip. "Well...I may have mentioned the high rate of divorce among celebrities but I never said..."

Sophia walked around the edge of her desk. "And you felt that was an appropriate conversation to have with a six year old child?" She turned and faced Frank and Marina. "Mr. and Mrs. Nash, you have my deepest apologies for what happened. I guarantee this will never happen again."

"Of course," Janice stumbled. "I'm sorry for the misunderstanding."

"You never learn, do you Janice?" said Sophia. "This is not a misunderstanding. This is you being a pretentious bitch, again. You're done." The woman flushed beet red and tried to speak, but the look on her former boss's face said it was hopeless. She turned on her heels and slammed the door behind her. Sophia picked up her phone and dialed an extension. "John, please go to Janice's office. She's been terminated. Make sure she turns in her keys and is gone before lunch." She sat back down and took a breath. "I am terribly sorry for what has happened. I hope Anna is not too upset."

It took a minute for Frank and Marina to take in what happened. "Ah, no. She seemed satisfied with our explanation."

Sophia looked visably relieved. "I'm so glad."

"I do want to be sure of one thing," said Marina. "I want to make sure there are not repercussions on Anna because this woman has lost her job."

She smiled. "God no. If the staff knew the reason Janice is gone they'd throw Anna a party."

"If she was so disliked why was she here?"

"Being a pretentious bitch may have made her difficult to be around but I couldn't fire her for it. Mess with a kid and I bounce your ass to the curb, no matter who you are."

Frank stood and shook Sophia's hand. "Thank you, Ms. Hanson."

"If there is anything I can ever do for you, please feel free to call me." She looked at her closed door and smiled. "I owe you."

As they walked in their front door Marina got a text. "It's Sara."

"Everything okay?"

"Yes. Jake and Charlie are having such a good time that his mother invited them to stay for lunch."

"That's good," said Frank as he tossed down his keys and picked up the small stack of mail from the sideboard. Marina pulled it out of his hands and tossed it back.

"Yes it is. Very good." She threaded her hands around his neck and pulled him close. "Very good," she whispered as she kissed him deeply. "Come with me." She took him by the hand and led him to their bedroom. "Now, where was I?"

Frank took her hands and held her still "Sweetheart, not that I mind you dragging me into our bedroom, but what is going on with you?"

She was stunned. "Since when do I have to drag you?"

He wrapped his hands around her waist. "Never. But you're definitely not yourself. Talk to me diva, what's going on with you?"

She plopped down on the edge of the bed and it all came spilling out. "My birthday's next week."

"I'm aware," he smiled.

"I'll be forty-five!"

"Sweetheart, I can tell from your tone that's making you upset but as I am sixty two, you'll have to explain to me why."

She rolled her eyes. "How do you not get it? Forty five in this town for a woman is

like being eighty anywhere else. Everything on me is starting to droop." She caught her reflection in the mirror and pushed up on her jawline. "Maybe I should see someone." Frank pulled her hand away from her face with surprising force.

"Don't you dare! Don't you dare let any of these Hollywood hacks touch you."

"I'm not saying anything dramatic, just a little freshening."

"For what? So you can look like all the other women in this town? Most of them look like they've been shellacked. Nothing on them moves."

"I'm invisible," she said.

"Okay, I'm trying to be supportive here, but that's insane. You are one of the most beautiful women on the planet. You are not invisible."

"Oh please. Ms. Ariel," she said making air quotes, "felt free to flirt with you in front of me. That other stupid woman assumed you were going to leave me."

"Actually, I think she assumed you would leave me but that's not the point."

"No? I'm an old woman in this town."

Frank sighed and nodded. "Okay, in this town, maybe that's true." She gasped, not really expecting him to agree with her. "But in this house," He took her hand and placed it on his chest, "In this heart, you are my beautiful, sexy, much, much younger wife." She gave him a small smile. He really was a good man. Delusional, but good.

"You know I think you're smart and funny, a great mother, and the best partner I could ever have, all the important stuff, right? Any questions there?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No."

"Good. Okay. I admit I don't talk about the surface stuff that much because you're so much more than that but maybe I should once and awhile. Do you know those faded jeans you wear, the ones with the paint stains?"

"Yeah?"

"Never get rid of those."

"What? Why?"

"They fit your ass like a glove. I will admit I've even asked you to pick stuff up so I can see you bend over in them."

"Really?"

"Hell yeah. Your ass is world class. Your legs, dear God, they go on forever. And

your breasts, they're magnificent. Yes, they've changed since the kids." He placed his hands on her and caressed them. "They've changed for the better." He gave her a soft kiss. "Sometimes it's all I can do not to maul you in public." She couldn't help but giggle. "I'm also going to admit I get a little crazy when men look at you. I know you wouldn't give any of them the time of day but I can't help but notice they are all a lot younger than I am. So maybe I do understand a little about what you were feeling today. But I want you to know you are even more beautiful to me today than you were seven years ago when we met." He gave her another kiss, a little deeper this time. "There's something else you need to know. For what it's worth, this old man belongs to you."

She smiled and touched his cheek. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. No one could ever replace you. Not in my heart or my bed."

"Good to know," she whispered. She pushed him back on the bed and straddled his waist. "In case I haven't mentioned it lately 'old man' I'm crazy about you." She slid her hands under his t-shirt and pushed it up and over his head. She ran her hands down his chest. "I love touching you. I love your chest and your arms. I know you work hard to keep them like this and I want to say," she bent down and ran her tongue up his chest. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he gasped.

"And your ass. Baby, when you wear jeans, ummmm. I just want to bite right through the denim." He reached for his belt and unhooked it.

"Feel free," he said.

Marina gave him a wicked grin. "I believe I will." She divested him of his jeans and boxers in a practiced move and rolled him on his stomach. She delighted in his gasps and groans as she nipped at his tight ass.

"Oh babe, you're killing me."

She pushed him over on his back and saw he was rock hard. She looked at him and smiled. "Old man, my ass."

Chapter Two

Frank slipped his arm around Marina's waist as she finished the lunch dishes. He placed kisses on her neck while inhaled her fresh scent.

"Didn't you get enough?" she giggled.

"Of you? Never," he whispered and nipped lightly at her shoulder. They heard the opening of the side door followed by the unmistakable sound of their youngest child. Jake was a joyful soul who was always quick with a smile and a hug.

"Mama, Papa, look what Charlie's Mama gave me," he said in Russian. Jake spoke to them more often in Russian than Anna and Jonas did. He probably wanted to prove he could speak it as well as his siblings. He handed Marina a small plate covered with foil.

"Oh, chocolate chip cookies. Yum," she said.

"Charlie's Mama would only let us have one after lunch. She said I would have to ask you if I could have more."

"After dinner," said Marina as she gave her youngest a kiss. "Did you have a good time?"

"Yeah, Charlie has all these cool trucks and he has this big sand box and we were building castles and knocking them down."

"Sounds like lots of fun," said Frank as he held his arms out for a hug. Jake quickly complied and he scooped him up in his arms. "I'm glad you had such a good time."

"Do you think I could have a sand box?"

"I think we might find room in the back yard. You'd have to help me," Frank smiled. He was rewarded with a big kiss from his son and a smile and a shrug from his wife. He knew he was a soft touch and he rarely denied his children anything they wanted.

Sara joined them in the kitchen. "They really did have a great time together. We had to drag them in for lunch. I brushed the sand off but it wouldn't hurt to have him change."

"I'll take care of that," said Marina as she reached out for her son. She kissed his cheek and then set him on his feet. "Papa is strong enough to lift you but Mama isn't. You're such a big boy."

"I wish I was as strong as you, Papa."

"You will be one day," he said.

Jake smiled broadly. "Really?"

"Really, Jacob. I promise." He watched his son beam with pride as he left the kitchen with his mother. He glanced over at Sara who was watching him and smiling.

He shrugged as he finished putting away the dishes. "That never gets old."

"You're a great Dad, Mr. Nash."

"Thanks, Sara," He smiled. "I'm glad Jake had such a good time. What's the mother like?"

"Mrs. Roberts is really nice. She seems...I don't know...normal. Like you and Mrs. Nash."

Frank laughed. "We're normal?"

"Yeah, you know. You go to work, you come home, you play with your kids. You do normal stuff."

"Except for when my wife is starring in a major motion picture."

Sara smiled. "Yeah, except for that. It's just some of the people I've been around with the kids, I can tell if their angling for an introduction to Mrs. Nash."

"Maybe she doesn't know Marina's married name."

"No, she mentioned it. She said she loved her last movie and that was it. She was more interested in talking about the kids."

"Maybe we should invite her and Charlie here next time."

"Jake would love that."

"Jake would love what?" asked Marina.

"If we had Charlie over here for his next play date. She says the mother is really nice."

"Well, he must have had a good time because I no sooner changed his clothes then he fell asleep. Sara, Frank and I are home today. Why don't you take the rest of the day off?"

"I still need to pick up Anna and Jonas."

"We'll do that. Go on. Get a jump on your weekend. We'll see you on Monday."

"Okay. Thanks. Call me if you need me." Sara left them alone in the kitchen.

Marina slipped her arms around his waist. "Jake was so proud you said he was

going to be strong. He flexed his little arm and asked if he had a muscle like yours." She rested her head on his chest. "He was so cute." Frank held her tight and placed a kiss on top of her head. "We really are lucky, aren't we?" she asked.

"Yeah, we are. We have two hours before we need to wake Jake and pick up the kids. What would you like to do?"

"Let's go back upstairs," she smiled.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, Jake isn't the only one who needs a nap. I'm exhausted."

Frank laughed. "And whose fault is that?" he asked as they walked up to their bedroom.

"Yours."

"Mine? Who attacked who when we got home?" He stripped off his jeans and crawled back into bed.

Marina tossed her jeans at the foot of the bed and joined him. She gave him a quick kiss. "It's still your fault. If you weren't so damn hot, I wouldn't feel compelled to jump your bones at every opportunity." She curled up on his chest and whispered, "I love you, Josiah."

"I love you too." He glanced down to see she was already asleep. He set the alarm on his phone and pulled her tight against him.

"Where's Sara?" asked Anna.

"Hello, Anna. Did you have a good day?" Frank said in his firm Russian Papa tone.

"Sorry. Hi Papa. Where's Sara?"

"Is she sick?" asked Jonas as Marina fastened him in his car seat.

"No, she's not sick. Can't we pick you up from school?"

"I guess so," said Anna as Frank secured his daughter.

"What did you learn today?"

"Well, I learned Jenny Price likes Johnny Schwartz."

Frank tried not to smile. "Jonas, would you like to tell Papa what you learned today?"

"We practiced numbers. It was kinda boring." He looked at the book his brother was reading. "What are you reading?"

Jonas held the book out for his brother to see. "Papa found it. It's about trucks."

"That was my book. I read it when I was a baby."

"Jonas!" called Marina. "That was rude. Your brother likes that book. Apologize."

"But I did read it when I was a baby."

"You were four and not everyone does everything the same. Now apologize."

"Sorry," he mumbled.

"I doubt Jake heard you. I know I didn't," said Frank as he pulled out of the parking lot.

"Sorry Jonas."

"That's okay," said Jake. "What's that one called?"

Frank watched as Jonas looked at the book again. He didn't doubt that Jonas had been bored in class. He was starting to show signs of being very advanced.

"It's an excavator."

"What's that mean?"

"It means it scoops out lots of dirt."

"Cool," said Jake with a smile.

Marina stifled a laugh. "Cool?" she whispered.

"Hey, I'm a child of the sixties. He's picked up a few things."

Frank looked at his watch and saw it was just after four. "I have an idea. What do you say to a little excursion?"

"Sure. What do you have in mind?"

"Shopping." He smiled when Marina looked at him like he lost his mind. Spontaneous outings were not something he ever suggested. Security for Marina and the children was always his first priority. It was true he didn't like having Marina in public spaces he couldn't control, especially if he was unarmed. He felt pretty sure this would be safe. He pulled into a mall parking lot and parked in front of Harrow's, a large book store and cafe.

"A book store?" Marina asked.

"Okay kids here's the deal. Everyone gets to pick one book and I want all of you on your best behavior." He looked at Marina. "You get Anna, I'll get the boys." She gave him a questioning look but nodded. He unhooked his sons from their car seats and stood them next to the car. "Jonas I'd like you to help Jake pick out a book. Maybe something on trucks."

"Oh, Papa, do I have to?" he whined in Russian.

"Jake, go hold Mama's hand." He glanced over at Marina and tapped the bridge of his nose, reminding her to put on her sunglasses. They would provide at least a small bit of concealment. "Jonas, I want you to help your brother," he said in Russian. "He's very excited to learn about trucks. You could help him."

"Papa, he's a baby. He reads baby books."

"He's only a year younger than you. You read at a much higher level than kids your age but that doesn't make you better than your brother. You just have different skills. You could use those skills to help him. He looks up to you."

"He does?"

"Of course. You're his big brother. He wants to be like you." He saw a glimpse of a smile. "There is something you should know. Jake's Russian is even better than yours and Anna's."

"What?"

"He understands every word you say. So when you say unkind things about him, he understands." He gave Jonas a hug. "You're a good boy, Jonas. Be kind to your brother." He released his son and gave him a pat on the bottom. "Go on now."

Jonas nodded to his father. He walked toward his brother and held out his hand. "I'll take Jake, Mama."

Marina looked at Frank with a shocked expression. He nodded. "Okay," she said. "Jake, hold your brother's hand." Frank joined her and watched their sons walk hand in hand through the electric eye door with Anna trailing after them. "What's that about?" she asked.

"Jonas is getting a little full of himself. I think this will be good for him. I used to do it with my Marines. Have the older ones look after the newer ones."

"Are you trying to turn our children into Marines?" she asked.

"No. I'm trying to raise good people. And what's wrong with being a Marine?" She smiled and took his hand in hers.

"Not a damn thing."

They followed their children into the store and watched as Anna went straight for a table displaying books on cars and motorcycles. "I've got her," he said. "You get them."

"Got it." Marina trailed after their sons while he looked at what had caught his daughter's attention.

"Papa, look." She pointed to the large book sitting upright in a display. "It looks just like our bikes."

"It sure does, princess." He pulled down the book and sat in a near by chair. Anna crawled up in his lap to get a close look. The book was a history of Harley Davidson bikes. He quickly flipped through the book to make sure there were no inappropriate images for his six year old.

"Papa, where's your bike?"

He looked to the index and found the Road Glide Ultra. "Here it is."

"Wow, that is so cool." Anna ran her hand over the picture. "Here, let me see." She pulled the big into here lap and started turning the pages. Frank smiled as he watched the look on his little girl's face. "Papa, look how big the engine is. It must be really loud."

"I bet it is, baby."

"Can I have this book? You said we could have one?"

"It's pretty grownup. You might not understand some of the words."

She lifted her chin and Frank saw the same fire in his daughter's eyes that he saw in his wife. "I could learn."

He smiled and gave his girl a kiss. "Yes you could, princess. Yes you could."

"So I can have it?"

"Yes, you can have it."

She squealed and gave her father a big kiss. "Thank you, Papa." She jumped off his lap and held on to her oversized book. "Come on, Papa. I want to show Mama."

He took Anna's hand and wondered if the Boozefighters would mind him bringing Anna one day.

Marina watched her sons as they sat on the carpeted floor, a large book spread across both their laps. Jonas had selected a child's book of construction trucks that was above Jake's reading level but Jonas was helping him. He was also translating the names of the trucks into Russian. For the names he couldn't translate he looked to her for the correct word.

Frank came up from behind her with a very excited Anna. "Mama, look at my book. It has a picture of Papa's bike."

"The History of Harley Davidson?" she asked.

"It's what she wanted."

"Jonas, Jake look what I got?" she said. She sat down next to Jake and showed off her book. Anna and Jonas chattered with each other in Russian and much to everyone's surprise, Jake joined the conversation in Russian.

She leaned into Frank and whispered, "Well done, Josiah." He put his arm around her and whispered, "Thanks, angel."

A small woman in her late sixties walked down the aisle. "Excuse me, Ms. Sokolov?"

Marina glanced at the woman, surprised to be recognized while being dressed casually with no makeup and wearing sunglasses. She felt Frank's arm tense around her.

"It's you isn't it? I don't mean to disturb you or your family but I promised myself if

I ever met you I had to thank you. It's about my son."

She took off her sunglasses. "Your son?"

"Michael. He was in the army. He was hurt but his real injury was inside." The woman's eyes teared as she touched her heart. "He was in a bad way when he got home. He had so many nightmares and he was so angry all the time. His anger got him into some scrapes with the law. My husband and I didn't know what to do. I went online and found your group, Welcome Home. I called and talked to your brother. He helped us with all the legal stuff and he convinced the judge to let Michael go for therapy and do community service. He did his service with your group. They worked with him and made sure he followed through with his therapy. But what I think helped the most was working with your group, helping other men like himself. He could see he wasn't alone." The woman glanced down at their children. "Michael was always such a happy child. We're starting to see some of the old Michael again. He still has his troubles but he's doing so much better now. I honestly don't think he would have survived this if we hadn't found your group." A tear slid down the woman's cheek and she whispered, "I just wanted to say thank you."

Marina wiped the tear from her own cheek before she gave the woman a tight hug. This wasn't a movie star and fan moment. It was two mothers sharing the pain. "It sounds like Michael is the one doing the hard work. You must be so proud."

"We are," she smiled.

"I'm glad we were able to help."

"You saved his life, and mine." She smiled at their children and glanced back. "You have a beautiful family. I'll leave you be, now."

Marina pulled the woman into another hug. "I'm very glad to have met you and please give my regards to Michael and your husband."

"I will," she said with a teary smile.

"Are you okay?" Frank whispered.

"Not even close."

"Mama, who was that lady and why was she crying?" asked Anna.

It was moments like these that test the resolve of any parent. They'd always been honest with their children but how much honesty was good for a six year old? "She was

the Mama of a soldier who got help at Welcome Home, the veteran's group Uncle Val and I work with."

"Why was she sad?"

"She wasn't sad. They were happy tears. Her son got a lot of help."

"Oh. That's good. Why were you crying?"

"I had happy tears too. I was so happy her son was better."

"That's good. Can we go to Montie's for wings?"

"We'll see," she said. Anna sat back down with her brothers and looked at her book.

"Sweetheart," Frank whispered. "Talk to me."

"I can't," she whispered.

"Hey guys, let's get moving. Jonas, did you pick out a book for yourself?"

"No. I was helping Jake."

"Anna and Jake give me your books and go with Mama to the car. Jonas and I will pick out a book and then we'll stop at Montie's for wings."

"Yay!" yelled Anna. She grabbed her mother's hand. "Come on, Mama, let's go." Marina gave him a pleading look.

"Drive thru," he said. She nodded and took her children's hands and walked toward the exit. He turned his attention to his son. "Do you have a book in mind?"

"I like that book on geology Uncle Jake got me. Could we look in the science section?"

"Sure." He found the section and Jonas quickly spotted a large book about gemstones. "These are what Aunt Mike uses."

"They are. If you read up on them she could answer your questions."

"Cool," he replied. "You know Papa, you were right. Jake's Russian is very good."

Frank smiled as he took the book and walked toward the checkout. His children were becoming very interesting little people.

Frank came into the kitchen and found Marina cleaning up what was left of the Atomic wings from Montie's. "Sweetheart, come with me." He took her by the hand and led her to the couch. "Please sit. The kids are in their beds. I told them they could read for another hour before lights out."

"They were probably asleep before you got downstairs."

"Probably, it was a busy day. Now stay put for a couple of minutes and I'll be right back." He went into the kitchen and came back with two glasses of red wine.

Marina smiled a genuine smile for the first time since their encounter with the woman in the bookstore. "Oh Lord, gimme," she said holding out her hand. She took a deep sip. "You really are the perfect husband."

He smiled "So I've been told by a particularly beautiful woman."

"Oh yeah? Give me her name so I can kick her ass."

"Okay, talk to me. What's got you all turned around?"

"The veteran's mother."

"That much I figured. What about her?"

"She was in so much pain and I couldn't help but think what if something like that happened to one of our children. It really threw me."

"Your sense of empathy is what makes you who you are. That's not everything is it?"

"No. I realized I haven't been to the office in weeks. I'm letting them down."

"Letting who down?"

"People like her son. I committed to help and I'm not doing what I should."

"Marina, you work from home. You make calls, handle problems, raise money."

"But there is so much more to do. Val is at the office much more than I am and he and Katherine have a busy practice. I haven't worked in six months. I'm letting them down."

Frank took a sip of his wine and then set down his glass. He took Marina's glass from her hand and set it down next to his. He took her hands in his and threaded his fingers through hers. "Okay supportive husband is stepping aside for a moment in favor of take charge Marine. Here goes. Marina Nash, you are not allowed to beat yourself up.

I won't permit it. In case I need to remind you, you are a full time mother to three very active young children. You do work. You work very hard every day as is evidenced by our happy and healthy children. You have raised awareness and tens of millions of dollars to help veterans. You've made a difference in more lives than you could ever count. If you want to find a way to spend more time at the office, we'll work it out. You are an amazing, generous, loving woman. I'm proud of you. But I absolutely forbid you to think you aren't doing enough. Are we clear?"

She gave him a slow, sly smile. "You always were a pushy goon."

"Damn straight."

"Let's go check on the kids," she said. She stood and smiled. "Don't forget the wine."

Frank grabbed the glasses and followed her upstairs. He set them on their nightstand and then joined her in Jonas's room. To their surprise. Jake had gotten into bed with his brother. The big truck book was open and it was clear Jonas had been reading to his little brother. They were both now fast asleep.

"What exactly did you say to Jonas to make that happen?"

"I just told him that his little brother looks up to him and he should help him. I also told him that Jake's Russian is a lot better than he thought so he understands when he's being mean. He's a good boy and shouldn't be unkind to his brother."

"Jonas didn't realize Jake's Russian is so good?"

"No. Like I said, a little too full of himself."

"Wow." She looked at Frank and smiled. "Good work, goon."

"Thanks, diva."

They carefully removed the book from the bed and tucked in their sons. They moved to Anna's room and found the same scene. Anna's book was opened to a picture of a particularly tricked out Harley. She was sound asleep. Marina looked at the picture and sighed.

"She's going to scare the crap out of us with this stuff when she gets older, isn't she?"

"Oh I think that's a safe bet."

"Good Lord," she whispered as he took the book and she tucked her daughter in.

Chapter Three

Frank poured Marina another cup of coffee as she snatched up the last croissant. He couldn't believe at forty five and after three babies she could still eat anything she wanted. He ran three miles and worked out at the gym every chance he got and still had to watch his weight. Saturday mornings they got up early to spend some quiet time with each other before the kids woke up.

"I'm supposed to have lunch with Cabe this afternoon," he said.

"Yeah, I remember. Tell him I said hey and they need to come over soon."

"Will do. I'm meeting him at the Scorpion garage. He wants to talk about a possible job."

"Okay?" she asked.

"I was thinking of taking Anna with me."

"You want to take our six year old daughter to a business meeting?"

"It's not really a business meeting. It's just Cabe. He said the team will be there including Happy. I've ridden with her on a couple of the Boozefighters rides. She also a genius engineer. I thought given Anna's fascination with bikes she might like to talk to her."

Marina set down her coffee mug and glared at him. "You're determined to make her a gearhead."

"I swear it's not me, it's her. She's always asking to be there when I work on my bike. I just want her to see it's okay for girls to like engineering." Frank fought the urge to smile when she sighed and leaned back against her chair.

"Fine. But you know the rule. That child does not ride until her feet reach the ground. Clear?"

"Yes ma'am."

"And if she gets so much as a scratch you'll be sleeping alone for a month."

"Ouch," he winced. "Talk about cruel and unusual punishment."

Frank smiled as he listened to Anna chatter on from her car seat. She'd squealed and threw her arms around him when he invited her to come along. He was surprised when Jonas didn't protest not being included. It appeared he'd taken to his role as Jake's teacher and they were deeply involved in Jake's new book.

He pulled into the Scorpion lot and got out of the car. He unhooked Anna from her car seat. "Alright princess. This is where Uncle Cabe works so I expect you to be on your best behavior."

"Yes, Papa. I promise."

He took her by the hand and walked into the garage. "Hey, it's the Colonel," said Toby. He came over and shook his hand. "How's it going?" "Good, Toby. How are you?"

"Excellent as always."

"Anna, you remember Dr. Curtis."

Anna held herself closer to her father's leg. "Hi," she said quietly.

Toby crouched down to Anna's level and held out his hand. Anna looked toward her father who smiled and nodded. She extended her hand and Toby shook it carefully. "It is very nice to see you again, Anna. You know we first met when you were much younger." He stood up and smiled at Cabe. "Much younger." Frank felt suddenly uncomfortable. Toby was the doctor who'd first confirmed Marina's pregnancy with the twins.

"Do I see my favorite Russian princess?"

"Uncle Cabe!" Anna squealed and ran past Toby and her father. Cabe scooped her up and gave her a kiss.

Toby put a hand on Frank's shoulder. "Wow. She's a ball of energy. She must keep you on your toes."

"You have no idea," he smiled. Cabe walked toward them still carrying Anna. "Hi Cabe."

"I have the stuff I want to go over on my desk. Then we'll do lunch."

"I get to go with you, Uncle Cabe."

"I know and I'm very happy to have such a lovely luncheon companion. You're much prettier than your Papa." Anna giggled as he set her back on her feet. "Anna, your

Papa and I have some business to talk about but I think Happy would like some company." He turned and yelled toward the back of the garage. "Yo, Happy!"

"I'm not deaf." Happy Quinn walked in from the back of the garage. She was wearing flannel jeans and a plaid shirt over a white t shirt. Every item had grease stains.

"Happy you remember Frank's daughter, Anna."

"How's it goin' kid?"

Anna giggled. "You're married to the man in the hat."

"Ah, yeah, I am."

Frank put his hand on Anna's shoulder. "Happy sometimes rides with me and Uncle Cabe when we ride with the Boozefighters."

Anna's face lit up. "You have a bike? A real one?"

"Yeah."

"Papa has a Road Glide Ultra." Happy eyes widen and she looked up at Frank.

"The girl loves Harleys."

"Papa bought me a big book and I'm learning all the names."

Happy smiled and nodded. "Sweet."

"Okay, time to own up," said Frank. "Cabe told me you'd be here and I was hoping you might show Anna a little of what you do. She's fascinated by all things mechanical. That is if you don't mind."

Happy shot Cabe a look to which he responded with a wink. "Well, I was just working on my bike. I could always use an assistant." Anna looked at her father with a joy that is usually reserved for Christmas morning.

"You do not touch anything Happy doesn't tell you to touch. Are we clear?"

"Clear!" she smiled before grabbing Happy's hand. "Where's your bike?"

Cabe slapped Frank on the back and laughed. "Has she picked out her first bike yet?"

"She wants a Street Glide Ultra."

"Marina is going to kill you."

"Wow, is that a Softtail Slim?" asked Anna.

Happy stood dumbfounded as the little girl looked at her bike with big eyes. "Ah, yeah it is. How did you know?"

"It's in the book Papa bought me. It's a real book, not a baby's book."

Happy smiled. "Neat. Well, I was changing the spark plugs. You wanna help?"

"Sure! What can I do?"

She pointed to the floor. "You sit here." When Anna sat down Happy handed her two spark plugs. "You hold on to these and then hand them to me when I ask."

"Okay."

Happy smiled. Anna reminded her of herself at that age. Actually at her age she could have stripped the engine and reassembled it. She thought for a moment about how nice it would have been to have had someone like Frank in her life. Someone who bought her books on Harleys and didn't force her to play with dolls. She extended her hand to the little girl. "Okay now hand me just one." Anna handed her a spark plug like she was a nurse handing a surgeon and instrument. The child look fascinated as she wrenched in one and then the other spark plug.

"Now I have to make sure the engine is going to start so you have to stand back." Anna moved back a few steps as Happy revved the engine.

"Yay!" Anna cheered and clapped her hands.

Frank smiled as he heard his daughter's cheers over the sound of a revving engine. "So is everything ready?"

"Yeah. Everyone has replied to the invitations. All the family and the team, of course. Jonathan is bringing his new girl friend, Jess Stratham."

"Oh yeah? What's she like?"

"Nice. She's an NCIS agent. They met working a veteran's case."

"It's really nice of you and Kate to do this."

"Oh Kate's ecstatic. There's nothing she loves more than throwing birthday parties. She loves making birthday cakes."

"She's making a cake?"

"Oh yeah. It's a rule. All birthday parties have to have a scratch cakes."

"I thought this was just going to be a barbeque with friends. I don't want you to have to go to a lot of trouble."

Cabe waved his hand dismissively. "This is a normal Gallo gathering."

Happy turned off the engine and got off the bike. "Do you have something else to fix?" asked Anna.

"Not today. Saturday's are usually pretty relaxed."

"Do you wear a gun like Uncle Cabe?"

"No, Uncle Cabe is the muscle around here. I build stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Lot's of stuff. Conveyence systems, EMP devices. One time I built a giant winch to swing Cabe over a cliff so he could pull Walter out of his car."

"Why did Uncle Cabe want to pull him out of his car?"

"Because the car was crashed on the side of the cliff."

"Oh. Why didn't he just come out himself."

"Because he was hurt and he couldn't move. Cabe had to rescue him."

"Wow. That's cool."

"Yeah, it was kinda cool," Happy tried to hide her smile as she picked up her tools.

"So you build big machines. Do you have any here. Can you show me?"

"Well, they're not always big." She walked over to her workbench and opened a drawer. She pulled a round silver box with long metal poles She set it down and flipped a switch the poles began to swirl and dance.

"Wow, she whispered. She looked up at Happy in what she thought might be wonderment.

"Anna, are you ready for lunch?" called Frank.

"Papa, Uncle Cabe, come look at what Happy made." He and Cabe walked over to Happy's workbench and watched the spinning carousel. "Isn't it pretty?"

"Yes it is." He smiled at Happy. "Thank you for showing her what you do."

"No problem. She's a good kid."

Frank put his hand on Anna's shoulder. "Princess, we need to get going. Uncle Cobe is hungry."

"Oh, do I have to?" she whined.

"Maybe your dad will bring you back sometime," Happy said. "That is if you want to," she added. She glanced over and saw Cobe smiling at her.

"Can we, Papa?" Anna asked quickly.

"Sure, princess."

"When?"

Frank laughed. "We'll figure it out. Now say thank you to Happy."

"Thank you, Happy. I had a lot of fun."

"You're welcome, kid." She gasped when the little girl launched herself at her and gave her a tight hug. Anna released her and turned to leave with her father. "Anna, hold up." She found a cardboard box and placed the carousel inside it. "Here you go," she said as she handed it to Anna.

"For me?" Anna whispered.

"Yeah. You seem to really like it."

"I do." She turned to her father and said in Russian, "Papa, please hold this." Frank took the box from his daughter as Anna motioned at Happy to bend over. When she did Anna put her arms around her neck and kissed Happy's cheek. She spoke to her in Russian then turned and took the box from her father.

"Ah, I don't speak Russian."

Frank smiled. "She said I love you."

Chapter Four

"Happy Birthday!" Marina opened her eyes to see the bedroom door flying open and her children running towards her. She sat up just in time to catch Jake as he launched himself at her.

"Happy Birthday, Mama," he said as he gave her a kiss. Anna and Jonas climbed up on the bed and each gave her a hug and a big kiss. "Happy Birthday, Mama."

"Thank you," she smiled. She looked at Frank standing there holding a bed tray with breakfast.

"Happy Birthday, Mama," he smiled.

"Thank you, Papa," she laughed.

"We made you a present," Anna said. "Papa, give Mama her present." Frank smiled as he handed her an awkwardly wrapped gift. "We all made it," said Jake.

"Papa helped a little," added Jonas.

Marina smiled as she opened the box and saw a leather scrap book. She pulled the book out of the box and opened it. She saw opened the first page and saw a smiling picture of her three children holding a sign that read 'Happy Birthday Mama'. She paged through page after page of photographs and drawings. Anna drew a picture of the rose Frank had cultivated and named after her. She laughed at a collage that Jonas had done that had the banner 'Mama's favorites'. It was pictures of her favorite foods. In the center was a picture of a Death by Chocolate cake. She stopped at one of the last pages and gasped. It was printed in the childish hand she recognized as Jake's. He'd written her a poem and it was in Russian.

"Papa helped me with some of the Russian words," Jake said quietly.

*Our Mama is pretty because
She smiles all the time
She makes good food for us
She is nice to other people
She makes Papa laugh
She gives good hugs and kisses
She loves us.*

Marina looked up at Frank as the tears ran down her face. "Don't you like it, Mama?" asked Jake.

She pulled Jake tight against her and kissed the top of his head. "I love it," she whispered. She held her arms out to Anna and Jonas and they cuddled close with their little brother. "It is the most perfect gift any Mama ever got. I love you all, so much."

"Then why are you crying?" asked Anna.

"Happy tears," she said as she kissed each of her children. She reached out for the tissue Frank handed her and wiped her eyes.

"Hey, you lot go pick out your clothes for later. We need to be at Uncle Cabe and Aunt Kate's at noon and we don't want to be late."

"Can we bring our swim suits?" asked Jonas. They'd been going to Cabe and Kate's since they were babies and learned to swim in their pool.

"Yes, get your suits."

"Yay!" shouted Jonas as they fled the room and let their parents alone.

Frank handed her a glass of orange juice and she took a sip. He sat the tray table on her lap. "Here. Eat your eggs before they get cold. The kids helped me make it," he smiled. "Jake had toast duty. He was very proud." He watched as she stared at her gift. "Are you okay, babe?"

"I'm just a little overwhelmed. This is an amazing gift. What Jake wrote, I just can't believe it."

"They're good kids and they love their Mama."

"I guess they do."

"You guess? Did you ever doubt it?"

"I don't know. Sometimes in the hubbub, you lose track. Fighting with Anna to stop climbing so high in the trees. Making Jonas put away his things. Chasing after Jake, sometimes it feels like I more of a cop than a mother."

Frank sat down next to her and took her hand. "A good mother is a cop. You protect them. You also teach them, and nurture them and love them. They're good kids because you've done such a great job being all those things."

She leaned in and gave him a kiss. "We do all those things, together."

Marina and Frank pulled up to the Gallo's home and punched in their own code. They'd become very close with the Gallo's over the years. Marina had bonded with Kate over being Marine wives. They laughed over their husbands similarities, stubborn, loyal, loving men. It had been good for her to have a friend who wasn't family or in show business.

She didn't think Kate knew it was her birthday. When Frank said they'd been invited for today she told him not to mention it. She hadn't made a big deal about her birthday to Kate. She was pretty sure it was poor form to whine about turning forty five to your friend who was fast approaching sixty. Whining to your own husband about it, however, was perfectly acceptable no matter how old he was.

"Okay, listen up!" said Marina as she unhooked Jake from his carseat. "You know the rules. No running around, no going to the beach and no going into the pool without me or Papa. Got it?"

"Got it," they replied.

The front door opened and the children immediately ran like maniacs toward Kate and Cabe. They quickly bent down to accept the enthusiastic hugs.

"So much for the rules," she thought.

"Today is Mama's birthday," said Jake.

"Jacob!" said Marina.

"What? It is your birthday?" asked Cabe.

"Is that right?" asked Kate. She gave Marina a hug. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks."

"Why don't we go out on the deck while Cabe fires up the grill."

"Sounds great. These live wires need to burn off some energy." She followed Kate toward the deck but stopped dead when she heard a loud "Surprise!" All her family and friends were standing on the balloon covered deck. There were several large tables with every kind of barbeque food and drinks. There was a even a small table with gifts. She looked at her friend and smiled. She pulled her into a tight hug. "Thank you," she whispered.

"You're welcome sweetie."

Marina turned toward Cabe and gave him a sly smile. "I see your hand in this, Josiah."

He leaned in and whispered in her ear. "Are you mad?"

"Of course not," she said as she gave him a soft kiss.

She greeted all the guests, starting with her mother and stepfather and her in laws. Florence and Jonas Nash had permanently moved to their Malibu condo after Jake was born. The ability to regularly spoil their grandchildren won out over leaving the home the Nash family had lived in for three generations. Frank made the transition easier for his parents when he bought the homestead and promised to keep it in the family.

"Happy birthday, angel," said her mother.

"Thank you, Mama. This is such a surprise."

Florence gave her a hug. "Your friends seem very nice."

"They're the best."

"Aunt Happy!" squealed Anna as she flung herself at a surprised Happy.

"Hey kid. How's it going?"

"Great. Papa bought me a new book. I've been reading about circuits."

"Cool."

Cabe put his hands on Anna's shoulder's. "Hey princess. You're grandparents are looking for you."

"Okay," she whined. She looked up at Happy and smiled. "I'll be back." Anna turned and ran off to greet her grandparents.

"When did I become Aunt Happy?"

"Anna's a sweet kid. She call all adults she likes Aunt and Uncle."

Happy looked back at the little girl and couldn't hide her smile.

Marina and Frank made the rounds of the guests, starting with the Scorpion team. They got to know them after they had beefed up security around their wedding and provided back up when they had to leave the children in Carmel. Frank had used them as subcontractors on several projects. The time Marina and the children spent with the team was at the Gallo's. Jake had a particular fondness for Walter and Paige's son. Cabe O'Brien was a year younger than Jake and gave him the opportunity to play big brother. Cabe's actual big brother, Ralph was busy with his work at the Palomar Observatory. At nineteen, Ralph was the youngest astrophysicist ever to be granted a research chair at CalTech.

"Hi guys. Thanks for coming," said Marina.

"Happy birthday," said Paige as she held her four year old.

"Where's Jake?" asked Cabe.

Walter smiled at his son. "When I told him where we were going he was very pleased. He's very fond of your son."

"Jake is very fond of him," said Frank.

"Where's Jake?" Cabe asked a bit more forcefully.

Marina turned toward the gathering of grandparents and pointed. "He's over there. Cabe is welcome to join him."

"Mommy, put me down." Paige complied and followed her son as he ran toward Jake. Marina smiled as Cabe threw his arms around Jake in a tight hug.

"They're good together," said Frank.

"Yes. Jake is very adept at teaching Cabe Russian."

"He's what?" asked Marina and Frank.

Walter looked confused. "I assumed you knew. Jake has been teaching him for a while. In fact they've started to speak to each other in Russian so Paige and I won't understand what they're saying. I've had to listen to some Russian language discs to catch up."

Marina and Frank glanced at the two boys. They were moving past them to an area unoccupied by adults. Jake was showing Cabe the new toy truck he'd insisted on bringing.

As they walked past they heard Jake say, "Gruzovaya mashina." Cabe repeated the words with amazing accuracy.

"Holy crap," said Marina.

"I don't believe it," said Frank

She looked at her husband and smiled. "Are we sure it's Jonas who's the smart one?"

"Well look what the cat dragged in," said Toby.

"What cat?" asked Walter.

Toby opened his mouth as if to explain and then shook his head and pointed. Rounding the corner into the back yard was Ralph and a pretty young brunette carrying a small bouquet of flowers.

"Ralph!" called Paige.

"Hi Mom." He gave his mother a hug. "Hi Walter."

"We didn't think you'd make it," said Walter.

"Well we weren't going to but when I told Kelsey who the party was for she kind of insisted. "Hi, Mrs. Nash. Happy birthday."

Marina smiled and gave him a hug. "Thank you, Ralph. I can't believe you drove all the way from San Diego for my birthday. That's so nice."

"To be honest, I don't think Kelsey believed me when I said my grandparents were good friends with you." He looked over at the girl who'd hung back from the crowd and smiled. "She's a big fan of yours."

Marina leaned toward Ralph and whispered, "I've got you covered." She waved the girl over and extended her hand. "Hello Kelsey, it's very nice of you to come all this way for my party."

Kelsey broke into a broad smile. "Oh, Ms. Sokolov I'm so happy to meet you." She handed Marina the flowers. "Happy birthday."

"Oh these are lovely. Thank you so much." Marina gave the girl a hug and she could feel her tremble. "Ralph, why don't you take a picture of me and Kelsey." She put her arm around her shoulder and gave her best movie star smile.

"Oh, thank you Ms. Sokolov. My girlfriends are never going to believe it. We saw

your last movie a bunch of times."

"I'm glad you and your friends enjoyed it. Ralph, the new Time Travelers movie premieres next month. You'll have to bring Kelsey."

"To the premiere?" she gasped.

"Of course. My family always comes to my premieres and Ralph is family." Marina gave him another hug. He walked over to his girlfriend who looked at him like he was a rock star.

As Marina and Frank walked toward the rest of the party he whispered in her ear. "You realize you just insured that kid is getting laid tonight."

Marina smiled. "Don't tell Cabe."

Marina and Frank brought the kids back to the party after a post-barbeque cleanup.

"I still don't know how Jake got barbeque sauce on his feet," said Frank.

"He's a kid. It's his job to be messy."

"But he still had on his socks and shoes."

"He's creatively messy." Jonathan Gallo joined them as they watched their kids dispersed among the guests. "Jonathan, we haven't had a chance to talk. How are you?"

"I'm good. Are you having a good time?"

"I am. It's so nice of your parents to do this for me."

"Mom loves nothing more than planning a birthday party. She's already talking about Cabe's fifth birthday party and that's not for six months. Expect ponies." He extended his hand to Frank. "How are you doing Colonel?"

"I'm good Jonathan, thanks." He smiled

Marina smiled as Jess Stratham joined them. Jonathan had been dating her for a few months and according to Kate she was definitely the one. Jonathan just hadn't figured it out yet. Kate had already decided what she'd wear to their wedding, swearing she wouldn't be a stoggy mother of the groom. Marina suppressed a laugh when she remembered making Kate promise not to wear her shoulder holster to the wedding and her Homeland Security badge would have to stay in her purse. Kate accused her of being a spoil sport. "Jess, Thank you for coming to my party. I hope you're enjoying yourself."

"I am. It turns out your stepfather knows my grandfather, Dez. They both grew up in the Chelsea section of London. He even thinks he has some pictures of him when he was a boy."

"Jess' grandparents retired out here. George has invited us all over for brunch to talk about London and go through old pictures," said Jonathan.

"That's wonderful."

Kate joined them. "Excuse me, Marina. I hate to interrupt it's time for presents."

Marina was placed front and center on a chaise with Frank in the next chair and her children at her feet. She looked at all the smiling faces of her family and friends and offered up a silent prayer of thanks.

"Ralph?" asked Kate.

"I think I'm a little old to still be Santa."

"Excuse me?" asked Marina.

"I always give out the gifts because..."

"He's young, he's cute, he wins," said every member of Scorpion. "I think it's time to pass my duties on. Jonas?"

Jonas looked up at Ralph with a big smile. "Me?"

"Yeah, I think you're the man for the job." Jonas walked up to him and Ralph leaned over and whispered "I'll just help you get started."

"Okay, what do I do first?"

"Give her that envelope." Jonas picked the envelope and handed it to Marina. "Here Mama, this is for you."

"Thank you, sweetheart." She opened the envelope and read the card. "Oh my," she whispered.

"What is it," asked Frank.

"It says a contribution has been made in my name to Welcome Home from all my friends at Scorpion. A very generous contribution. Thank you. That's a wonderful gift." Jonas picked up a small shirt box size gift and gave it to his mother. She read the card and smiled. "Happy birthday little sister, Love Val, Katherine, Jake and Mike." She opened the box to find a small photo album. Inside were pictures of Marina when she was four

years old and her brother Jacob was sixteen and Vasily was eighteen. They were taken at the local playground. Val was pushing her on the swings, Jake was helping her climb monkey bars. She turned the next page and saw a picture of Jake and Mike's gazebo. He'd built it as part of the expansion of their home, turning it from a one bedroom cottage to a four bedroom home. Marina and Frank had the beach house next to Jake and Mike in Carmel. Whenever they spent time in Carmel, Marina always found an excuse to hang out in the gazebo. It had the perfect amount of shade while you enjoyed a glass of wine and watched the ocean. "Your gazebo?"

"Your gazebo," said Jake. "Turn the page." She turned the page and saw a wider shot of the gazebo which was obviously in front of their Carmel house. "Val and I worked on it during the weekends."

"I don't know what to say."

"There's a first," Val laughed.

Marina flipped another page and saw a new set of swings, elaborate monkey bars and a playhouse.

"We thought we give you something to divert the kids attention while you're in the gazebo."

She leaned over and showed Frank the pictures. "I've seen them. They ran everything by me before they built it."

She stood and gave her brothers and their wives each a tight hug. "Thank you." She looked at her brothers and smiled. "You're the best big brothers a girl could have," she whispered in Russian.

As she sat back down she saw her children looking at their new playground. She said to Frank, "You know we're never going to get Anna off the monkey bars."

"Yeah," he smiled. Marina thought he was a little too pleased to have a daredevil daughter.

"Give her that pink box, Jonas," said Florence.

"Okay, Grandma." Ralph handed him the box and he careful carried it to his mother.

"Thank you, baby," she whispered. "Great job." She opened the package and pulled out a another photo album. She opened it and immediately started laughing. Each page made her laugh harder.

"What's so funny?" asked Frank.

She held the book in front of him. "You!" She laughed louder. "Florence, Jonas this is fantastic."

"I thought you might enjoy having these," said her mother in law.

She turned another page and squealed in delight. "Oh God it's you in high school."

Frank let out a plaintive "Mom!"

Marina lost it. The sound of her sixty two year old husband sounding just like Jake and Jonas whining was just too much.

"Not funny," he muttered.

"Oh yes it is." She flipped another page and saw a picture of Frank when he was Jonas age. If it weren't for the dated clothes his mother was wearing she would swear it was a picture of her son. "Jonas, come here. Look at this. You look just like Papa."

"I do?" he leaned over her arm and looked where she was pointing and smiled. "Cool," he said.

"He's your son, alright," said his father.

"Dad, couldn't you have restrained Mom? Just a little?"

"Not in sixty four years of marriage, son."

As Marina hugged his parents, Frank looked over at his mother in law. "Mama, you're going to have to help me out here."

She waved a dismissive hand and smiled. "It won't do you any good Frank. She was always beautiful."

"Of course she was," he muttered.

"What about me, Mama?" ask Jake. "Do I look like Papa?"

"You have Papa's eyes."

"And his muscles," he said proudly showing off his five year old bicep.

"And his muscles," Marina agreed.

"Do I look like Papa?" asked Anna.

"You look exactly like your mother," said Frank.

"I do?" she asked looking vaguely disappointed.

"But you have you Papa's spirit," said Marina. "You are strong and brave like he is."

"I am," she said proudly.

She glanced over at Frank and she knew he understood. She was pleased her daughter had brave and independent spirit. But she couldn't help but be a little sad Anna didn't like looking like her mother. Marina had never used her looks. She worked hard to achieve what she did, but she never apologized for them either. They had been problematic for her over the years, with people assuming she was nothing more than her appearance. Her daughter would face those issues. Maybe Anna already knew it too.

"Jonas, please give your mother the box with the blue ribbon."

"Okay, Nana Anna." Having two Annas, two Jonas and two Jacobs had forced them to come up with names the children could use for their namesakes. Marina's mother was Nana Anna. Frank's father was Grandpa Joe. Uncle Jake worked for Marina's brother but he cringed when the rest of the family used it. He said it made him feel like Methusala.

Marina smiled at her mother as she opened the box and pulled aside the tissue. She gasped and pulled out an Alice in Wonderland doll. She was wearing a beautiful blue dress with a prim white collar and a starched white apron. Her hair was long, blonde and perfectly groomed. Marina closed her eyes, held the doll tight to her and remembered. Her Papa had given her the doll shortly before his sudden death. She carried the doll with her everywhere for years. She played with her, had tea parties with her, insisting her brothers join them. Somehow she'd been misplaced and Marina had been heartbroken.

"Mama where did you find her?" she asked in Russian.

"She was in an old trunk I hadn't opened for years. She was in the bottom under some old clothes. I don't know how she wound up there."

The memory flashed in her mind. "I do. I remember now. I was pretending I was going on a long trip. I put her in the trunk." She looked at her doll and whispered, "I'm sorry I left you alone for so long." She held the doll tight and began to weep.

"Sweetheart, are you okay?" asked Frank.

"What? Yes." She looked up at the concerned group of friends. "I'm sorry everyone," she said, reverting back to English. "My father gave me this doll and she was very important to me. Mama, she didn't look nearly this good when I put her away."

"George told me about something called a doll hospital. I'd never heard of such a thing. They restored her hair and eyelashes. I made the new dress for her off of the old

one."

Marina looked closer at the dress and realized it wasn't the original. It was all hand stitched by her mother. The doll in its original dress might have been worth some money. Now, it was priceless. "Oh, Mama, she's beautiful."

"That's not the only thing we found. Look in the box."

She removed the rest of the tissue and found the little doll table and chair she'd used for her tea party. It too had been restored but now it was trimmed with hand painted roses. The two little chairs had also been restored. "Oh, it's beautiful."

"George restored those."

"George?"

"Alice is an English girl. She needs a proper tea. Look in the box again."

She looked inside and found a tea set, just the right size for a proper English tea. "Oh, this is wonderful. Truly." She walked to her step father and gave him a tight hug and kiss. "Thank you, George. I love you."

"I love you too."

Marina put her arms around her mother and whispered in Russian, "You know how much having her back means to me."

"I know, baby. Your Papa loved you so much."

"Mama, you have more to open," said Jonas.

"More?" she said with a smile. "I'm getting spoiled."

Jonas handed her a package that felt like a picture frame. She opened the card and smiled. It was from Jonathan. Her best friend's son was a good man, a lot like his father. She opened the package and was without words. It was a watercolor of her children playing on the beach. It was a picture of pure joy. "Oh Jonathan, this is beautiful." She showed it to the guests and everyone agreed. Jonathan blushed an adorable shade of bright red when she gave him a hug. "Thank you. I'll treasure it."

"One more, Mama. I looked at the card. It's from Uncle Cabe and Aunt Kate."

She opened the gift and sat stock still. Jonathan had inherited his artistic ability from his father. It was a portrait of Frank. He was wearing one of his favorite t-shirts and wearing a fade pair of jeans. He was standing against a dark background so all she could focus on was Frank. Her man at his very best.

"Cabe, this is amazing."

"I don't know why he wanted me to pose for him," said Frank. "I thought he should paint you."

Marina looked at Cabe and smiled. "He did." Cabe smiled and nodded.

"He kept asking about you but I'm pretty sure that's just me in the painting."

"He did paint me. This is the way you look when you look at me."

"Really?"

"Really." She stood and gave Cabe a hug. "Thank you isn't enough."

"It will do nicely," he said. "I'm glad you're pleased."

"Alright, that's enough hugging my woman, Gallo. It's my turn." Frank stood and took an envelope out of his jacket. "Happy birthday." Marina opened the envelope and looked at pictures of The Hideaway, a beautiful resort just outside LA. "I've heard this is amazing. Kate and I were just.." She glanced at her friend who was smiling. "I sense a conspiracy."

"Well if you mean a conspiracy for the two of us to go away for a long weekend, you would be correct. You and I are booked in next weekend. There's a spa and hot rock massages, what ever that is."

"Next weekend? The children.."

"Sara is staying the weekend with alternating grandparents cooking and spoiling them the entire time."

She looked at Frank and smiled. "Just the two of us?"

He slipped his arms around her waist like they didn't have an audience. He gave her a soft kiss and whispered in her ear. "I can't wait to get you all to myself."

"Well, happy birthday to me!"

Frank opened the garage door with the remote and parked the car. He punched in the alarm code and opened the door that led to the kitchen. He and Marina unhooked their children from the carseats. "Alright kids, straight upstairs. Put your things away. Mama and I will be up in a minute." The kids made a mad dash into the house as they unloaded the kids things and carried in her birthday gifts.

"How do they have any energy left?" asked Marina.

"Sugar o.d. Between birthday cake, soda and all the chocolates they were sneaking..."

"How did they get into chocolates?"

"They were with four doting grandparents who love to curry favor with their grandchildren."

"Good Lord. They're going to crash hard."

"Count on it," he said as he set all the gifts down in the kitchen. He lassoed Marina around the waist with his arms, preventing her from following the kids. "So, did you enjoy your birthday?"

"I did, very much. How did you managed to schedule a long weekend away? I thought you were swamped at work."

"I am, but I'm a Marine, sweetheart. We are excellent at planning and multitasking."

She gave him a warm kiss. "That's not the only thing you're good at."

"Oh yeah?" he grinned as he pulled her closer.

"Hold that thought, Marine. We have three children who need to be tucked in."

Frank followed her upstairs to find all three children together in Jonas' room. He thought they had a vaguely conspiratorial look about them.

"What's going on?" asked Marina.

"Nothing," Jonas said in a tone that said something was definitely wrong.

Marina sat on his bed and took his hand. "Jonas. I'm your mother. I know all and see all. Something is wrong. Please tell me."

He tilted his head down and mumbled. "You liked their presents better."

"What?" asked Frank.

She glanced up at him and gave him the silent look that said "I've got this." She pulled Jonas into her lap. "What presents?"

"Uncle Cabe and Jonathan. They're really good drawers and we're not."

Frank heart broke a little for his son's pain but Marina was handling this. He'd hang in for backup if needed.

"Anna, come here." Marina patted the spot next to her. "Jake, you sit here." She patted the spot opposite. He climbed up and sat next to her. She leaned over and gave each a kiss. "I want you to know I loved your present. It means so much to me because

the pictures and the stories and poems came from you."

"Uncle Cabe's picture was better," said Anna.

"Uncle Cabe and Jonathan are great artists, that's true. That doesn't mean I love their pictures more than yours." She pulled Anna and Jake tighter into her. "You want to know why I liked Jonathan's picture so much?"

"Why?" asked Jake.

"Because it was a picture of all of you. A picture of my babies."

Jonas stuck out his chin. "I'm not a baby."

"Jonas Nash, you will be fifty years old and I'll be ninety and you will still be my baby. Just like I'm Nana Anna's baby." She looked up at Frank and smiled. "The reason I loved Uncle Cabe's picture so much is because it was of Papa. So you see I loved them because they are pictures of the four people I love most in this world."

Anna looked up at her mother. "Really?"

Marina smiled and he knew, yeah, she had this.

"Do you know that I never dreamed I'd be a Mama?"

"Did you want to be a Mama?" asked Jake.

"I didn't know I did. I was living my life and making movies but I wasn't really happy."

"You weren't?" asked Anna.

Marina smiled at her daughter. "No. What I was, was lonely. But God saw to it that I met Papa. Then he gave us you and Jonas. And a year later, Jake. Having Papa and the three of you is my greatest joy. There aren't enough words, in English or in Russian, to describe how much I love all of you."

"Mama, do you love us all the same?" asked Jonas.

"Of course I do."

"Sometimes you get mad at us," said Anna.

"You're right, angel, sometimes I do. I get mad because I love you and I care what happens to you. I don't want you to climb too high in the tree so you don't get hurt." She looked at Jonas and brushed a his messy hair from his forehead. "I get mad if you are unkind to your brother and sister because I know you love them." She gave Jake a little kiss. "I tell you to pay attention because I want you to learn and grow up to the man I know you can be. If I didn't care about you, I wouldn't care if you got hurt."

"But how can you love us all the same?" Jonas repeated.

"Jonas, do you love me?"

"Yes, Mama." To emphasize his point he put his arms around Marina's neck and gave her a kiss on her cheek.

"If you love me does that mean you don't love Papa?"

Jonas looked horrified as he looked over at him in the doorway. "No, I love Papa!"

"Of course you do. And you love Anna and Jake."

"Well..."

"I know you do, Jonas Franklin, so don't pretend you don't."

He looked over at his sister who was smiling at him. "Yeah, I guess."

"So you see, you have room in your heart to love more than one person. I have room in my heart for all of you. I will never love anyone as much as I love all of you and your Papa. Not ever." She gave them all a hug and kiss. "I loved your present the best."

"Mama?" asked Anna. "Are you happy now?"

"Baby girl, I am very happy now."

The children sat with Marina for a moment while he grabbed Jonas pajamas out of the drawer. Another thirty minutes and all his children were changed into their pajamas and tucked in for the night. He kissed each of his children and turned out their lights.

As they walked into their bedroom Marina kicked off her shoes. "Well that was certainly an eventful day," she said.

He pulled her to him and gave her a deep kiss. "You are the most wonderful mother our children could ever have."

"Thank you, Josiah. I have a great partner."

He rubbed his hand down her back and cupped her ass. "I know it's been a long day and you're probably tired." She silenced him with a passionate kiss.

"For you Marine, I'm never that tired."

Chapter Five

The Hideaway was an exclusive resort about an hour north of Los Angeles. Perched on a cliff, it boasted spectacular views, a four star restaurant and a world class spa. What sold Frank on the location was their attention to guest privacy and security.

Marina had gone back to work after Jake was born, but not at the pace she had before. One or two carefully chosen projects a year had not only been good for their family life but for her career. She'd been much more selective about the work, only choosing projects that truly inspired her. The effect was now she was not only lauded for her looks but for her skill as an actor. While he was proud as he could be about what she'd achieved it also meant tight security whenever they went out in public. The management at The Hideaway had assured them of privacy and the discretion of their highly paid staff.

Frank wanted this to be a perfect weekend for them. Three days for just the two of them. They hadn't had time like this alone since before Jake was born. He arranged for the best room, with the best view. Everything this weekend would be top of the line. He opened the door to their room and Marina gasped and smiled. Their suite was decorated in white and cream colors. Not one sticky finger print or stray toy in sight. The only splash of color were the two dozen red roses on the small dining table.

"Oh Frank, this is beautiful." She walked to the roses and inhaled their scent. "There's a card," she said. She opened the card and read it out loud in Russian. "Happy birthday, my love. Yours always, Josiah." She turned to him and ran her hand over his cheek. "I love you, Josiah."

He gave her a soft kiss. "I love you too, angel." He picked up their bags and led her to the bedroom. The bedroom featured a king size bed with an all white puffy comforter. There was large wicker ceiling fan over the bed, reminding them of their time in Hawaii. He set down their bags as Marina opened the patio door and stepped out on the balcony.

"This is beautiful," she said as she watched the ocean.

He came up from behind her and slipped his arms around her waist. "Yes it is."

She turned toward him and looked concerned. "Are we being a little overindulgent?"

"How do you mean?"

"We have a beautiful beach house in Carmel."

He smiled. "Yes we do and I love it there. But, in Carmel we'd have three children needing our attention, family next door. Here, it's just you and me, doing what ever we want, whenever we want."

She gave him a sly smile. "True."

"Why don't we get settled and we can take a walk on the beach before lunch. I've booked us a couples massage at two."

"You, Franklin Josiah Nash, booked a couples massage?"

"Yes I did. You kept saying you wanted to and this weekend is all about you."

"Oh yeah?" she grinned. He answered her with a deep kiss.

Marina grinned. "I think I can pretty much guarantee you are going to have a good weekend too."

He threw on a fresh polo and a pair of khaki shorts. He went out to the living area, making sure the champagne he'd ordered was chilled in the fridge. When Marina joined him she'd changed into a pair of dark blue shorts and a little, light blue top. He grinned and ran his hand under the thin strap. She knew how much he liked her in this. Mostly, how much he liked peeling it off her.

"Ready to go?" she asked.

"Let's go," he smiled.

They walked down to the private beach and began walking down to the water. Frank glanced around and noticed the subtle security measures. Hidden video cameras, alarm sensors and beefy lifeguards that were older than college student types you'd normally find. He looked back at his wife and was finally able to relax. They walked for awhile in a comfortable silence, holding hands and listening to the ocean.

"I can't believe you did all this," she said.

"Why?"

"It must have been such a hassle to rearrange your client meetings."

He pulled her to him. "You listen to me, diva. Being with you is never a hassle. You and our family are my number one priority. Everyone and everything else is second. Got

it?"

She gave him a soft kiss. "Got it."

After a quick lunch on the patio Frank and Marina walked to the spa center off the main lobby. They changed clothes in a small dressing room and wrapped towels around themselves. He'd never done something like this but she'd asked him a few times. This weekend was all about her so he could suck it up long enough for one awkward massage.

"You know Frank, you're supposed to leave your boxers here."

"Yeah, not gonna happen, sweetheart."

Marina smiled and led the way to a large room decorated in the soft cream and white of the resort. Standing next to the massage tables were two white clad women preparing two massage tables.

"Mr. and Mrs. Nash, welcome," said the taller of the two women. "I'm Maria and this is Kim."

"Hello. This is my husband's first time with something like this."

"Don't worry, Mr. Nash. I'll take good care of you," said Kim as she turned down the lights. "We have several different types massage oil."

"Oil?" asked Frank.

"Relax, they're not going to grease you up like a body builder." Marina looked him and smiled. "Although..."

"Again, not gonna happen."

"Here's one Mr. Nash. It's light, theraputic with almost no scent."

"Yeah, that'll work."

Frank thought this petite asian girl looked like a strong wind could blow her away. He wondered what this little slip of a thing could do. It didn't take long for him to find out. He laid down on the table and her grip on his shoulders was like iron. He had to admit this was pretty good. The quiet music in the background, and whatever that scent was, it was all working to relax him. He'd have dozed off if it hadn't been for his masseuse's iron grip.

"How you doing over there, Josiah?"

"I'm good, babe. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm real good."

He couldn't believe it had an hour when the women turned up the lights. He sat up and rotated his shoulders. He had to admit he didn't have a single knot.

"Thank you, ladies. That was very nice," he said. He followed Marina into the private dressing room and smiled as Marina dropped her towel. She was still the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He might have carried out what he was thinking if he hadn't been in such a hurry to not be nearly naked in a place where someone could walk in. They walked out to the spa reception desk and Frank signed the bill. Marina picked up a menu you of spa services.

"I take it you enjoyed it considering the size of the tip you added," said Marina.

"Yeah, it was good."

"Am I allowed an 'I told you so'?"

"A little one."

"I told you so," she smiled and gave him a quick kiss.

"What would you like to do next?"

"Well, you did say it was all about me this weekend."

"I meant it. What would you like?"

"They have a hair salon and they give manicures and pedicures. It's been forever since I've had my hair done for anything other than a movie."

Frank pasted on a fake smile. "Sure. Let's go see if they're available."

"I have a better idea. I'll go do that and you could go there." She pointed across the lobby to a bar with a big screen TV. "Isn't that the Phillies?"

He looked at the screen and sure enough there were red pinstripes of the Philadelphia Phillies. They'd been his favorite team since he was a kid. No matter where he'd been assigned they were a little piece of home.

"Why don't you go in there. Grab a beer. Watch the game."

"Are you sure?"

She held up the spa menu. "Sweetheart, this will take hours. You go relax and have fun and I'll be doing the same. I'll meet you back in the room in time for dinner."

He gave her a genuine smile. "You're the best, babe."

"Yes. Yes I am." She gave him a kiss and walked back to the spa.

This was turning out to be a great weekend. Marina looked relaxed and happy and the Phillies kicked the Yankees collective ass. He text her that their dinner reservations were for seven. She text back she was nearly ready and she'd meet him in the room. He took a quick shower and put on a white dress shirt with a comfortable pair of navy slacks. He'd checked out the restaurant beforehand. Dress code didn't require a tie. He heard the suite door open.

"Hey goon, you in here?"

"Yeah, I'll be right out." He ran a brush through his hair. "Did you have a good time?"

"Great! I haven't been pampered like that in years."

He smiled. This is just what he wanted. He opened the bathroom and stopped dead. Marina was dropping shopping bags from the spa and the lobby dress shop on the bed and chatting away.

"You're going to see a couple of entries on the bill. Makeup, the dress, and oh, aren't these shoes adorable." She stopped talking and looked over at him. "Frank, are you okay?"

He never forgot he was married to a beautiful woman but right now she was stunning. Her long chesnut hair was full and curved softly just below her shoulders. Her makeup was subtle, highlighting her blue eyes. The dress, dear God the dress. It skimmed her body and reached just above her knee. It plunged low in the back and was held up by two mere suggestions of straps. The color nearly matched her tanned skintone. If it hadn't been for the delicate print, she'd look naked.

"Frank? Don't you like the dress? They had this shopper at the dress shop and ..."

He walked closer and pointed at her lips. "Did you buy that lip gloss?"

"Yes, why?"

"Good because I'm about to mess the hell out of it." He pulled her face to him in a devouring kiss. When he finally released her he looked her up and down, smiling. "My God, woman. You are beautiful."

"Thank you," she smiled. "So I take it you don't mind that I signed for all this?"

"Hell no, I don't mind." He ran his hand down her side but felt nothing but the dress.
"Ah, sweetheart, what are you wearing under this?"

She gave him a wicked smile. "As little as possible."

"Ah damn," he groaned.

"Shouldn't we get going? Our reservations are soon."

"Yeah, well we're going to have to wait a few minutes."

"Why?"

He glanced down and she could see his comfortable slacks were now a good deal tighter.

The Hideaway restaurant was as elegant and subdued as the rest of the resort. The music piping through the speakers was a quiet mix of classic love songs and instrumentals. Their table on the deck gave them a beautiful view of the ocean and Frank, an excellent vantage point for security.

Their dinner had been excellent. Now they were sipping their drinks while Marina was waiting for her dessert. Once the server mentioned chocolate mousse her eyes lit up. He reached across the table for her hand.

"Are you having a good time?"

"I'm having a wonderful time. Although I am feeling a little guilty for not missing the kids as much as I should."

"Sweetheart, our children are currently being spoiled rotten by our parents. They're fine."

"I know they are but I'm still feeling a little guilty."

"Why?"

"Because I'm really enjoying it just being the two of us."

He smiled and threaded his fingers through hers. "Marina remember when the kids came? We promised ourselves we wouldn't lose each other in the chaos of being parents. Having two parents who love each other and are happy being together only benefits our kids."

She gave him a wry smile. "So we're actually doing this for them."

"Exactly."

Marina smiled and sat back as the server brought her dessert.

"Here you are," said the server. "I brought you a second spoon in case you want to share."

"Thank you...?"

"Kathy." Marina took a bite and rolled her eyes. "Oh my God, this is heaven." She took a big scoop and held it out to Frank.

"I shouldn't," he said patting his stomach. She pushed the spoon toward him and he took a bite. His eyes got wide. "You were right, Kathy this is excellent."

"Should I bring you one?"

"No I..."

"Yes, you should. I'm selfish with chocolate. He's not getting anymore of mine." The young girl laughed and then looked around to see if anyone was watching. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes, we're just not supposed to engage with the customers any more than taking their orders. We aren't supposed to bother you."

"You're not bothering us," said Frank. "And your entree suggestions were excellent."

"Thank you," she smiled. "If there's anything I can do for you, please let me know." She leaned closer and whispered. "I'm a really big fan."

"Thank you, Kathy. You're very sweet." Kathy returned quickly with a second mousse for Frank and they both enjoyed the indulgence.

"That really was good but I'm going to have to run a marathon to burn off the calories."

Marina smiled. "Don't worry. You will."

He smiled and reached for her hand. "Come dance with me."

"What? Where? There's no dance floor."

He tapped his foot on the deck. "Sure there is." He stood and pulled her into his arms. He recognized the old tune playing and he began to sing softly,

*"It had to be you, It had to be you,
I wandered around and finally found the somebody who*

*Could make me be true, and could make me be blue
And even be glad, just to be sad thinking of you."*

Marina pulled back and looked astonished. "Josiah, since when do you sing old love songs so well?"

He gave her a quick grin. "I do a lot of things well, sweetheart."

"Yeah, you do," she smiled.

He pulled her back in his arms and continued.

*"For nobody else, gave me a thrill
With all your faults, I love you still
It had to be you, wonderful you, it had to be you."*

The music ended and she gave him a soft kiss. "You are a constant surprise, Josiah. I love you."

"I love you too." He brushed a curl from her cheek and smiled. He didn't know what he'd done to deserve the love of this woman. He was about to kiss her again when he caught some movement out of the corner of his eyes. He saw a man with a cell phone trying to take a picture of them. He was about to move Marina behind him when he saw Kathy catch his glance and nod. She elbowed into the man, spilling the tray she was carrying along with several drinks on the man's ugly Hawaiian shirt. In the commotion the man's phone hit the ground and shattered.

"Oh sir, I'm so sorry. Let me clean that up."

The man yelled loud enough for the entire restaurant "Get away from me you stupid bitch!"

"Frank, what's going on?"

"Stay here." He left Marina on the porch and went to Kathy's side. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine Mr. Nash. I had a little accident."

"Accident my ass! I'll have your job for this."

"I doubt you could handle her job." Frank spotted the manager coming toward them. He put his hand on the man's shoulder and applied enough pressure to get his attention.

He got close to the man and spoke softly. "Here's what's going to happen. You're going to tell the manager that the accident was your fault and apologize to Kathy."

"The bitch broke my phone!"

He applied a bit more pressure.

"Ow! That hurts."

"Wrong answer. You are going to do this or I'll have you arrested under the paparazzi laws for getting too close to my wife. You could spend thirty days in jail or you could apologize to Kathy."

"What happened here?" the manager asked.

"Just a little accident," said Frank.

"I bumped into her. Sorry," said the man through a strained voice.

"Oh." The manager looked back and forth between Frank and the man. "Kathy, clean this up."

"Yes sir."

"I think our friend here was just about to leave." He glared at the man.

"Yeah. We were just leaving." The man walked to his table and threw some cash down. His wife looked mortified as they left the restaurant.

"Sorry about the commotion Mr. Nash."

"No problem, Cosgrove isn't it?" Frank put a hand on his shoulder and led him away from Kathy.

"Yes sir. I hope this won't affect your opinion of The Hideaway. We take our guests comfort very seriously."

"I know and I wanted to mention Kathy to you. Her suggestions for entrees were terrific. My wife was very pleased and believe me, there is nothing that makes my wife happier than good food."

All the tension drained from the man's face. "Oh I'm so happy to hear that. Kathy's such a good kid. She works here and another job while she goes to college. I was hesitant at first to hire someone who had so many commitments but she's never missed a shift."

"What's she studying?"

"Nursing." The man's face suddenly blanched. "Oh my God."

Frank smiled when he saw what Cosgrove was seeing. Marina Sokolov, one of the

most famous women in the world, was helping his server clean up.

"This can't be happening," he whispered.

"Relax, Cosgrove. My wife and I have three children under seven. All we do is clean up." He walked toward Marina and smiled. She really was remarkable. "You all set?"

"Yes." She turned to the girl and smiled. "It's been lovely meeting you, Kathy. We're here for the weekend so I hope we'll see you again."

"I'd like that," she smiled.

"Yes, of course," said Cosgrove. "I'll make sure Kathy is available for you."

Frank put his arm around Marina. "Mr. Cosgrove please put thirty percent on our bill for Kathy."

"Of course, Mr. Nash."

They walked toward the elevator and pushed the button to their floor. "You know you nearly gave Cosgrove a heart attack when he saw you helping Kathy."

"I felt bad for her. I wouldn't have thought someone as professional as Kathy would have bumped into him like that. I must have made her nervous."

"It wasn't an accident."

"What?"

He slipped his arms around her waist. "The jerk was trying to take a picture of us while we were dancing. She bumped into him to ruin his shot. I don't think she expected him to drop his phone and break it."

She gave him a soft kiss. "That's why the big tip?"

"Cosgrove said she's a good kid. Works two jobs while going to college for nursing."

"Why do I think there is going to be a full scholarship in that girl's future?"

He slipped his key card in the lock and opened the door. "What's the point of having money if you don't have fun with it?"

Marina walked into the room and set down her purse and kicked off her new shoes. "I really enjoyed..."

He cut off her speech with a deep kiss. He pulled back and whispered, "Talk later, naked now." He'd been restraining himself all night but not any more. He ran his hands over the soft material. "Take this off," he said more plea than demand. She smiled as she stood back and lifted the hem of her dress. His heart began to race as she slowly pulled

the dress up and over her head. All that was left was the smallest of thongs. "That was all you had on?" Her wicked grin undid him. He picked her up and carried her into the bedroom.

"What are you doing?" she squealed.

"What I've wanted to do all night. Damn, woman you make me insane." He tossed her on the bed and began to shed his clothes and tossed them aside without a second thought. He climbed on the bed and yanked her excuse for underwear off and tossed it with his clothes. He covered her body with his and let everything that was Marina overwhelm his senses. He stopped kissing her only long enough for them to catch their breath. He nipped at her ear, her neck. "You smell so good."

"Massage oil."

"Buy more, a lot more," he whispered as he started a teasing tour of his wife's body. Her moans drove him further, losing himself in her. He traveled down her long legs, tormenting her with his lips and tongue. He sat back and watched her for a moment. Her eyes were glazed with desire for him, her body more than ready for him. His woman was every fantasy he'd ever had come true. He kissed her and whispered, "I can't wait any more. I need you now."

"I'm yours, Josiah. Take what you need."

That was all it took for him to lose all control. He took her hard and fast and she matched him with a desperate passion of her own. His body tensed as they both found what they needed in each other.

Like they always had. Like they always would.

Marina stirred, hearing the sound of the ocean. It took a moment before she remembered they weren't in Carmel. There were no children ready to bounce on their bed. Their children were being well taken care of by their nanny and their grandparents. They had the whole day to themselves.

She curled up next to Frank and rested her head on his back. Their anniversary was coming up in a couple of weeks. She couldn't believe how much her life had changed in the last seven years. Back then she'd been living a singular existence, doing what she wanted, when she wanted. Now she had a husband and three children. Her life was frantic

and she rarely had time for herself. She'd never been happier.

She looked at the beautiful eagle tattooed across her husband's back. The image made her feel safe, enveloped by its magnificent wings, protecting her and those she loved. She placed a soft kiss on his back.

"Mmmm. Good morning," he whispered.

"Good morning."

He rolled over and took her in his arms, giving her a quick kiss. "What would you like to do today?"

"You know what I'd really like? I'd like to stay here and order room service."

"Enjoy the view," he said, kissing her neck.

"Enjoy the view," she whispered.

"And maybe make use of the big shower?" he said nipping at her ear.

"You read my mind," she grinned.

He smiled and winked. "Hold that thought." He jumped out of bed and went into the bathroom. She admired the view of her husband's truly spectacular ass. He ran every morning and worked out in their home gym. She definitely reaped the benefits, especially last night. She smiled at the dull ache of her muscles. He came back to bed a few minutes later smelling of soap.

"Now, where were we?" he asked.

"Hold that thought," she laughed and took her turn in the bathroom. As she brushed her teeth she looked over at the huge shower. Multiple heads, a variety of soaps and lotions. Oh yeah, they were going to enjoy that.

Marina climbed back into bed and Frank immediately rolled on top of her and pinned her to the mattress. "Now...where were we?" he smiled and began tasting her neck.

She giggled as he nibbled on her ear. "You're very randy this morning."

He stopped and smiled. "Why wouldn't I be? I'm in bed with the sexiest woman in the world." He tilted his head and laughed. "And three small children aren't about to pounce."

She laughed too. "I thought the same thing."

He grew quiet and stroked her hair. "I love our kids but I do love having some time

for just the two of us. This weekend was supposed to be just about you, but I have to admit, I really wanted this."

"Well I'm definitely enjoying myself." She brushed his unshaven cheek. "You certainly went above and beyond last night."

"You were very inspiring."

"Oh yeah?"

"Hell yeah. That dress, you looked naked," he whispered. "Come to think of it you practically were. Since when do you go out in public wearing next to nothing?"

"Since I was trying to seduce my husband."

"You don't have to try. I'm yours, babe. Anytime you want me."

She laughed and gave him a kiss. "Good to know. Let's just say I was putting in a little extra effort."

"Well it was most appreciated."

"I could tell," she said with a grin. "You know, I've figured something out. I can't stop getting older. Gravity is going to take its toll. But the way you look at me, like you did last night, like you can't wait to be with me. Josiah, I've never felt more beautiful and sexy than since I met you. Not when I was on magazine covers or on a big screen. So long as you keep looking at me the way you do, I'll always feel beautiful."

"You always will be my beautiful, beautiful girl," he whispered in Russian before he proved once again how he was hers.

Anytime.

Marina sat on the balcony wrapped in a plush hotel robe. She ran her fingers through her wet hair and smiled. She'd been right about that shower.

"Breakfast is served," said Frank as he handed her a champagne flute with orange juice.

"Mimosas? You're spoiling me."

"A husband's prerogative." He pulled a room service cart to the balcony and set the table with covered serving dishes. He removed the covers and she gave a deep sigh.

"Oh baby, you know what a girl likes." She was staring at a big plate of huevos

rancheros and a large side of hash browns. "Did you remember the..."

Frank pulled a napkin off a basket to reveal buttermilk biscuits. "How long have I been married to you?"

"You're the best, babe." She put down her glass and picked up a fork. She glanced over at what Frank had ordered for himself. Some scrambled eggs, a small order of bacon and fruit. "I don't know how you can only eat that."

"Sweetheart, you may have the body of a goddess but you have the appetite of a lumberjack."

She shrugged, smiled and took a big bite of the fresh biscuit.

Frank smiled as Marina demolished her breakfast. He grabbed the pitcher of orange juice and refilled their glasses by half. He then topped them off with more champagne. He picked up the glasses and set them next to the chaise. He sat down and smiled. "Care to join me?"

"I'd love to." She tried to sit down next to him but he pulled her into his lap. He held her around the waist with one hand and gave her the drink with the other. "I could get used to this."

"We aim to please, ma'am," he said letting his Carolina accent come out.

"Nothing like a charm of a Southern gentleman." She set her drink down and slipped her arms around his neck. She said nothing, studying his face.

"What? Do I have food in my teeth?"

"You have the bluest eyes since Paul Neuman." She smiled at his blush. "And your chiseled jaw, very sexy," she smiled.

"Thank you, sweetheart," he managed to say as his blush flamed hotter. He never had learn to accept a physical compliment. He'd merely learned to endure them.

"Do you know what I think of when I see women checking you out?"

"The name of a good eye doctor?"

Marina smiled and gave his shoulder a playful push. "I think 'Go ahead and look. But he is my man. All mine.'" She ran her hand through his graying temples. She loved it when he let his hair get a little long and he didn't tame it straight. "You're so damn sexy. I thought it that first day in Jake and Mike's kitchen and I still think so." She gave him a soft kiss.

"Your opinion about that is the only one that matters to me."

She stood and reached for his hand. "Come with me." She led him back to the bedroom. "Lose the robe." He smiled and dropped it to the floor.

"And the boxers."

"What do you have in mind?"

"On the bed, face down."

"Okay, you have my attention." He laid down on the bed and watched as Marina ran hot water in the bathroom sink. She dug through a shopping bag, pulled out a bottle and dropped it in the water. "What is that?"

"Massage oil."

"I don't want to smell like my garden."

"Don't worry." She pulled the bottle from the water and dried it off. Opening the bottle she inhaled and smiled. "It's spice based. Very male." When she held it toward him he could smell a slight scent. "So you're going to give me a massage? Nice. Maybe if the movie star thing doesn't work out they'll offer you a job."

"Oh this service will be a little different from what they offer in the spa." She smiled and dropped the robe. This time, not even a thong. She climbed up on the bed and straddled his hips. She leaned over and whispered, "If little Miss Kim tried this with you I'd kick her skinny ass."

Frank closed his eyes gave him over to the sensation of Marina working the muscles in his shoulders. He felt the warmed oil heat his skin as she worked her way down his back. The thought occurred to him that half the men on the planet would kill to be him right now. It was also the last coherent thought he had as she began to work his ass and his legs not just with her hands. When she finally rolled him on his back he was going on pure instinct, but apparently so was she. She rubbed oil on his chest and worked her way down. He want to scream in relief when she finally took mercy on him. She stared in his eyes as she took him in, controlling the movements until neither could hold back. When she finally collapsed on top of him all he could do was wrap his arms around her and hold on. It would be some time before he could form a thought, let alone speak.

Marina's growling stomach caused her to stir. She glanced out the window and

saw the low sun. She rolled over and kissed Frank's shoulder. When he didn't stir she nipped at his neck.

"I'm sleeping, woman."

"You need to feed me."

"You just ate."

"That was six hours ago. It's four in the afternoon."

"What?" He rolled over and grabbed his watch off the nightstand. "Holy crap!"

"I think reality finally caught up with us," she said as she got out of bed. She stood and had to brace herself on the edge of the bed. "And I think we need to get out of this room before neither one of us can walk."

"You know what else? We promised to facetime with the kids."

Marina smiled. "We should put on some clothes first."

"Good plan."

A few minutes later they were dressed and sitting in front of Frank's phone. "When are you coming home?" asked Anna.

"We'll be home tomorrow night," said Marina.

"Hey Papa, you should see the neat castle I built," said Jake.

Frank had come through on his promise for a sandbox for Jake. They'd had a great time picking it out and setting it up. It was their first father son project. "That's great, Jake. Maybe Sara will take a picture and send it to us."

Jake squealed. "Yay! Sara, let's go. Take a picture. Papa wants to see it." He grabbed Sara's hand and pulled.

"No. Sara was going to help me with my project," said Jonas.

"What project?" asked Marina.

"I decided to read the new 'Splat the Cat' book for storytime in school."

"Why do you need Sara to help you?"

"I'm going to translate it into Russian." He reached for Sara's free hand. "Come on, Sara. You promised."

"What is going on?" Frank bellowed in his best Papa voice. It worked. Jake and Jonas dropped Sara's hand. Anna, who looked like she was ready for a nap, sat up

straight.

"Well...your parents just left Mr. Nash."

"What happened?" asked Frank.

"To be fair it really wasn't the children's fault. Mr. Nash Sr. made pralines."

"Oh Lord, he sugared them up. I've warned him about that."

Marina smiled, "Anna's starting to wind down. Sara, I don't envy you the next hour or two."

"Don't worry. We'll be fine."

"I'm sure you will," said Marina.

"You be good for Sara," Frank cautioned.

"Yes, Papa," said all three.

"We love you and we'll see you tomorrow night," said Marina as she disconnected the call. "Am I a terrible mother because I'm really glad I'm not home right now?"

Frank smiled. "Well if you're terrible so am I."

Frank and Marina went downstairs to the lobby and he started heading toward the restaurant.

"You get us a table and I'll be right there. I want to pick up some things at the gift store for the kids."

"Feeling guilty?"

"Just a little," she smiled.

"Don't forget Sara. She's the one dealing with their sugar rushes." Marina smiled and headed off to the shop side of the hotel. Frank headed into the restaurant and nodded when Cosgrove spotted him.

"Hello, Mr. Nash. Is your wife joining you?"

"Yes, she just stopped at the shops first."

He led Frank to an empty table with a great view on the terrace. "Kathy will be right with you."

Frank looked around and saw that Saturday night meant the restaurant was crowded even though it was barely five p.m. He realized Cosgrove had held the table for

him despite the fact they hadn't made a reservation and had no idea whether they'd even be eating here tonight. He saw Kathy headed toward him with a big smile. Cosgrove must have

had her waiting in case they showed up. That was great for them but terrible for servers. Wait staff, even ones in a four star restaurant like this, depended on tips. If she'd been sitting around just waiting for them she wasn't making any money.

"Hello Mr. Nash. What can I start you off with tonight?"

"Hello Kathy. Good to see you again." He smiled and lowered his voice. "Tell me the truth. Did Cosgrove have you sitting in the kitchen waiting for us?"

She gave him a genuine smile. "I don't mind at all, Mr. Nash. Will your wife be joining you?"

"Yes, she's hit the shops to get something for our kids. She should be here soon. In the mean time, I think I'll have a beer. Something on tap. Surprise me."

She made a note on her pad. "Will do. For Mrs. Nash?"

"Red wine. Again, you choose."

"I'll be right back." She turned when an older man called out for Kathy's attention. He was tall, distinguished and vaguely familiar.

"Oh, Miss, we've been here longer and we'd like our drinks."

"Yes sir, I'll let your server know."

The man sighed in disgust and then took a second look at Frank. "Nash, is that you?"

"Oh crap," he thought. "Why him?" General John Lane. He'd served under him briefly at the Pentagon. He stood and walked toward the table. The man may have been a pompous ass but he was still a superior officer, even if they were both retired.

"General Lane, it's been a long time." Lane stood to shake his hand. He was still trim and looked fit despite the fact he was in his late seventies.

"Yes, it has. Helen, this is Captain Frank Nash. He was my assistant for a time at the Pentagon."

Frank shook the older woman's hand. Perfectly groomed white hair was stucked into a neat bun. Her minimal jewelry and simple dinner dress made her look the perfect D.C. doynne. "A pleasure, Captain."

"Ah, it's Colonel, Ma'am. Retired."

"Really? Well, congratulations," Lane said with no small tone of surprise.

"Are you here with someone, Colonel?" she asked.

"Yes, my wife. She stopped to get some gifts for our children."

"Oh, the gift shop has some lovely jewelry. I picked up some beautiful earrings."

"Beautifully expensive," he growled.

"I'm afraid our daughter's too young for jewelry. She's only six."

"How old?" gasped Lane.

Frank smiled. "We have six year old twins and a five year old." Before Lane could comment he heard the murmurs that always followed Marina into a crowded room. Helen Lane spotted her too.

"John, isn't that that actress? You dragged me to that science fiction thing."

"Marina Sokolov. It can't be," whispered Lane as his eyes glazed over.

Frank fought the urge to smile. This was gonna be good. Marina, looked fantastic. She was wearing a sundress that skimmed her tanned body. Her makeup and jewelry were subtle but she looked every inch a movie star, every gorgeous inch.

"Why is she coming over here?" whispered Helen. The General seem to have frozen solid.

Frank looked at him and tried hard not to grin. "That's my wife."

"Excuse me?" he gasped.

Marina stood next to Frank. He looked at the two large shopping bags and smiled. "It looks like you cleaned the place out."

"I did get a little carried away."

"Marina, this is General John Lane and his wife Helen. He was my commander when I was at the Pentagon."

She extended her hand. "It's nice to meet you." Lane looked like he might faint.

"It's a pleasure," he managed a smile.

Marina reached for Helen's hand. The woman looked like she'd been asked to touch something unpleasant. "Hello."

"How long have you been married to Nash?" asked Lane.

She looked up at and smiled at him like he was a giant chocolate cake. "Seven

years next month. Best seven years of my life."

Frank was surprised at her response. It wasn't that he was surprised that she felt that way. He was surprised at the way she said it in front of a stranger. "I see Kathy's brought our drinks. It was good to see you again, sir." He nodded to the Lane's wife. "Ma'am." He took Marina's packages from her and led her to their table. He switched to Russian so no one could overhear their conversation. "What was that?"

"What?"

"What you said in front of Lane and his wife. Why do I think you were making a point?"

"Because I was. I saw how he was looking at you. I don't like it when people think you couldn't be my husband." She reached for his hand and smiled. "I have excellent taste in husbands."

He smiled. "Agreed. I did think it was a little over the top."

"Oh, that was for her benefit."

"His wife? Why?"

"I've seen the look for the last twenty years. The smiling husband and the pinched face wife. He hasn't paid attention to her for at least a decade but I get his attention. She hates me for it."

Frank smiled and squeezed her hand. He didn't have an answer for her. He couldn't imagine what kind of encounters she'd had to endure over the years. "He always was a pompous ass. Apparently nothing has changed."

"I saw that a mile off." She gave him a sly smile. "You enjoyed flaunting me in front of him."

"No I didn't..." He paused. He should know better than to get something past her. "Yeah, I did. Sorry."

"Don't be. I'm glad you're proud of me."

"I am. Very proud." He took a sip of his beer and found Kathy had made an excellent choice. "Try your wine. I had Kathy pick."

She took a sip and her eyes widened. "Oh that's excellent."

"What all did you get at the shops?"

"They had some beach toys, things for digging in the sand I got for Jake. I got a

book on seashells for Jonas. I got a cute bracelet for Sara."

"What did you get for Anna?"

"I not sure she's going to like it but I couldn't resist it." Marina pull a long box from one of the bags. She opened the box and moved the tissue aside. She pulled out a doll with long brown hair and blue eyes. The doll was dressed in jeans, a bright colored t shirt and a denim jacket. She was even wearing sunglasses. "It's the same company that made my doll." She looked at the doll and smiled. "I thought it looked like her. Do you think she'll like it?"

"It's from you. I think she'll love it."

Frank and Marina had another excellent meal thanks to Kathy's suggestions. "What do you want to do after dinner?" he asked. "We can't just stay in our room all weekend." He grinned. "Well we could but they do have a lot of things to do here."

"You know they have a great pool. I saw it from our balcony."

"It's pretty late."

"It will be light for at least another hour and the later it is, the fewer people who might be around." She leaned close and smiled. "It has a hot tub."

Frank smiled. "Swimming it is." He nodded toward Kathy who was waiting at the hostess station.

"Can I bring you anything else?"

"No thanks, we're finished." He accepted the leather folder, reviewed the bill and signed. "We're leaving before dinner tomorrow but I want to thank you for your great service."

"You were right about the salmon," said Marina. "It was fantastic."

The girl smiled broadly. "I'm so glad you were pleased."

Frank handed her the folder. "We were, very much."

Kathy opened the folder and gasped. "Mr. Nash, I think you made a mistake." She tried to give him back the folder and he shook his head. "No I didn't." He extended his hand to the young girl. "It's been very nice meeting you and good luck with your studies."

"Thank you," she whispered through teary eyes.

Marina shook her hand. "Good luck, Kathy."

"Thank you. Thank you very much."

Frank picked up Marina's packages and they walked to the elevator. He gave her credit for waiting until the elevator doors closed.

"So how big a tip did you leave?"

"Not that big."

"Franklin Nash, that girl was near weeping and ready to fall at your feet."

"A thousand," he whispered.

"I couldn't hear you. How much?"

"A thousand dollars. She's a good kid and Cosgrove made her stay available for us. She wasn't able to serve other guests so that meant she wasn't making any tips."

Marina smiled and placed a kiss on his cheek. "You're a good man, Frank Nash."

"Thank you," he said quietly.

"You're still giving her the scholarship." It was a statement, not a question.

He allowed himself a small grin. "I've text Jerry to get her information."

Frank and Marina came down to the pool area and Marina had been correct. They were the only people there other than one lone resort employee. He was a large balding man, wearing sunglasses. He was obviously more security guard than life guard.

"Hello sir, ma'am," said the guard. He handed them some beach towels and Marina thanked him, moving off to a chaise to drop her things. "The pool is opens for another thirty minutes. You can stay longer, of course if you'd like some privacy," he smiled.

"Actually, if you could stay on duty for a bit longer, I'd appreciate that."

"Of course sir."

"It's more for security, than life guard." Frank saw the man mentally switch to security mode.

"Is there an issue?"

Frank smiled and nodded toward his wife. She dropped her sunglasses on the table and then removed her beach jacket. Marina was wearing a bright red bikini. The guard couldn't take his eyes off her and Frank couldn't blame him. Her body was perfectly tan and toned. Her full breasts were barely restrained by the tiny top.

"Holy shit," he whispered. "That's..."

"My wife," said Frank

"Oh, yes." said the man quickly. "I'm sorry sir."

"No problem. We won't be here that long, but if you would keep a discreet eye out, I'd appreciate it."

"Of course sir."

Frank joined Marina and pulled his t shirt over his head. "You know you just about gave the guard a heart attack in that suit."

"I wear it at home. Am I too old to pull it off? I should have brought my one piece."

"Sweetheart, stop. You are a stunningly beautiful woman and you look better than you did twenty years ago."

Marina smiled. "You didn't know me twenty years ago."

"I've seen all your movies. That college horror movie."

"Ugh, 'Terror Fraternity' You saw that?"

"You were very popular with my Marines on movie night."

"Oh Lord."

"Come on, diva." He smiled and dove into the pool. She smiled and dove in after him. He grabbed her around the waist and gave her a quick kiss.

"You've seen all my movies? Since when?"

"Most of the early ones I saw in the service." He tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "The rest I've seen over the last few years."

"Wow. That's a lot of B movies."

"You've really grown as an actress. You don't get all these offers because you're beautiful. You get them because you're talented."

Marina smiled and gave him a kiss. Then she slipped out of his arms and darted the length of the pool. They chased after each other until she finally let him catch her. "How about that hot tub?"

"Sounds great." They got into the hot tub and Frank hit the button for the jets. "Oh this is great," he said as he leaned up against jet. "Maybe we should get one."

"I'm afraid with the kids."

"Maybe when they're older." He pulled her into his lap. "In the meantime we'll have to do this more often."

"Oh, I do love the way you think, goon."

He leaned in and whispered, "And I love the way you look in a hot red bikini." He placed a kiss on her neck.

"What do you say we take this party upstairs?"

Frank grinned and took her by the hand.

Marina pulled off her beach jacket and tossed it on a chair. "So you like my suit?" she said as she walked toward him.

"Hell yes," he said as he pulled her close. "You look amazing."

She smiled and raised her arms behind her neck. "Well, it is all wet and I need a take it off. Care to help me?" She turned around and he unhooked the back of the top as she pushed the bottom to her feet. She headed toward the master bath.

Frank looked at his wife's beautiful ass as she walked away and marveled at what a lucky man he was. He followed her into the bath and tossed his wet trunks aside. Marina

stepped inside the shower and turned on the multiple sprays. She turned around and let water hit her from all directions.

"Mmmm, this is so nice. Maybe we should think about installing one."

"Maybe we should," he said as he picked up a large sponge. He put some liquid soap on the sponge and moved closer. He moved the sponge down her body, letting the soap run down her legs. He soaped her back and her ass. He moved to her breasts as Marina closed her eyes and sighed. He dropped the sponge and picked up a bottle of shampoo. He put a small amount in his hands and began to work it into her scalp. He rinsed her hair and repeated his actions with the conditioner. He smoothed her long hair in his hands.

"We definitely need to look into getting one of these," she purred. She opened her eyes and slid her arms around his neck. "Come here, Marine." She pulled him tight into a passionate kiss. "Your turn," she whispered. She picked up the sponge and began to scrub his back and legs. She walked around him to soap up his chest. She dropped the sponge and used only her hands. He enjoyed her attention as long as he could before he pulled her hands away. He pushed her against the smooth wall of the shower then lifted her up, wrapping her legs around his waist. She was more than ready when he entered her and it didn't take long before their moans echoed off the tile walls.

"You're right," he smiled. "We need one of these."

Frank sat on the bed and flipped through the streaming service for a movie. He'd thrown on a pair of shorts and one of his Harley t shirts. He glanced into the bathroom and watched Marina drying her hair. She was bent in half drying back of her hair, giving him a great view of her ass. She flipped her hair over and stood. She saw him watching her and turned around.

"Whatcha' lookin at, Marine?"

"I am looking at a sexy naked woman standing in my bathroom."

She walked over to the bed and gave him a quick kiss. He rubbed his hand over her warm skin. "I'm assuming from the shorts and the t shirt we're not going to the opera tonight."

"I was thinking why don't we order some ridiculously fattening dessert from room

service, stay in and watch a movie."

"An entire movie uninterrupted by squabbling children. Sounds like heaven." She went over to the dresser and pulled out a pair of shorts and a tiny t shirt.

"No underwear?"

"Will I need it?"

"Probably not," he grinned. He glanced at the room service menu. "This one has your name on it."

"Chocolate cheesecake. Yumm."

"We can get two forks."

She looked at him like he'd grown a second head. "Have you just met me?"

"What was I thinking?" he laughed. He picked up the room phone and ordered two pieces of cheesecake and another bottle of champagne.

Marina scrambled up onto the bed next to him. "Did you find something for us to watch?"

"As a matter of fact, I did." He hit the button for streaming service and Marina gasped.

"Oh God. Not..."

"Terror Fraternity."

Frank watched as Marina hid her eyes from her younger self. "Oh God I can't watch."

"I think you're adorable, although I do question the big hair."

"That was the director's idea."

He laughed as Marina's character blew off the big man on campus for the quiet kid with glasses.

She cringed again. "Ugh, I was awful."

"Think of it this way. This is a reminder of how far you've come."

Marina stilled and then smiled. "Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"For everything. For the best birthday ever. For three beautiful children and a wonderful life." She wrapped her hands around his arm. "For always lifting me up when

I'm down. For always having my back. For being the best man I've ever known."

"Ah, thank you sweetheart," he said through his blush.

She straddled his hips and gave him a deep kiss. "And for being a tiger in the sack," she smiled.

"You're just trying to distract me from the rest of your movie."

"Is it working?"

He flipped her over her back, pinning her to the bed. "Hell yes."

Chapter Six

Frank and Cabe took up seats at a table and waved at the waitress, Maddie. They didn't have to order, Maddie knew what they wanted. It was before their normal rush hour so the place was nearly empty. The Road Warrior was the half way stop for most of the rides. Their fellow Boozefighter, Sven met his wife, Jenny, there when she was a waitress. Now she was a stay at home mom to their two kids.

"How are the kids?" asked Cabe.

"Good. Jake starts first grade full time next week."

"Wow, that sure went fast. Wasn't he in diapers just yesterday?"

"I know what you mean. Anna and Jonas are moving up to the second grade but he's going to take an advanced math class in the afternoon. I'm a little nervous about it."

"Why. Don't you think he can handle it?"

"No. I think he'll crush it but I think he'll miss his sister more than he realizes. It will be the first time they will be doing school work independent of each other. They may fight like cats and dogs sometimes but they rely on each other."

"He's the brain, she's the brawn."

"Exactly."

"It might be good for them."

"That's what Marina said. And Jonas is testing off the charts in so many categories he's getting bored with regular classwork. She said we have to let him explore his abilities but I don't want him to, well..."

"Turn into Walter."

"No... Yeah. I want him to be able to have a normal life."

"His mother is a world famous movie star, his father is an Ex-Marine biker and he's fluent in Russian at the age of seven. I think the normal boat sailed a long time ago."

"I just don't want him to have a tough time."

"I know just how you feel. Walter had a hell of a time growing up and now his son is showing signs of being advanced. He'd gotten so good with Russian I started teaching him Italian just to stay even."

"I know you did. I've been meaning to mention it. Cabe's teaching Jake Italian now. I may need you to teach me too."

"Only if you teach me Russian."

"Deal," Frank smiled as the waitress brought them their orders. He took a bite of his mushroom cheeseburger and was reaching for a fry when he noticed Cabe was watching the bar. "What's going on?" he asked quietly.

"I'm not sure. Bad vibe."

Frank looked straight ahead at a mirrored beer sign and saw what Cabe did. Two scruffy guys were hassling Maddie. One wore a blue plaid workshirt over a dirty white t shirt and a nasty pair of baggy work pants. The other wore a greasy old concert t shirt over his ripped jeans. They were both pale and bloated, looking older than men in their thirties should. It was probably from years of drinking. The bartender wasn't on the floor so Maddie was on her own. She looked like she was handling it until blue plaid grabbed her arm. Cabe jumped to his feet and covered the distance to Maddie in a couple of seconds with Frank right behind.

"Let her go," said Cabe.

"Who's going to make me, old man?"

Frank looked at Cabe and smiled. "Why do they always say that?"

"Just stupid, I guess."

Cabe's taunt was enough to get the guy to let go of Maddie. He took a swing at Cabe which he countered. Concert guy took a swing at Frank and he fought back. He got the impression these guys were used to brawling. He finally put concert guy down with an uppercut. The guy hit the floor like a rock, out cold. He turned in time to see plaid shirt connect with Cabe's chin. As Cabe hit the floor plaid shirt reached behind his pack and pulled out a revolver.

"Gun," shouted Frank as he launched himself at the gunman just as the man fired. Pain tore through him and he fell, hitting his head on the hardwood floor. Just before he passed out his last thought was, "Marina is gonna be so pissed."

Marina looked outside her kitchen window and saw Jake playing in the backyard in his sandbox. He took a bucket of water with him to wet the sand and use the tools she'd bought him to dig and build. What she didn't love was all the sand he tracked through the house no matter how many times she told him to brush himself off.

Anna was playing on the jungle gym with her doll, Sophia. She'd named her after her school principal because she said Mrs. Hanson was tough and smart but everyone still liked her. She couldn't fault Anna's choice. She'd been worried if Anna would like the doll. She'd bought it for her because she'd had one as a kid and loved it. She'd liked the doll but one day Marina surprised her. She dug out the Harley jacket that Cabe had given her when she was a baby and put it on Sophia. From then on she and the doll were inseparable. She even asked her Papa for, and got, a special basket for her bike because Sophia likes to be upfront. Frank took a plain bike basket, spray painted it black and fixed a large Harley decal to the front. He also made a small harness to hold her so Sophia would always stay safe.

The only one missing from the backyard was Jonas. She walked up to his room and opened the door. He was sitting on his bed with a book open in his lap. "Jonas, it's a beautiful day. I want you to go outside and play."

"I'm reading."

"You're always reading. Put the book down and go engage with humanity."

"They're not humanity. They're Anna and Jake."

"Sibling humanity. Now go."

"Mama, I'm just at the good part," he whined.

"I will not be raising the world's smallest vampire. Put the book down and go."

"Fine." He set his book down and walked downstairs. "What am I supposed to do out there?"

She looked at her son and smiled. He was great with books and technology but he had difficulty engaging with people. "Jake is building in his sandbox. Maybe you could help him." She gave him a kiss on his cheek and a small push out toward the patio.

A buzz from the security panel took her attention away from the children. She pushed a button on the security panel and the monitor screen lit up. She was surprised to

see Kate and Jonathan Gallo on her doorstep. She opened the door to them and gave each a big hug.

"This is a surprise. The guys aren't back yet from their ride." The look on their faces made her heart pound. "What's wrong?"

Kate put her hand on Marina's arm and looked around. "Where are the children?"

"Outside."

"I don't want you to panic. Frank's going to be okay, but he's been hurt. I'm here to take you to Mercy."

"Did he crash his bike?"

Kate shook her head. "There was an incident at The Road Warrior when they stopped for lunch. A waitress was being assaulted and they intervened. Cabe was down on the ground when a guy pulled a gun. Frank stopped him but he was hurt."

"Hurt?"

"He was shot."

Marina forced herself to stand up straight despite wanting to fall down. "Oh God," she whispered. She looked out the window and saw her children playing.

"I spoke to Frank briefly. He didn't want you to hear this over the phone. He also said to say 'ya lyublyu tebya, diva'. Did I say that right?"

She managed a small smile. "You said it just fine."

"What does it mean?"

"I love you, diva," she said as she fought back tears.

"I'll stay with the kids," said Jonathan.

Marina nodded and took a breath. She squared her shoulders and walked out to the back yard. "Hey guys, look who's here."

"Aunt Kate! Uncle Jonathan!" The children ran up and gave each a hug. Jake grabbed Jonathan's hand and Jonas reached for Kate.

"Come see what we're building," said Jonas

"Yeah, it's a castle," said Jake.

"Kids, Aunt Kate and I have to go out for a bit, but Jonathan is going to stay with you."

"Cool," said Jonas. "Come on," he and Jake pulled Jonathan's hands toward the

large sand box.

"What am I going to do?" whined Anna.

"You have to join us. It's been a while since I've spent anytime with my favorite Russian princess," said Jonathan with his killer Gallo grin. It made the female heart flutter, even that of a seven year old girl. Anna ran to his side and they all gathered around the sand box. Jonathan look up and smiled. "We'll be fine."

"We'll see you later, sweetheart," said Kate.

"Love you, Mom," he said with a forced smile.

"I love you too, baby."

The kids laughed. "He's not a baby. He's a grown up."

Kate smiled. "He's my baby."

Marina looked straight ahead as they darted through traffic in Kate's government vehicle. She had turned on the lights and sirens as soon as they'd gone beyond Marina's street.

"Are you allowed to do this?" Marina asked.

"Do what? Give you a lift?"

"Do it with lights and sirens."

"I can when it concerns a Homeland agent."

Marina gasped. "Oh God, Kate. I never asked. Is Cabe okay?" She saw Kate's hesitation.

"He said he's been hurt worse by me in our hand to hand training."

"You don't believe him."

"No, I don't," she said quietly.

Marina placed her hand on Kate's shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Kate. I'm a terrible friend. I didn't think of you at all."

"It's okay, sweetie. Unfortunately, Cabe and I are used to this. You aren't."

"No, it's not alright. I really am so sorry," she said as she began to weep.

Kate grabbed her hand. "It's okay, Marina. It's going to be okay." As they rounded the corner to the hospital they saw a sea of paparazzi and a handful of security guards

trying to hold them back.

"Crap. Word's out," said Kate.

Marina stared at the scene as if she were stuck in the middle of one of her bad early movies. It all seemed unreal. Thank God for Kate not so much guiding her through this as yanking her hand and pulling.

Kate pulled up in front of the ER entrance and parked. Before the guard could protest she flashed her badge. She flashed it again at the front desk.

"Two patients were just brought in by ambulance. Gallo and Nash. Where are they?"

"If you'll just take a seat," said the receptionist.

"Where are they?" she repeated.

"Hey, aren't you Marina Sokolov?"

Kate pounded her fist on the counter. "Where?!" she yelled.

The woman was startled and turned to her keyboard. "They've been moved."

"Somebody better tell me where our husbands are or I will.."

A tall, thin man with a shock of white hair came through the ER doors. "Kate, come with me."

Kate grabbed Marina's hand and followed the man to an elevator that had been locked open. He inserted a key and the doors shut. "We've moved them to a secure section in anticipation of what's going on outside. I want to assure you Ms. Sokolov we are taking every precaution for your security and theirs. Dr. Hawkins is the best trauma surgeon in the city. She's been paged and is on her way."

"It's Nash. My name is Marina Nash," she whispered.

"Of course, Mrs. Nash. My apologies."

Marina looked at the man as if she finally realized he was there. "Who are you?"

"Henry Wilson, Chief of Staff."

"Of course, I'm sorry. We've met at fundraisers."

"No problem, Mrs. Nash. I'm highly forgettable."

Marina managed a small smile as he walked them to a large private room. He opened the door and there were two beds with both men. Cabe was barely recognizable. His right eye was swollen shut and there was a large gash on his head. Frank had a bruised cheek

and his left leg was bandaged. Both men had IVs and machines running.

She saw Kate steady herself before walking to Cabe's side. "I've never hurt you like this in training. I would never do anything to mess with your handsome face."

Marina tried to mimic Kate, squaring her shoulders and taking Frank hand. She switched to Russian and faked a smile. "What mess have you gotten yourself into, Josiah?"

"This guy and his buddy were assaulting Maddie, the waitress at The Road Warrior. We stepped in but they were surprisingly tough for a couple of drunks. The one guy pulled out a gun when Cabe was down. He was going to kill him, babe. I had to. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry. You had to do it. I knew this day might come."

"What do you mean?"

"Every day for the last seven years, when you strap on a gun for the job or you run security for me, I worry that there might be another Peter Kane out there waiting for you."

"Every day?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you ever say something?"

"Honestly, because I talked to Kate. I asked her how she dealt with the fear that Cabe might not come home. She's told me some things they've been through. It's been really tough for her but she said she learned to trust his training and his judgement. He doesn't take foolish risks. Neither do you."

"I'm so sorry."

"Kate said you would be okay but I kept thinking the whole way over what if you weren't okay? What would I say to our children? I kept running it over and over in my head like it was a monologue for a movie."

"What did you decide?"

"I would tell them you were doing something important, something necessary. You were protecting people, keeping them safe." She squeezed his hand and tried to smile. "And that I'm very proud of you." Frank could see she wasn't holding it together. She couldn't hide from him. She never could. "Please don't ever make me give that speech."

"Oh babe, I'm so sorry."

"Just kiss me, Josiah." He gave her a soft kiss. "No," she whispered. "Really kiss

me. Show me you're really okay." He cupped her cheek in his hand and pulled her close. They put every ounce of passion they had for each other into one kiss.

"Ah babe, if I show you anymore how okay I am," he paused and glanced at his lap. "I'll be showing the rest of the world too."

She glanced down and smiled. She started to laugh and couldn't stop until she dissolved in tears. Frank put his free arm around her and whispered in her ear.

"I'm going to be fine. I promise, angel"

She wept on his shoulder "You can never leave me, Josiah. Not ever. I don't know how I would could go through this world without you. I love you so much."

"I love you too."

The door opened and Marina stood and wiped her eyes. A woman with short brown hair and a quick smile entered the room. She looked over at Kate and Cabe. "Well, if it isn't the Agents Gallo. Here to keep my practice thriving." She looked over at Marina and Frank. Today it's a twofer."

"Hi Stacee," said Kate.

The doctor took a quick look at Cabe's chart. "Well at least I won't be operating on you today."

Kate looked over at Marina. "Stacee has saved both our lives. She's the best."

Stacee laughed, "Ah, you'll make a girl blush." She set Cabe's chart down. "You'll keep for a bit. Let me look at your cohort."

She picked up Frank's chart and looked at the ER doctor's preliminary findings. "Okay, let's take a look." She examined Frank's bruised cheek and listened to his heart. She pulled down his hospital gown and checked his ribs. "Nice ink," she smiled.

"Thanks."

"I'm going to get some xrays to make sure nothing's broken." She picked up his chart to notate the order when she glanced up at him and then back down at the chart. "Is this right? You're how old?"

"Sixty two."

"Damn, dude. Way to keep the engine running. You must work out with the Gallos." She looked at Marina and smiled. "Being in such excellent physical shape aids enormously in healing." She set the chart down and pulled back Frank's hospital gown

fully exposing his bandaged leg. She looked at Marina. "I'm going to examine the wound. You may want to step outside."

She was shaking and her head felt like it was going to explode but she managed a fake smile. "No, I'm fine. I'll stay."

"Sweetheart, are you sure? You don't look so good."

"Really, Frank. I'm fine." Stacee began unwrapping his leg until a small ragged hole was revealed. "Oh God," she whispered. She thought she heard Frank call her name as the room faded from view.

Marina heard her name being called and she opened her eyes. She was sitting in a reclining chair. "Mrs. Nash can you open your eyes for me?"

"What? What happened?"

"You fainted."

"No. I've never fainted."

"I've spent a lot of years training. Trust me, you fainted." A nurse came in with a blood pressure cuff and handed it to the doctor. "This is ridiculous. Frank and Cabe need your attention, not me."

Frank swore at her in Russian. "You keep your diva ass in that seat and let the doctor check you out." His tone softened. "Please, baby."

"Fine."

Stacee smiled. "Is he like that alot, with the Russian and all?"

Marina smiled at her husband and replied in Russian. Then she repeated herself in English. "He's a pain in the ass goon, but I love him anyway."

"I'm going to run a quick blood test on you."

"What?"

"Diva, do not make me get out of this bed."

"Fine."

Marina sat in the recliner sipping ginger ale as Kate sipped her coffee. "I'm so embarrassed."

"Don't be. You've never been through anything like this before."

"I really don't know what I do without you, Kate."

"I love you too, sweetie."

"How long do you think it will take for their tests."

"Not long. They'll do the X-rays to see if anything is broken."

"I appreciate taking care of us like this when I'm sure you're worried about Cabe."

"When your mate wears a gun you're always worried, but you know that."

Marina couldn't stop the tear from running down her cheek. The door opened and Cabe and Frank were brought back in the room. She could tell from the look on his face that he was in pain. "I'll call the nurse and see if they can get you something for the pain."

"I'm fine. How are you?"

"I'm fine and you're annoying. I'm going over there." She walked around Frank's bed and gave Cabe a gentle kiss. "How are you feeling?"

"I've felt better but I'll be fine. So will Frank, by the way."

"I know but he's going to be a giant pain in the ass while he recovers."

Kate laughed. "Oh the tougher they are the bigger the baby when they're laid up."

"Marines do not whine," said Cabe.

"Oh, please. You sound like your grandson when he can't have another cookie."

Dr Hawkins entered the room with a smile. "Well, I got everyone's results back and it's all good. Cabe, you have a couple of cracked ribs but no facial fractures. You're going to hurt like hell for a few weeks but you'll be fine. I'll write a script for pain. Go home, sit on the beach and chill."

"Thank you, Stacey," said Cabe.

"Okay, Mr. Nash."

"Frank, please."

"Okay, Frank. You lucked out. No breaks. The gunshot is a through and through, small caliber. You don't require surgery. I'll write you a script for pain. You'll need some followup and some PT, but you'll be fine in a few weeks."

Marina could feel every muscle in her body relax. "Thank God."

"What about Marina?" asked Frank.

"I'm fine. I'm not sick."

Stacey smiled. "No, you're not sick."

"I told you."

"You're pregnant."

Chapter Seven

"What?" asked Marina and Frank in unison.

"Are you sure?" asked Marina.

"I had them run it twice. From the hormones in your system I'd say about ten weeks."

"I'm forty five. I thought things were starting to slow down. I didn't give a missed period or two a real thought. Why did you?"

"I know you and your husband have three young children." She looked at Frank and smiled. "Considering your husband's excellent physical condition, it's not that far a leap. Obviously you need to contact your own doctor as soon as you can. Pregnancy at your age does make you high risk."

Marina looked at Frank who appeared as stunned as she was.

"Okay. I'll write the orders and get you some crutches. You should be out of here soon."

"Thanks Stacey," said Kate. She closed behind the doctor and then embraced her friend. "Congratulations, sweetie."

"Thanks," she whispered.

Kate kissed Frank's cheek and Cabe stood to shake his hand. "Congratulations, brother."

"Thanks," Frank said. He looked up at his buddy and smiled. "You look like crap."

"Thanks for having my back."

"Always."

Frank and Marina sat in the back seats of Kate's car. Cabe sat in the passenger seat. With that eye it would be a few days before he'd be able to drive. Frank's leg was screaming at him and Marina could tell.

"I wish you'd take one of the pain killers."

"Not before we see the kids."

"What are you going to tell them?" asked Cabe.

"Unfortunately not telling them is not an option," said Frank. "It won't be long before someone tells them I was shot. It has to come from us."

"It stinks that you don't have a choice," said Kate.

"We promised ourselves we'd always be honest with them but it's a matter of how much we tell them," said Marina. They pulled into the driveway and Kate parked.

"I'll stay here," said Cabe. "I don't want to scare the kids."

Marina leaned in through the window and kissed his cheek. "Get some rest."

"You too, little Mama."

Marina shook her head and smiled. "I will."

Frank managed to get into the house on his crutches. No small feat since he hadn't used them since he'd broken his leg in a high school football game.

"You sit down and I'll get the kids."

He grabbed her hand to stop her. "Are we going to tell the kids about the baby?"

"Not yet. Let's let them process this first."

Jonathan came out from the kitchen. "Hey Frank. How are you feeling?"

"I'm good, Jonathan. Thanks for staying with the kids."

"It's no problem. They were great. I was just giving them dinner."

"Your parents are waiting for you in the car."

"Okay let me go say good bye to the kids." Jonathan walked back into the kitchen and Frank steeled himself for his children's reaction. The kids spilled into the living room but stopped when they saw him.

"Papa, what happened to you?" asked Anna.

"I want all of you to sit down and Mama and I will tell you all about it."

Marina gave Jonathan a kiss good bye and locked the door behind him. He could see she was preparing herself for what they were about to do, as if she were going to play a difficult scene. He reached his hand for her, wanting her to sit next to him on the couch. Anna was sitting in a wingbacked chair with her legs pulled up to her chest. Normally he would have told his daughter to get her feet off the furniture but now was not the time. Jonas was sitting on the arm of his sister's chair. Jake had taken up a spot on the floor.

Frank took a deep breath and smiled at Marina. "You can see I've got a hurt leg. So I'm going to tell you what happened. First thing is I want you to know I'm going to be fine. Uncle Cabe and I were having lunch and a couple of men started hurting the waitress. We couldn't let that happen. We got into a fight trying to stop them. The one man knocked Uncle Cabe down and then he tried shoot him with a gun." He saw the fear on his children's faces and he wanted to find those assholes and beat on them some more for putting his children through this. "I pushed the man away from hurting Uncle Cabe, but he hurt me instead." He looked at Marina, not wanting to tell his children the whole truth. She nodded because they both knew they had no choice. "That's when he shot me in the leg." Anna gasped and her eyes filled with tears. Jonas and Jake both looked shaken. "I'm going to tell you and I want you to listen to me. I am okay. I'm hurt but I will get better."

"Are you sure?" asked Anna.

"I promise, princess."

Marina squeezed his hand and looked at their children. "You know how we've told you about the press and sometimes they might say things about us because I make movies. They will probably say things about Papa being hurt. You are to only pay attention to what we tell you. We will always tell you the truth."

"That's right," Frank added. "If you have any questions you come to us."

"Does it hurt, Papa?" asked Jake.

Frank looked at his son and wished he could lie to him. "It does hurt now, but the doctor gave me medicine."

"Which Papa has to take," said Marina. "I'm going to get Papa upstairs. You can watch TV for awhile but keep it down."

Frank hated that he had to lean on his wife to get up the stairs. His pregnant wife. They were just getting Jake off to full time school and now they'd be starting over with two a.m. feedings. It made him feel ancient. Marina helped him get changed and get into bed. She adjusted the bed to raise his feet.

"I'll get you some water and I want you to take the pain pills."

He grabbed her hand and made her sit next to him on the bed. "Stop. Just stop. Talk to me."

"I don't know what to say. I guess I need as much time to process this as the kids do."

"I'm going to be fine."

"Of course you are. You're in excellent shape according to Dr. Stacey." She stood quickly and got a glass of water from the bathroom and handed it to him with the prescription.

"What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? Nothing. My husband has a bullet hole in his leg and I'm forty five and pregnant. Everything is dandy. Now take your damn pills."

He swallowed the pills and set down the glass. "Marina, I'm pretty freaked out too but we have to keep it together for the kids."

"Why are you freaked out?"

"Why?! Because you know how old I'll be when this one graduates? Eighty!"

"And I'll be sixty three! I'm not exactly the youngest mother in the PTA now." She sat back down on the bed and started to cry. "I'm scared. It was risky enough with Jake. Now it's worse." She covered her stomach with her hand. "What if something happens to the baby." She looked at Frank with fear in her eyes. "Or to me? I have to be here for our children."

He suddenly felt like a complete heel. He'd thinking about how this was affecting him. Marina was the one at physical risk. He pulled her into a hug and tried not to flinch in pain. "Sweetheart, we have access to the best medical help in the world. We will do everything we can to keep you and the baby safe."

She let out a small laugh. "Apparently a weekend away wasn't the only thing you gave me for my birthday."

He smiled. "I can't believe we're doing this again."

"Well you're the one whose swimmers are freaking Marine Recon!"

They were both laughing when the door opened. "Papa?"

"Yes, princess?"

"We brought you something." Anna was carrying a sandwich on a small plate. Jonas was carrying a book and Jake had a juice box.

"What is all this?"

"Mama always brings us our dinner in bed when we're sick. We made you a cheese sandwich."

"I made the toast," said Jake.

"Did you now?" he smiled. "I am a little hungry." He took a bite of the sandwich and smiled. They'd done a great job. It was his favorite quick sandwich. American cheese, lettuce and tomato with mayo on white toast. It was a little heavy on the mayo but it was pretty good.

"Do you like it? I said we should make cheese. Jake said peanut butter but that's his favorite."

"Jonas, it's a perfect sandwich." He smiled at his son's look of pride as he took another bite.

Jake handed him an orange juice box. "Mama gives us these so we don't spill in bed."

"Thank you, Jake."

Jake smiled then leaned over and kissed Frank's bandaged leg. "Mama always kisses my hurts. It makes them better."

"Yes it does," he said through a choked voice. "I feel it working already."

"Papa, you said we could ask you questions," said Anna

"Yes, princess. What do you want to know?"

"Did they get the bad guys who hurt you?"

He looked up at Marina and she realized the same thing. They'd forgotten a very important piece of information. They hadn't realized their kids would need to know what happened to the bad guys. "Yes, the police came and arrested both of them and took them to jail."

Anna smiled. "That's good, Papa."

"Jonas, what do you have there?"

"It's a storybook. Mama always reads to us when we don't feel good."

"That sounds wonderful. Why don't you all climb in and Jonas can read to all of us."

"Frank, are you sure? Your leg?"

"Will be just fine." He patted the bed next to him. "Come on, you too."

Marina got in bed while Jonas sat between them. Anna crawled in next to Marina and Jake squeezed in on her lap. Jonas opened the book and began to read. It was a child's storybook but it was in Russian. He was delighted at his son's ability to speak and read the language.

He smiled at Marina and stroked Jonas hair while he read. He couldn't give words to how much he loved his children. God had given them three beautiful children. He knew now there was no reason to think number four would be any less miraculous.

"Hey sleephead, time to wake up," said Frank. He was sitting on their edge of the bed and stroked Marina's hair.

She stirred and rolled over. "What time is it?"

"Almost nine."

"What?" she said bolting upright.

"You've been out cold for twelve hours."

"Wow. Why did you let me sleep so late? Your parents will be here soon." They'd called everyone from the hospital yesterday but they wanted to see for themselves that he was okay. Especially his parents.

"Why did I let you sleep late?" He leaned down and placed a kiss on her belly and whispered, "Good morning, angel." He sat up and smiled. "That's why."

She rubbed her eyes and saw he was already washed and dress. "How did you manage to get washed and dressed without help? It had to have hurt like hell."

"I'm a Marine, sweetheart. We always accomplish our missions."

She rubbed her belly and smiled. "I am well aware of that fact." She took his hand in hers. "I had a dream about the baby last night."

"What about?"

"She's going to be to be a girly girl. She's going to like pretty things and she has blonde hair, like your mother."

"You sound awfully sure she's a she."

"Ten bucks says I'm right."

"I'll take that bet just to be contrary."

"I also know her name. It's Riley. Riley Jane."

"Riley for Kate?"

"Yes. I don't know where Jane came from but in the dream I was chastising her for playing in my makeup and I called her Riley Jane."

"I know who Jane is."

"You do?"

"She was my mother's mother. She died when my mother was very young."

"Huh. Why don't I know about her?"

"My mother never talked about her. Too painful I imagine."

"Wow." Marina pressed her hands to her eyes and rubbed. "Okay the past twenty four hours has been way too crazy for me to even begin to sort out how Jane showed up. Let me get dressed and then we need to tell the kids about the baby."

"Are you sure you want to tell them now?"

"Frank, your eighty four year old parents are about to visit their son whose been shot. No matter how many times we told them last night you're okay, they're sick with worry. They need some good news." She got out of bed and headed toward the bathroom.

"Okay, you're the boss."

She stopped and turned around. "Since when?" she laughed.

"Since always, diva."

"Goon!" She stuck her tongue out at him before she closed the bathroom door.

Frank smiled. My God, he loved his woman.

Frank limped into the kitchen. These crutches were getting old fast. Sara had come in on her day off to help out and was feeding the children breakfast. The girl was a godsend. She'd worked for them since the twins were a few months old.

"Mr. Nash, how are you feeling?"

"I'm hanging in there, Sara. Thanks again for coming in today. We really appreciate it."

"You're welcome. I'm glad to help."

Marina came into the kitchen looking refreshed. "Sara? It's your day off."

"She text me this morning to see how I was and volunteered to come in and help out."

"Sara, thank you." Marina gave her a hug. "We do need to talk to you about something." She looked over at her children who barely noticed their parents were in the room thanks to Sara's French toast. "Good morning," she said. She shook her head and repeated herself in Russian. "Good morning my children."

"Good morning, Mama," they said through full mouths.

Frank hobbled out to the living room and Marina and Sara followed. "Sara, first we wanted to tell you again how much we appreciate all you do for us."

"Thanks Mr. Nash."

"With Jake going to school full time you may be thinking we won't need you as often."

Sara paled. "Are you letting me go?"

"God no," said Marina. "What my husband is trying to find out is have you made other plans beside working for us?"

"No, I haven't. I know you won't be needing me as much with Jake gone all day but I was hoping you want me to stay on. I love the kids."

"Thank God," Frank said.

"What's going on?"

"Sara, I'm pregnant. The baby is due in April."

Sara's face lit up and she gave Marina a tight hug. "That's terrific! Congratulations!" She gave Frank a much more careful hug.

"We're going to need you more than ever, Sara. Marina is going to have to take it very easy with this pregnancy." He turned and looked toward the kitchen. "We are about to tell the children. The family will be here shortly and we'll be telling them."

"I'll make myself scarce. I'll go to the laundry room and start a load."

"Thanks Sara," said Marina. Once they were alone, she slipped her hands around his waist, rested her head on his chest. "Are you ready for this?"

"Hell no."

"Me either, but let's hop to it, Marine." She looked at him and smiled. "Metaphorically speaking."

"Very funny, smart ass."

"You love my smart ass."

"Hell yeah I do." They walked into the kitchen and they took their regular seats at the table. "Kids, we need to talk to you."

"We didn't do anything, Papa," said Jonas.

"I didn't say you did."

Marina put her hand over his. "I've got this. Kids, we've had some news."

"What's wrong?" asked Jonas.

"When did you become such a pessimist?" asked Frank.

"Kids, nothing is wrong. We want to tell you that I'm going to have another baby."

"What?" they asked in unison.

"You're going to have a little sister."

"Or brother," Frank added with a smile.

"I hope it's a girl," said Anna. "we have too many boys."

"Excuse me, princess? I'm a boy."

Anna laughed. "You're not a boy, Papa."

Marina leaned in and whispered. "She's got that right."

"Behave," he said with a smile. "Now, kids. Your grandparents and your aunts and uncles are coming over. They all want to check up on me because I was hurt. They don't know about the baby yet so no blabbing. Are we clear?"

"Yes, Papa."

Jake got off his chair and walked to Marina's side, staring at her belly. "Is the baby in there?"

She covered her belly with her hand. "Yes Jake, the baby's in there."

"I don't want a baby. There's no room," he cried before running out of the kitchen.

"What the...?" asked Frank. He tried to rise but Marina shook him off.

"I've got this."

Marina found Jake in his room holding on to his favorite teddy bear. The bear had been on a shelf for nearly a year but now it was being crushed to Jake's chest. She sat down next to him and began to speak to him in Russian. "Tell me what's wrong, angel. Why are you upset?" He crushed his bear tighter and pulled away. "You'll get to be a big brother and help the new baby."

"I don't want to be the big brother."

"Why? You help Cabe O'Brien all the time. You've taught him Russian. You're a very good teacher." He looked up at her and she sensed an opening. "Cabe's Papa said so. You've taught him so well that his Papa started learning Russian so he could understand what you and Cabe were talking about."

"That's not the same."

"How is it not the same?"

"He's not my little brother."

"But you love spending time with him."

"Yeah, he's fun. He thinks I'm smart."

"You are smart. Very smart."

"Jonas doesn't think so."

Marina smiled thinking she was finally getting to the real problem. "Jonas is very smart. He learned to read faster than most people and he remembers everything he reads. But there are some things that he doesn't do as well as you do." Jonas looked with disbelief. "It's true. You make friends much easier than Jonas does."

"That's nothing special."

Marina pulled him into her lap. "That's very special. It's a gift. Now, with the new baby you'll be the big brother. You can teach them things. The baby will look up to you the way Cabe does."

Jake's chin began to quiver. "But I won't be your baby boy any more."

Marina fought back her own tears. "Jacob, you listen to me. You will be a grown man and you will still be my baby boy."

"Do you promise?" he whispered.

She couldn't stop a tear from falling. "I promise you, Jacob." She held him tight and rocked him back and forth. "I promise you, my baby." She held her son close and sang the lullaby she'd sung to him so many times before.

Frank was sitting on the couch watching the children in the backyard. Sara had taken Anna and Jonas outside until the family had some time. Marina looked upset as she came downstairs.

"Where's Jake?"

"He dozed off."

"Why is he so upset?"

She sat down next to him and leaned back against the couch. "He's afraid the new baby means he won't be my baby anymore."

"You two have always been very close."

"Franklin Nash, I love all my children."

"Of course you do, but you and Jacob have and a special connection since the moment he was born."

"I suppose it's true. He's such a sweet boy."

He leaned back against the couch and took her hand. "Yeah, he is." He closed his eyes and tried to push away the screaming pain in his leg. "Our folks should be here soon."

"Have you had your pain med?"

"I don't need it."

"Bullshit. You white as a ghost. I'm getting your meds." She came back downstairs with the painkillers and a glass of water.

"Seriously, Marina. I'm fine."

"No, you're not. You're in a hell of a lot of pain. I can see it and you can be damn sure your mother will see it. Take the damn pills. Please."

"Okay." He took the pills from her and washed them down. "They're pretty strong. Don't let me nod off."

"We're about to have a house full of people. Nodding off is doubtful." Her phone started to buzz and she picked it up off the coffee table. "Crap. It's Elaine Jensen."

"Why crap? She's a friend."

"Hey Elaine," she said as she covered the mic with her hand. "I forgot I'm supposed to do her show tomorrow."

"You heard about Frank?" She nodded. "It's all over the news. Of course it is. Yes, he was hurt but he's going to be fine. He's home."

"Hi Elaine," he shouted loud enough for her to hear.

"She says hi. Look Elaine, about tomorrow...Oh, that's very understanding of you. I hate to disappoint you,"

"Marina, wait."

"Hold on Elaine," she said as she put her hand over the phone. "She's calling to say it's okay that I can't do the show tomorrow."

"You should do it."

"What?"

"You'll only be gone for a couple of hours. Sara's here and I'm sure my mother will

be here. This is Elaine's first solo talk show. They've been hawking your appearance on the premiere for weeks. This way the real story is told. And Elaine has been a good friend to us over the years."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Elaine, I was just talking to Frank. I will do the show tomorrow. He insists." Marina smiled and nodded. "You're welcome, Elaine. I'll see you tomorrow."

Jake wandered downstairs, still carrying his bear. "I fell asleep." She picked him up and held him close.

"Do you feel better, angel?"

He nodded but put his head on his mother's shoulder. "Why don't you and Teddy go outside with Anna and Jonas?" She set him down and he walked out to join his brother and sister.

"What's with the bear? He hasn't carried Teddy around for a year."

"He's feeling insecure. I think we should let it ride for the moment." The buzzer sounded and Marina opened the door to her in laws.

"Where is he?" asked his mother.

"Living room couch."

Marina had been right about his parents. They were both pale and they looked like they hadn't slept. "Frank," said his mother with tears in her eyes.

He patted the cushion next to him. "Mom, Dad. Sit, please." His mother put her arms around him and kissed his cheek.

"My baby," she whispered. "My poor baby."

Frank laughed. "Mom, I'm sixty two."

"You're still my baby."

Marina laughed. "I just had this exact conversation with Jacob not an hour ago."

"Are you really okay, son?" asked his father.

"I am, Dad. It hurts like a bitch..."

"Franklin..." said his mother.

"Sorry Mom," he replied as he noticed Marina holding in a snicker. "It hurts but I have medicine which Marina made me take. If I doze off it's her fault."

"Thank you for sending your records to Carolyn and John. They were able to go over everything with us."

"Excuse me?"

"I forgot to tell you," said Marina. "While you were getting dressed I asked Dr. Hawkins to transmit copies of your files to Carolyn and John. Since they're trauma surgeons I knew they'd be able to answer your parents questions."

"Thanks, babe," he said in Russian. "You're the best."

"Is the rest of the family coming over?" asked his father.

"Soon," said Marina. "I asked them to wait at my mother's house. That way you three could have some time alone. And on that note I'm going to make some tea."

His mom stood and walked toward Marina. "Can I get you something, Florence?" His mom wrapped her arms around Marina in a tight hug.

"Thank you for being so good for my son."

Marina sat in the kitchen sipping some green tea. Her stomach was doing somersaults and she was saying a silent prayer that she didn't announce her pregnancy with public vomiting. She looked out the window and watched her children playing with Sara. The boys were on the swings, going higher than they should. Anna was crawling over the top of the monkey bars. Riley wouldn't have the same experience her other children did. They wouldn't be close enough in age to have similar interests. She thought of her own childhood. Val and Jake had been great big brothers but she'd spent a lot of time on her own. She'd had her fair share of imaginary friends, making her own fun. It was no surprise she became an actress.

She stood and glanced out into the living room. Frank's parents looked a lot better than when they first walked in. She figured it was safe to bring the kids in now. She went to the back yard and gathered them together. "Grandma and Grandpa Joe are in the living room with Papa. You go in and say hi but no running around. They were very upset about Papa."

"Why? Papa said he's going to be fine," said Anna.

"They are upset the same way Papa and I would be upset if one of you were hurt."

"Because he's their baby," said Jake with a smile.

"Exactly. Speaking of which, remember you're not to say anything about the baby until Papa and I do. Clear?"

"Clear," they replied.

Marina smiled to herself. There was an advantage to having a Marine for a spouse. Her kids knew how to take orders.

An hour later and Marina could tell Frank was fading. The entire family was in the living room and they'd all gotten a chance to see he was okay. She wasn't sure how much more Frank could take so if they were going to make the announcement they'd better do it soon. She handed Frank a soda and sat down next to him. He'd wanted a beer but she told him no when he was on the meds.

She looked around and smiled. Jake and Mike had flown down as soon as they'd heard what had happened. They were staying down the street with their mother and stepfather. Mike was currently engaged in a deep discussion on gemstones with Jonas. Anna was telling Val about her last visit with Happy Quinn. Katherine seemed to be having a conversation with Teddy while Jake gave his bear voice. She really did have a wonderful family.

She leaned into Frank and whispered, "I think it's time we tell them. Are you ready?" He nodded and faked a smile. "After that I'm sending everyone home and getting you into bed."

"Okay, diva, but I think you'll have to do all the work."

"Are you okay, angel?" asked Marina's mother in Russian.

"I'm fine, Mama," said Frank.

"Not you, Frank. Marina, you look pale."

"I'm fine, Mama. I'm a little tired." She knew she hadn't fooled her mother. "Everyone, Mama's right, Frank and I are both pretty tired."

"We will take this back to our house," said George.

"Good idea," said Anna.

"Before you all go there is something we need to talk to you about," said Marina.

"Yesterday when I was in the ER with Frank I fainted. The doctor did a blood test." She took a breath and smiled. "I'm pregnant. About three months." Shocked looks were

quickly replaced by smiles and hugs.

Anna pulled Marina aside. "Are you okay, sweetheart?"

"I'm fine, Mama. I'm just tired."

"We'll get out of your hair and you two get some rest. Call me tomorrow."

"I will, Mama."

Marina looked over at Frank who was embracing his weeping mother. He looked over at her and smiled. His father moved in for a hug and she could see he trying not to wince. She walked toward her in-laws and accepted their hugs. "I'm sorry to chase everyone off but I am pretty tired."

"That's quite alright dear," said Florence. "Quite alright. I am so happy for you both."

"Thank you, Florence."

It took another twenty minutes for Marina to shut the door behind the last visitor. The children were sitting at the dining room table and coloring. She sat down next to Frank on the couch. "I need a nap. Care to join me?"

"I'd love too."

Sara came in from the kitchen. "Could I get you anything?"

"No, I'm fine. Would you mind staying a little while longer?"

"How about I take the kids. We could go for a ride, maybe hit Montie's for an early dinner."

Marina smiled. "Sara, you're an angel. Kids come in here for a minute. First I want to say good job for today. You all kept the secret about the baby until Papa and I could tell them. Sara's going to take you out so I want you to behave."

"How about a trip to Harrow's," said Frank. "Everyone can pick out a book."

"Then atomic wings?" asked Anna

Frank laughed. "Like mother, like daughter."

The children were out with Sara and the house was finally quiet. Marina helped Frank into bed and then slipped off her clothes and climbed into bed next to him.

"Seriously, naked?" he asked. "You're killing me here." He rubbed his hand over her back.

"Frank, you've never heard me say these words before but, not tonight I have headache."

She closed her eyes and smiled, listening to her husband chuckle.

Marina hung up the phone and sighed. Stan was a good guy and he sounded genuinely happy for her that she was pregnant again. But he was also her agent and she had to tell him she'd be stepping away from her career for the next year. That included the next installment of Time Travelers movie series. The proposed start date for filming was March and she'd be eight months pregnant. Stan had called the producers to tell them Marina would not be available. The producers had the option to recast her role, but it's something she'd doubt they'd do. She'd been in the four previous installments and her face was licensed on hundreds of items including action figures.

She looked in the mirror and touched up her makeup. The car from Elaine's show would be here shortly. She'd chosen a simple shift dress and plain pumps. Her stomach was rolling and she covered it with her hand. "Okay, listen up Riley. We are going to have many of these conversations over the next six months. I need you to settle down. If you don't make Mama puke on national tv I'll buy you a pony."

"You're really convinced the baby is a girl."

She glanced over her shoulder and saw Frank leaning against the door frame. "I am. But if I'm wrong, which of course I'm not, Riley still works."

"My son will not be named Riley Jane."

"What was your grandmother's maiden name?"

"Stewart."

She shrugged. "That works." She checked herself one last time in the mirror. "How do I look?"

"You look perfect."

She ran her hand over her stomach. "Can you tell? After three kids I'm bound to show early."

"Sweetheart, you look terrific. I promise. No one would know to look at you that you're pregnant."

"Are you sure you'll be okay."

"Marina, Sara is here and my mother was delighted when I asked her to keep me company while you're gone. The kids are in school. All I have to do is plant my ass on the couch and watch you on TV."

"And take your pain med and do not tell me you don't need it."

He was about to argue with her when the security buzzer went off. "That would be your ride. Go be brilliant."

Marina sat in the green room getting her makeup touched up. The older woman smiled and put down her brush.

"You, Ms. Sokolov, make my job irrelevant. All I needed to do was add a little power so you wouldn't glow on camera."

"You're being very sweet..."

"Janice. And believe me, I don't do sweet. I've been working at this network for thirty years. Some people who sit in my chair need me to perform miracles."

"Which of course you do."

She made a dismissive sound. "Of course."

"Marina?" Elaine Jansen walked in the green room. She looked fantastic. At nearly six feet tall, slender frame and her beautiful dark brown skin she could be mistaken for a model. Elaine had been a friend to Marina and Frank since the Peter Kane incident. Marina stood and gave her a hug. "How's Frank doing?"

"He's good. Grumpy about being on crutches but I expected that."

"I can't thank you enough for doing the show today."

"It will give me a chance to tell what really happened." She gave her friend's had a little squeeze. "Frank and I are very happy for you. You've worked hard for this. You deserve it."

A young producer with a clipboard and headset stuck her head in the door. "Elaine, five minutes."

Elaine smiled. "It's go time!"

Marina looked at her phone and smiled at the text from Frank. *"You've got this."* She turned off the phone and tucked it in her bag.

"Ms. Sokolov, we're ready for you."

She stood in the wings and waited for Elaine's introduction. "Please welcome as my very first guest, a terrific actress and an even better friend, Marina Sokolov."

She took a breath and walked out on the stage giving the audience and a smile and a small wave. Elaine stood and gave her a hug and they took their seats. It took a minute for the applause to die down. She acknowledged the audience again and

whispered, "Thank you."

"Okay, lets get right to it. Your husband is in the news after being injured. First, how is Frank doing?"

"He's doing well, recovering at home. Cranky as hell to be on crutches, but doing well." She turned to the camera and said, "You are so cranky." She turned back to Elaine. "He's watching at home."

"For those who don't know you are married to retired Marine Colonel Frank Nash." A picture of the two of them at the last Marine Ball appeared on the screen. A second picture of just him in his bike leathers came on in split screen. Marina couldn't help but smile. She also heard a lot of 'ohs' from the female audience. She couldn't blame them.

"Down, ladies," Elaine laughed.

Marina laughed, "That's quite alright. My husband is one fine lookin fella."

"Can you tell us what happened?"

"Yes. He and his friend, Homeland Special Agent Cabe Gallo were stopped for lunch. Two men were involved in assaulting a waitress and Cabe and Frank intervened. One man pulled a gun and tried to shoot Cabe. Frank stopped him but he was shot in the leg. Fortunately the wound was not severe and he's recovering at home as is Cabe."

"Were the men captured?"

"Yes. They were taken into custody."

"So all those stories that he was in bad shape?"

"Complete b.s. Those sites take one piece of information and magnify and distort it. They don't care if it's a lie or who it hurts, like our children."

"How are the kids taking it?" Elaine asked as a picture of the kids flashed on screen. Marina smiled at the appreciative 'awws' she heard from the audience.

"It was obviously difficult for them to see their father injured but we were honest with them. Frank is in excellent health so his recovery should be swift."

"How are you doing?" Elaine asked softly. This was her friend asking not the interviewer.

Marina glanced back at the picture of Frank and tried to contain her emotions. "It's been very difficult to see my husband injured. But honestly, I wouldn't have expected Frank to act any differently in the situation. It's who he is. He's a hero." She couldn't

prevent a tear from slipping down her cheek as she smiled at his picture. "He's my hero," she whispered. Elaine reached under the table and covered her hand.

"We're going to take a break and we'll be back with Marina Sokolov."

"And...we're clear," said the director.

"Are you okay? You look pale," said Elaine.

"Could I get some ginger ale?"

"Of course," She turned to a young man standing in the wings. "We need a ginger ale." A few moments later he returned with a can and a cup with ice. He poured it and handed it to Marina.

"Thank you," she said as she took a sip. "Riley, you need to settle down. Stop making Mama feel sick," she whispered in Russian.

"Excuse me? You slipped into Russian."

"Sorry. It's nothing."

The director held up his hand. "We're back in three, two..." he pointed at Elaine.

"Welcome back. I'm here talking to Marina Sokolov. Marina, I want to thank you for doing our first show, considering what you've been through the last few days."

"I'll tell you why I did it." Marina smiled and looked out at the audience. "Elaine has been a good friend for years. She called yesterday to check on Frank and to say she understood why I couldn't do the show. Not a word about how long they'd been promoting my appearance." She turned to Elaine who had tears in her eyes. "You put the needs of your friends first."

Elaine gave her a hug. "And Frank insisted. I heard him yelling in the background."

"Frank insisted."

"Okay before we both turn into weeping messes and ruin Janice's handiwork let's talk movies. The new Time Traveler's is due to start production soon. Can you talk about that?"

Marina smiled and took a sip of her ginger ale. "Well I'm actually going to be stepping away from work for the next year."

Elaine looked concerned. "You said Frank is okay."

"Frank will be fine. It's me. I'm pregnant."

Elaine's face went from shock to broad smile as she launched into a squealing hug

and the audience cheered. "Oh my God, this is fantastic. Are you feeling okay?"

"I may be chugging ginger ale for awhile."

"When are you due?"

"Early spring."

"This is fantastic news for you and your family. Will you miss acting?"

"Well, I have seven year old twins and a six year old, so they keep me busy. I love acting but honestly, there's nothing in the world I love more than being with my family."

Chapter Eight

Frank pulled into the garage and parked his car. It had been a long six weeks since he'd been hurt but he'd gotten his final all clear from his doctor. He'd recovered from the gunshot wound with the help of some good PT. He was still a bit stiff but the doctor was very pleased with his progress.

He walked into the kitchen and saw Marina reaching into a top cabinet. She was wearing those jeans he loved. Her pregnancy was barely noticeable. He stood for a moment just admiring her.

"So how did it go? What did the doctor say?" She turned around and stuck her hands on her hips. "Earth to Frank." He walked to her and pulled her into a passionate kiss. "Umm, I take it the doctor gave you a good report."

"Uh huh," he said as he ran his hands down her back and cupped her ass. "Woman, you have a spectacular ass."

Marina smiled. "Oh, you think so?" He tightened his grip and pulled her tight against him. She could feel just how serious he was. "The kids won't be home from school for about three hours."

He smiled. "That will have to do."

Marina smiled as she looked out the window at her children. Sara had picked them up from school and they were burning off some excess energy in their play area. Jake was playing with his trucks in his sandbox. Jonas was showing Sara a flower in Frank's garden. He'd recently shown an interest in the science of horticulture. And Anna was...where was she? Marina walked out to the deck and called to her son.

"Jake, where is your sister?" He turned toward the large oak tree in the back of the yard. Of course she was in the tree. She swore the girl was part monkey. She glanced toward the branches and couldn't see her. She looked further up the tree and gasped.

"Mama, look how high I climbed!" Anna was holding onto a branch nearly twenty feet in the air.

"Anna Marina you come down here right now!"

"Oh, Mama it's fine." She bounced on the branch. "See?"

A loud crack sounded as the branch gave way and Marina saw her child fall to earth.

Frank brushed his hair, still wet from his shower. He and Marina had made good use of their time before the kids got home. Marina was a passionate woman to begin with but when she was pregnant she was particularly enthusiastic. He set down his brush on his dresser and smiled. It was then he heard it, a scream so piercing it made his heart race. He was barely aware of running downstairs and out the open deck door. Marina was on her knees by the large oak in their backyard. Sara was standing just behind her with his sons huddled close. He ran toward them and found Anna on the ground with what was obviously a broken leg.

"Papa," she cried.

"Don't move, baby. Sara call 911."

Marina face was as chalk white as Anna's "It's going to be okay, baby. We're getting help."

"I'm sorry, Mama," she wept.

Marina kissed her cheek. "It's okay, baby. You're not in trouble."

"Papa?"

"No, princess. You're not in trouble. Just try to hold still." He leaned over and kissed Anna's forehead. He vaguely heard Sara in the background calling for an ambulance.

Frank sat against the wall of the ambulance as he held tight to Marina's hand. Anna cried out as the EMT's stabilized her injury and started an IV. Every cry, every tear his daughter shed was a pain greater than he'd never known. He hadn't felt this helpless when Marina was held hostage by Peter Kane. Then he had a gun. Now he could do nothing but pray.

Marina whispered to him in Russian. "I'm scared."

"Me too, but she's strong," he said with a false conviction. This was his baby girl, only seven years old. She'd fallen so far there was no telling the extent of her injuries.

He'd give anything to change places with his princess.

They pulled into the ambulance entrance at the hospital and the EMT's quickly transported Anna into the ER. They tried to follow her into the examining room but were stopped by a floor nurse.

"Mr. and Mrs. Nash, please come with me." They followed her into a private office near the ER. "This will be a more secure waiting area for you."

"I want to be with my baby," Marina cried.

"Of course you do, but Dr. Hawkins needs to exam her first."

"Dr Hawkins?" asked Frank. She was the trauma surgeon who took care of his gun shot wound.

"I recognized the name when it was called in. I notified the chief of staff, Dr. Wilson. He notified Dr. Hawkins and told me to set you up in here. We don't want the press to be an issue for you."

"Thank you...?" he asked.

"Grace."

"Thank you, Grace."

"I'm going to check on your daughter and Dr. Wilson will be here shortly. I'll make sure to tell her you're both near by."

As soon as the door closed Marina dissolved in tears. He pulled her close. "It's okay, she's going to be okay."

"It's my fault."

"What?"

"She'd climbed so high, at least twenty feet, I yelled at her to come down. She tried to prove she was fine and bounced up and down on the branch. That's when it snapped and she fell." She buried her head in his chest and wept.

"You listen to me. It's not your fault. If I had seen her that high up I would have yelled at her too. It's not your fault, baby." He kissed the top of her head as he held her close. "It's not your fault."

There was a soft knock at the door and Dr. Henry Wilson stuck his head in the door. "Mr. and Mrs. Nash, may I come in?"

"Of course," said Marina as she wiped her eyes. Wilson found a box of tissues on

a corner table and handed them to her. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Dr. Hawkins is with your daughter now and I've called in Dr. Derek Brown. He's our best orthopedist. We should have word shortly."

"We want to be with Anna," said Frank.

"She must be so scared," Marina added.

"Of course. I understand. I promise the moment it's possible you will be."

Frank could feel Marina shaking in his arms. "Dr. Wilson would you please contact Dr. Weston for us?"

"Dr. Weston? I don't understand."

"My wife is pregnant and has had issues with high blood pressure."

"Frank, that's not necessary."

"Please sweetheart, do it for me. Let me look out for you." He placed his hand on her rounded belly. "And for her."

Marina managed a small smile. "So you think it's a girl now too? You'll still owe me that ten bucks." She looked at Dr. Wilson. "It wouldn't hurt to be sure."

"I'll let her know."

"Mr. and Mrs. Nash," said Grace. "Dr. Hawkins said you can come with me."

They followed the nurse to an examining area where Dr. Hawkins was standing next to a sandy haired man who was looking at a chart. Anna spotted them and began to cry. "We're here, princess." They went to her side and each gave her a kiss.

"Mr. and Mrs. Nash, this is Derek Brown, the best orthopedist in LA."

Frank shook the man's offered hand. "So we've been told."

"In the interest of full disclosure, he's also my husband. But he really is the best."

Dr. Brown smiled at his wife. "Okay. You want to know about Anna. She has what looks like a break in the tibia and possibly the fibia of her lower right leg. We've stabilized it and we're sending her to x-ray and we're waiting for some test results." He looked at Anna and smiled. "She's being very brave."

Frank smiled and squeezed his daughter's hand. "Of course she is."

"A princess is brave," Anna said with a small smile.

"That's right, angel," he said in Russian.

"I ordered a couple of tests," added Dr. Hawkins, "but honestly I'm not seeing any

trauma beyond her leg." She smiled at Anna.

"Thank you, doctor," said Marina.

An orderly appeared to take Anna to X-ray. "Mama, I don't want to go."

Marina took a breath and spoke to her in Russian. "Sweetheart, you need to do this. They will take care of you and Papa and I won't go anywhere."

"You promise?"

"I swear."

Anna pasted on a smile and looked at the orderly. "Okay, let's do this."

Frank shook his head and laughed. His princess was something else.

Frank and Marina sat back down in the office that had been set aside for them. He would have to thank someone for the water bottles and coffee that had been set up for them. He picked up a bottle and handed it to Marina. "Here, you need to stay hydrated."

"I'm fine," she said as she down on couch.

He sat down next to her on the couch. "Let's not debate this. You know it's good for you and the baby."

She sighed and twisted off the cap. "You win, goon."

"I'll call Sara and give her and the boys and update. Then I'll call Val. I'm going to ask him and Katherine to tell the family."

Marina took a sip of water, looking straight ahead. "Fine."

"I can't make a dozen calls." He took a centering breath. "I can't stand the idea of repeating what happened to her over and over." His voice caught in his throat.

She grabbed his hand and fought back her own tears. "That's okay, Josiah. Val and Katherine will help us. The whole family will."

He forced a smile. "I know they will."

"I'll call Sara, you call Val."

"Are you sure?"

"I am." She pulled her phone from her purse and hit the button for Sara. "Hi Sara."

"How is she?" asked Sara.

"Her leg is broken and they're running some more tests."

"The boys are worried."

Marina looked at Frank. "Sara, put your phone on speaker."

"We're on speaker and the boys are here."

"How's Anna?" asked Jonas.

"She's broken her leg but the doctors are taking care of her."

"Is she going to be okay?" asked Jake.

Frank heard the fear in his son's voice. He spoke to them in Russian, knowing they understood when they spoke this way, it was deeply personal. "Jonas, Jacob, Anna is going to be fine. I know this is scary. Yes, she is hurt but she will get better, just like I did."

"I promise we will call you later. Sara, can you stay until we get back?" asked

Marina.

"Of course. The boys and I will be fine."

"Thank you, Sara." Marina hung up the phone and reached for Frank's hand. "Well done, Josiah."

He managed a smile. "You too, diva." He pulled out his phone and tapped Val's contact picture. "Hey Val."

"Hey Frank, what's up?"

"We're at the hospital."

"Oh God, is it Marina? The baby?"

"No, it's Anna. She fell out of the tree in the backyard. Her leg is broken. We're waiting on more tests."

"What can we do?"

"Thanks brother, that's why I'm calling. Would you please call the family for me."

"Of course. How's Marina?" Val knew they were being very careful with Marina's health because of her pregnancy.

"Upset, but I'm keeping a close eye on her."

"Let me know when you have anything else. We'll start making the calls right away."

"I will. Thanks Val." He disconnected the call and looked at Marina. She was sipping her water but he didn't like her color. She was too pale and her hand was shaking. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. "It's going to be okay, diva."

Another knock and Dr. Weston opened the door. "Hi. Dr. Wilson said you wanted to see me." She saw Marina's pale appearance and reached for her arm. "Are you not feeling well?"

"I'm fine."

"Your pulse is rapid. Tell me what's going on."

"Our daughter Anna had an accident. We're waiting for the results now. I didn't like her color so I thought you should be notified."

"You're right, Mr. Nash." She indicated to the couch. "May I?" Frank moved to the end of the couch and Dr. Weston took his place. She pulled her stethoscope from around her neck and listened to Marina's heart, then to the baby's. "Yours is a little fast. The baby's seems fine. I'll be right back." She left the office briefly and returned with a blood

pressure cuff. She took Marina's pressure, then sat back against the couch. "Okay. Your pressure is higher than I like but not dangerous. I can understand it given the situation."

Marina managed a smile. "See, Frank, I told you so."

"No, he was right to call me. We have to be extra careful considering your history. I'm going to have the floor nurse continue to monitor your pressure but I don't anticipate this is going to be a problem. Keep taking care of yourself the way you have and get some rest as soon as you can." She turned to Frank and smiled. "I saw Hawkins and Brown. Are they looking after Anna?"

"Yes, they are."

"They're both the best in their fields. Anna is in good hands." She nodded toward Marina. "I don't expect she'll listen but try and get her to rest."

"I will, doctor." He extended his hand. "Thank you for coming." Frank put his arms around Marina again and gave her a kiss. "It's going to be okay."

"I keep seeing her falling. I just stood there as she hit the branches on the way down."

"Sweetheart, there is nothing you could have done to stop it."

"There should have been."

"We can go round and round about this but it won't help. Now, you heard the doctor. I want you to put your feet up and rest."

"No, Frank. I'm not tired."

He didn't want to get into an argument. It wouldn't help either of them. "I'll be right back." He went to the nurses station and got two pillows and a blanket. He returned to the office and set one pillow at the end of the couch. "Put your feet up on this. You know raising your feet will help with your blood pressure."

"Fine," she said as she raised her feet up on the pillow. He set the other pillow under her head and began to unfold the blanket. "Frank, I'm not tired."

He stopped and looked at his wife, trying to hold back tears. "Please let me do this. I couldn't help Anna. Let me take care of you and Riley."

She reached for his hand. "You always take care of me and the kids."

He sat down on the edge of the couch. "I felt pretty useless today."

"Franklin Nash, you listen to me." Frank managed a small smile. He was always in

for a loving scolding when she called him Franklin. "You are never useless to us. You are there for us in every way possible. You are the best partner and best father to our children I could ever hope for. I won't ever have you think differently. Are we clear, Marine?"

He gave her a gentle kiss. "Yes, Ma'am."

"Good. Now cover me up and I'm going to close my eyes for a few minutes." He tucked her in on the couch and kissed her forehead, as he did for his children every night.

"I love you, diva."

She gave him a soft smile and closed her eyes. "I know you do, you big goon."

"I'm going to see if the family is in the waiting room."

Her eyes snapped open. "You'll come get me if you hear anything."

"I promise."

Frank looked out into the ER waiting room and it looked like Sunday dinner at Mama Anna and George's. He took a breath and walked out to a rush of nervous grandparents, aunts and uncles.

"How is she?" asked Mama.

"We haven't heard any more than I told Val. She's being looked after by Dr. Hawkins and Dr. Brown. They're both very good. They're still doing tests."

"Is Marina with her?" asked his mother.

"No. Her pressure was a little high. I had her ob/gyn check her out. She wanted her to try and rest. I've got her laying down in an office."

"That's good, son," said his father.

"I need to get back. I'll let you know as soon as I hear anything." He turned toward the ER door and was surprised when his father followed him. "Dad, I..."

His father grabbed his arm. "Hush, son. Come with me." Jonas Nash was a strong man, even at the age of eighty four. Frank would have followed him no matter what, out of respect. He looked down a hallway and found a men's room. He pulled his son into the room and closed the door. "Okay, we're alone now. Talk to me."

"Dad, I wasn't holding back. We're still waiting for tests."

"That's not what I'm talking about. I know you, Frank. You're a strong man and you're holding it together for your family, as you should. But you're holding on by your

fingernails. That's not good. Believe me, I know. So talk to me."

Frank bowed his head and fought the tears. "It was awful, Dad. Her leg was twisted and I could tell it was broken. She was crying and in pain and I couldn't make it better."

"I know, son. You want to keep them safe but it's not always possible. You got her help and she's a tough kid. She's going to be okay."

"I keep telling myself that because I can't imagine a life without her." Frank saw the look on his father's face, kind, understanding, here for him. He couldn't hold his tears back any longer. His father pulled him into a tight hug and he wept on his shoulder until he couldn't cry anymore. When he pulled away he saw the tears on his father's cheek. "I'm sorry, Dad."

"Don't apologize. You can't hold that stuff in or it will eat you up. I remember when you got lost in the caves at Sutter's Point."

"I did? I don't remember that."

"Of course you don't. You were only five. You were always adventurous, like Anna. You loved exploring. We were having a picnic. I had promised to take you in the caves after lunch but you didn't want to wait. You slipped away while we were eating. You were missing for hours. Your mother was frantic. I ran to the Ranger station for help while she stood at the head of the cave, calling your name. When I got back with the rangers we searched and searched. I kept praying I'd find you. When we finally did find you were laying on the cave floor. In that moment I thought you were dead. When I ran to you I discovered you were asleep. When you woke you started crying and threw yourself in my arms."

Frank wiped his eyes and smiled. "Some things never change. I sorry I put you through that. It must have been horrible for you."

Jonas smiled and touched his son's cheek. "It was one of the best days of my life."

"How is that possible? You thought you'd lost me."

"Because I got you back."

Frank sat quietly in the office sipping water and watching Marina sleep. He was grateful she'd managed to doze off. She had to be exhausted. He was and he wasn't six months pregnant. He took another sip of his water and thought about his father. He'd

been so lucky to be raised by such a good man. He prayed he would be as good for his children as Jonas Nash was for him. A slight knock at the door caused Marina to sit bolt upright. He turned to see Hawkins and Brown enter the office. They were both smiling. Frank sat down next to her on the couch.

Dr. Brown started. "We've completed our tests. Anna is back in examining. It was as I suspected, a break of both the tibia and fibula."

Marina gasped and he squeezed her hand. "Is it bad?" she asked.

"Your daughter was very lucky. The fracture in the fibula is hairline, the tibia is a clean break. I've set her leg in a cast." He looked confused for a moment. "She was distressed that her cast would not be black. She said she wanted to look like a boot."

Frank chuckled and shook his head. "That's my girl."

Dr. Brown turned to his wife smiled. "Your turn."

"All her neurological tests, x-rays and blood work show she has no other injuries other than a few scrapes. Your daughter was very lucky."

"Is she in pain?" asked Marina.

"I gave her a shot before I set her leg," said Dr. Brown. "So she's feeling okay now but it will wear off. I'm going to give you a script to fill for tonight. After they're finished ibuprofen should be fine."

"Tonight?" asked Frank.

Both doctors smiled. Dr. Hawkins handed them some papers. "This is her discharge. As soon as we get her into a wheelchair you can take her home." Marina squealed and launched herself at Dr. Hawkins while Frank shook Dr. Brown's hand.

"I'm going to want to see her in a couple of days for a followup," said Brown. "We can do it here in the hospital. I have an office in the Gallo wing. Call if you have any issues, fever, excessive pain. Honestly I don't think you will. That is one tough cookie you've got there. Although while I was setting her leg, I think she was swearing at me in Russian."

Frank smiled. Yeah. That was his girl and she was going to be just fine.

Marina watched Frank carry Anna into the house. It seemed the painkiller was wearing off but she was hanging tough. Of course she was. She was so much like her father. He tried hard not to jostle her leg as he brought into the living room. Sara and the

boys were waiting for her despite how late it was. It was past ten at night and they should have both been in bed.

"Are you okay, Anna?" asked Jake.

"I'm okay," she said.

"Does it hurt?" asked Jonas.

She looked at her parents before she answered. "A little."

Marina knew that meant it hurt like hell. "Frank, let's get her right to bed. The pharmacy should be here soon with her medication."

"They were already here," said Sara. She picked up a white bag from the table.

"Excellent. Frank, let's get her into bed."

Frank smiled as Anna whispered in his ear and he nodded. "No problem, baby."

Marina was about to follow Frank when she saw the look on her boys faces. "Boys, Anna hasn't had any dinner. Do you think you could make a cheese sandwich for her like you did when Papa was hurt?"

"Sure," said Jonas.

Marina smiled at their determined little smiles. All they wanted was not to feel so helpless. She knew just how they felt. She followed Frank upstairs but he made a detour to the bathroom.

"I'll get her set down and then you take it from there." Marina opened the toilet lid and he sat her down. "When you're ready, let me know and I'll get her into bed."

She followed him to the door. "Grab a nightgown and I'll get her changed."

"Do you want me to do that? You may need to lift her."

"I'll manage." She glanced back at her daughter and smiled. "Sweetheart, she's Papa's girl, but she's a girl. She'll want me to take care of some things for her."

"Oh, got it," he smiled. "I'll be right back."

Marina smiled as she took care of the most basic needs for her daughter. It was the first time all day she felt necessary. "Is that better, baby?"

Anna stuck out a defiant chin. "I'm not a baby. I'm a big girl."

She took Anna's hand in hers, noticing for the first time the scratches on her arms and thighs. "Anna, angel, you will always be my baby girl, no matter how big you get. These look like they sting. Would you like me to put something on them?"

"Okay," she said quietly.

Marina found some antibiotic cream and gently covered each scratch. She knew once she had a pain killer she'd never feel the sting but the cream would help the healing, for both of them.

"Mama,"

"Yes, baby."

"I'm sorry I scared you."

She kissed Anna's cheek as Frank knocked on the door. "Everything okay in there?"

Marina opened the door and took the nightgown from his hand. "We're fine. Just a little girl talk." She closed the door and helped Anna on with nightgown. She opened the door to Frank.

"You all ready, baby?" he asked.

Marina smiled when Anna looked at her with exasperation.

When Frank set Anna in bed they could see close her eyes in pain. "We'll give you something for pain as soon as you eat something."

Sara knocked on Anna's door. "Dinner is served." Jonas and Jake walked into the room carrying a toasted cheese sandwich and a juice box.

"Here, Anna. We made this for you," said Jake.

"Thanks. I'm hungry."

Marina watched her sons as Anna devoured her sandwich. Jake seemed okay but Jonas too quiet. He was a natural introvert but this was different. Jonas and Anna fought like all brothers and sisters but as twins they had a special connection. She motioned to Frank to follow her as she walked out to the hall.

"I think Jonas is taking this hard."

"He didn't seem to."

"He's too quiet. I'll talk to him when I put him to bed."

"I'll do it. I want you to get into bed."

"I'm fine, Frank."

"Let's not do this again. Marina, you're pale as a ghost. You're exhausted and I

want you to lay down. I'll get the kids tucked in."

"Fine. Let me say good night."

"Fine."

She turned to walk back into Anna's room. "Goon"

He gave her bottom a quick swat. "Diva." Frank gave Anna her pain pill as Sara took away the dishes. "Okay, everyone it's long past bed time."

"Boys, get ready for bed and I'll be in to tuck you in," said Frank. They were finally alone with their daughter for the first time all day.

"Do you need anything?" asked Marina.

"I'm okay."

"You call for us if you need anything. Tomorrow I'll teach you how to walk on your crutches," said Frank. They both kissed their daughter's forehead and turned out her light. They walked out into the hallway and Frank pointed to their bedroom. "You. Go. Now."

She shook her head and smiled. "Goon."

"Diva."

Marina changed into her nightshirt and sat on the edge of the bed. What energy she had left drained out of body. This day had been too much. She'd never felt fear like she'd known today. The tears came and she covered her eyes.

"Mama?"

She looked up and saw Jake standing there in badly buttoned pajamas. "Come here, angel." He walked forward and she rebuttoned the top.

"Are you okay, Mama?"

"Yes, baby. I'm just a little upset. It's been a difficult day."

Jake took his mother's hand. "It's going to be okay. Anna's going to get better, just like Papa did."

Marina pulled her son into a tight hug. "That's right. Everything is going to be okay." She couldn't stop herself from weeping on her son's shoulder. He pulled away and she thought she'd frightened him. Instead he climbed on to the bed and pushed her pillows up.

"What are you doing?"

"Lay down, Mama." She lay back on the pillows and her son curled up next to her. He put his arms around her waist as far as he could and held her tight.

"Sweetheart, what is this?"

"You always hold me close when I'm upset and you sing to me."

In a moment Marina would remember until she was a very old woman, her baby boy began to sing to her an old Russian lullaby. She covered his hand with and closed her eyes, thanking God for this wonderful gift.

Frank locked the front door and set the security codes. He leaned his head against the door and sighed. It had been a hell of a day. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been this tired. He still needed to get the boys tucked in and make sure Anna was okay.

A quick peak on Anna showed the toll of the day and the pain killer had taken effect and she was asleep. Jonas room was next to Anna's. When he looked in on him he was sitting up reading.

"It's past your bedtime. Please put the book down." Jonas put the book on his nightstand as Frank tucked him in. He usually resisted, claiming he was too old to be tucked in, but not tonight. Maybe Marina was right. "Jonas, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Papa."

"Anna's going to be okay."

Frank was stunned to see tears in Jonas eyes. "Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. A broken leg is not like a having a cold, but she's going to be fine."

"She's hurting. She didn't say anything but I can tell."

Frank brushed his son's unruly bangs to the side. "I know you can. I gave her some medicine to help with that tonight. She's asleep now." He stopped for a moment, pulled the covers back and took his hand. "Come on. We'll check on her together but you have to stay quiet. Her door is open." There was enough light from the hall to see Anna sound asleep.

"She doesn't sleep like that, on her back. She's always all scrunched up," Jonas whispered.

"She can't roll over because the cast is awkward." He turned Jonas around and walked him back to his room. "Okay, now it really is bedtime." He tucked him back in and

kissed his forehead. "I love you," he whispered in Russian.

"I love you too, Papa."

Frank turned out Jonas light and closed the door. He went to Jake's room but he wasn't there. It was then he heard Jake's voice coming from their bedroom and he was singing. He stood by the door and listened. It was a Russian song Marina sang to the children. He looked in and saw Marina was sound asleep. Jake spotted him and smiled. Frank waved him out to the hall. Jake gave his mother a gentle kiss and whispered, "Good night, Mama." Then he leaned down and kissed her belly and whispered, "Good night, baby." He slipped out of the bed and came out into the hall.

"Mama's sleeping," he whispered.

"I can see that." Frank led him to his room and Jake climbed into his bed. He hadn't gotten to the point of resisting being tucked in.

"Mama was crying."

"She was?"

"She was upset about Anna."

"So you sang to her?"

"She does that for me when I'm upset. I thought it would make her feel better."

Frank always tried to be strong for his children but he couldn't help letting his tears fall.

"Papa, are you okay? Do you want me to sing to you?"

Frank smiled. "I'm okay, son." He took a moment to look at this wonderful boy with the big heart. "That was a good thing you did for Mama. I'm sure you made her feel much better." His son smiled and his heart felt lighter. "Jacob, I want you to know something. I think you are a very good boy and I know you're going to grow up to be a very great man."

"Like you?" he asked.

"No." He pointed to his small chest. "Like you. You are special Jacob. I am so proud of you and I am so lucky you are my son. I love you very much."

Jacob threw his arms around his father's neck "I love you too, Papa." Frank held his son and reveled in the pure goodness of Jacob's soul.

Chapter Nine

Marina looked out the kitchen window watching her children in the backyard. Jake was playing with his trucks in the sand. Anna was walking around on her crutches. Ever since Frank showed her how to maneuver on them she was running around almost like she wasn't wearing a heavy cast. Jacob was sticking close, as he had since the first night. When they got up the morning after her accident they'd found Jonas asleep on Anna's bedroom floor. He wanted to be there for his sister if she needed him. Marina let out several Russian invictives when she saw Anna drop her crutches and reach up for the monkey bars. She threw open the sliding doors and ran out to the deck. "Anna Marina, don't you even think about it!"

"What's she done now?" asked Frank as he walked out onto the deck.

"She was trying to climb on the monkey bars." She put her hands on her hips. "Honestly that child will be the death of me."

"She just can't seem to help herself, can she?"

"No she can't. She can't resist going farther and higher, no matter what it is."

"Yeah well, she's not getting higher in that tree. I'm calling someone to cut it down."

"No."

"What?"

"You can't."

"You know the second she can she's going to be right back up the damn thing."

"I know. Frank, if we cut it down we're saying her adventurous spirit is wrong. We can't stifle her like that."

Frank put his hands on her shoulders. "So what do we do?"

"I think all we can do is direct her energy. Maybe we could take her to one of those climbing gyms, you know the ones with hand holds on the wall. They string you up on ropes so you can't fall."

"Maybe." He pulled her close as they watched their children play. "I worry about her."

Marina sighed and leaned back against him. "So do I, Josiah. So do I."

"Jonas has turned into quite the caretaker. First teaching Jake, now this."

"It's really nice to see. He does love them, no matter how often they argue."

Frank rubbed his hand over her belly. "You ready to find out who this little one is?"

"Yes. Let's get confirmation you owe me ten bucks."

Marina and Frank pulled into the hospital parking lot closest to the Gallo wing. They would take Anna in for her checkup with Dr. Brown and then they would have their appointment with Dr. Weston. Frank helped Anna out of the car. She took her crutches from Marina and tried to bolt forward.

"Anna Marina!" Frank called. "Do not move." He walked up to his daughter. "You do not try and go ahead of us."

"Yes, Papa."

"Thanks," Marina whispered. "I'm tired of being the bad guy."

The Gallo Pediatric Center was full of brightly colored rooms and featured a magnificent mural of children playing. It had been a joint effort of Cabe and Jonathan Gallo. In the center of the mural was a beautiful blonde girl Marina knew was Amanda Gallo, Cabe's six year old daughter. Amanda had died of cancer more than thirty years ago.

They were escorted straight to the examining room where Dr. Brown joined them. He greeted them with a warm smile. "Well, hello young lady. How are you doing?"

"Okay."

"She's running around on her crutches," said Marina.

"Oh really?" he smiled. "You need to be careful, Anna. It's only been a week. You need to give your body a chance to heal properly. It's okay to move around if you feel okay, just don't push it too hard."

"Yes, sir," Anna said sheepishly.

"Okay, we're going to take a quick x-ray and see how she's healing." The doctor helped Anna with her crutches and held the door for her. Marina and Frank sat down in the exam room and waited.

"We're going to go through this a lot with her," said Frank.

"I'm afraid so. She's fearless."

"I know. I used to think that's a good thing but now I'm not so sure."

Marina took Frank's hand in hers. "This one will be more interested in fashion than gymnastics."

"She's probably going to make me crazy with boys."

"Oh God, you're right," she gasped.

Frank smiled and squeezed her hand. "One problem child at a time. Okay we have some time to kill. Let's talk about the nursery. Do you think Jake will mind moving into the guest room?"

"I haven't even thought of it. He might."

"His room is closest to ours and I want the baby there." Frank sat back against his chair and laughed. "I thought when I bought this house ten years ago that five bedrooms was excessive. I bought it for the big yard. I had no idea."

"Now your roses have to share space with monkey bars and sand boxes."

"I don't mind, sweetheart. Really I don't, but we've already moved our offices and gym into the basement. Any more kids and we'll have to move."

"Oh, hell no! Your little Marines are hereby retired." She rubbed her hand over her belly. "This is my last performance."

The door opened and Anna hobbled in followed by Dr. Brown. "She's doing fine. The break is healing well. I've also given her the lecture about taking it easy."

Marina let out the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. "Thank you, doctor,"

"I'll want to see her again in two weeks."

"How long am I going to have to wear this?" asked Anna.

"At least another six or seven weeks."

"That's forever!"

"Anna, stop whining," said Frank.

"That's what happens when you fall twenty feet out of a tree," said Dr. Brown.

Frank extended his hand. "Thank you, doctor. We'll see you in two weeks." They walked out of the office and made their way toward the children's playroom. "I don't know about leaving her here while we're both at the appointment. I should stay with her."

Marina smiled. "I knew you'd feel that way." She pointed toward the nurse's station and waved. Kate Riley smiled and waved back. "I figured an armed Homeland Agent

would be a passable substitute for Papa Bear."

"You're the best," he said in Russian.

"Aunt Kate! Do you see my cast? Daddy put a Harley sticker on it. Isn't it cool?"

Kate gave Anna a kiss. "It's very cool."

Marina gave Kate a hug. "Thanks so much for coming,"

"You're welcome. How was the appointment?" asked Kate.

"She's healing well."

Kate smiled. "That's good news."

"We need to get to my appointment. Are we good?"

"We're fine. Come on, Anna. You'll like the playroom."

"You behave yourself, princess," Frank said in Russian.

"Yes, Papa."

Anna peered into the playroom. She didn't know what her parents were thinking making her stay here. She wasn't a baby anymore. She'd much rather be outside riding her bike. Except she couldn't do that for awhile because of this dumb cast.

"Aunt Kate, I don't have to stay here. This is baby stuff. How about we get a cheeseburger?"

"No, your parents want you to stay here and here is where you stay."

Aunt Kate smiled at her but it was the smile adults used when they knew the kid had to do what they wanted. Fine. She would sit in the playroom but it's not like she would actually play. There weren't even any kids in here. Aunt Kate guided her to a kid's table with some coloring books. She moved the chair out so she could extend her leg.

"Here Anna, why don't you sit here?"

Anna giggled as Aunt Kate made a funny noise as she tried to sit down next to her. She looked closer and she saw under her jacket something she only saw on Papa. "Aunt Kate you have a gun?"

"Hush Anna. Yes I do. You know I work for the government."

"I thought you work with computers and stuff."

"I do but I sometimes I need my gun too. She pulled a skinny wallet out of her pocket and flipped it open. Anna gasped.

"Wow, you have a badge just like Uncle Cabe."

"That's because I'm a Homeland Special Agent, just like he is."

Anna ran her fingers over the gold badge. "Special Agent," she said quietly. She always liked Aunt Kate but she never thought of her like Papa and Uncle Cabe. "Aunt Kate, do you know how to fight?"

"Yes, I do."

"Could you teach me?"

"Oh sweetheart, I don't know about that."

"Please!"

"I tell you what. I'll talk to your parents. Maybe they'll let me show you a few defensive moves."

"Yay!"

Anna looked up when she heard someone come in the room. It was a girl, at least she thought it was a girl. She wasn't sure because she had no hair. She was pulling something with her that looked like one of those bag things that they'd stuck into her when she broke her leg. Only this was bigger and had dials and lights.

"Hello, I'm Kathy."

"I'm Anna."

"Hi Anna. Do you want to play? They have a lot of cool stuff here."

"Like what? I only saw the coloring books."

"Oh, that's baby stuff."

Anna looked at Aunt Kate. "See, told you."

Kathy pointed to a toy box against the wall. "That's where the cool stuff is." She looked down at Anna's leg. "I'll bring it over here." Aunt Kate helped Kathy put the box on the table and opened the lid. "They have all this cool stuff from 'Time Travelers'. They even have a Callie Reynolds figure."

Anna looked at doll Kathy pulled out of the box. It always weirded her out when someone had one of those things. It was supposed to look like her mother but sometimes those things did, sometimes they didn't. She didn't know which was worse. "Isn't there anything else in there?"

"Don't you like 'Time Travelers'? It's so cool. They can go anywhere, anytime."

"Not really." She pointed to the Callie doll. "That's my Mama."

"What?"

"Callie Reynolds. She's my Mama."

Kathy rolled her eyes. "You're silly." She pulled out more characters and set them around the travel pod. "Where should we go?"

Anna made a face but she saw Aunt Kate shake her head. She guessed she could pretend. That's what Mama did. Play make believe. "Where do you want to go?"

Kathy got a funny look. "Last year."

"Why?"

"I wasn't sick then."

"Oh. Is that why you don't have any hair?"

"Yeah. The medicine makes it fall out."

Anna reached for one of the boy figures. "That stinks."

"Yeah it does." Kathy looked down at Anna's leg. "What happened to you?"

"I fell out of the tree in our back yard." She pulled a horse out of the box and set the boy figure on it.

"That must have hurt."

"Yeah, but it's better now. Except I have to wear this cast for, like, forever. I won't be able to go swimming all summer."

Kathy set the Callie doll in the travel pod. "It's good you're better."

"When will you be better?" She heard Aunt Kate gasp and wondered what she said.

"Nobody knows."

"That stinks."

"Yeah, it does."

Anna looked at Kathy and wondered when she would get better. Maybe she should pray for her when she went to church. She picked up the boy doll on the horse and pushed it toward Kathy making a horse noise. Kathy smiled. She liked it when Kathy smiled.

"How are you feeling?" asked Dr. Watson.

"Fine. I'm a little tired but that's it," said Marina. She smiled at Frank. "This one has been watching me like a hawk."

Dr Watson smiled. "Good job." She took Marina's pressure and her smile faded a bit. "Your pressure is still a bit higher than I like. Not dangerous, but it could be better. What's going on?"

"Our daughter is downstairs after getting her leg checked. I was a bit concerned."

"Okay. That makes sense. How is she doing?"

"Good. Healing well. So well the little bugger keeps trying to climb on things with her cast."

"Tell her to give Mama's nerves a break."

"Will do," said Frank.

"Okay, you know the routine. Lay back, feet up."

Marina assumed the position. She smiled when Frank assumed his, as far away from the action as possible without pushing himself through the exam room wall. As much as she hated these exams she was relieved when she saw Dr. Weston's smile return.

"Everything seems good. Strong heart beat, healthy size." She took off her gloves and sat back. "Are you ready to find out what color to paint the nursery?"

Marina looked at Frank and smiled. "Did you bring your ten bucks?"

"Excuse me?" asked the doctor.

"I say it's a girl. Frank bet me ten bucks just to be contrary."

"Alright, let's do this." Dr. Weston smeared the cold gel on Marina's stomach. She flipped on the screen and moved the wand over her. The image moved and tilted. She pushed a button and printed a picture.

"Well?" asked Frank.

"You owe your wife ten bucks."

Marina and Frank walked down the hall toward the children's playroom.

"Go ahead," said Frank.

"What?"

"You know you're dying to say it."

"Say what?" she smiled.

"Go on."

Marina giggled and rubbed a protective hand over belly. "I told you so." She was still smiling when she walked into the playroom.

"I take it the exam went well." said Kate.

"It did." Marina paused when she saw Anna playing dolls with a little girl. The child was bald and had a grey pallor. She nodded toward the little girl. Kate moved with them out of earshot.

"That's Kathy. They've been absorbed in playing Time Travelers." "Really? She said seeing my face on those dolls creeped her out." "She got over it when Kathy said how much she liked it."

"Do you know what she has?"

"Leukemia."

"Oh, God," whispered Frank. Marina clasped his hand tight in hers.

Marina raised her voice to get her daughter's attention. "Hello Anna. Do you want to introduce us to your friend?"

"Hi Mama. Come here and meet Kathy. See, I told you so."

Frank smiled. "Why do the woman in my life love saying that?"

"Kathy didn't think you're my Mama."

Kathy looked at her and tilted her head. "Holy cow! It *is* you!"

"Hello Kathy. It's nice to meet you."

"Callie Reynolds," she whispered.

Marina smiled. She was used to people confusing her with her most famous character. "I play Callie Reynolds, but my name is Marina."

"And she's my Mama!"

Marina laughed. "And I'm Anna's Mama." She looked at all the Time Traveler figures

mixed in with figures from other movies. "You like Time Travelers?"

"Oh yes. Callie is the best. She's so strong. Nobody messes with her."

"I like that about her too."

"Kathy?" A tall woman with long black hair entered the playroom.

"Mommy, look who's here! It's Callie!"

The woman looked at her and gasped. "Oh my gosh. It's you."

Marina shook the woman's hand. "Hello, Marina Sokolov."

"Nash," Anna corrected.

"Marina Sokolov Nash," she smiled. "This is my husband Frank, and the loud one over there is my daughter, Anna. And this is my friend, Kate Gallo."

"I'm Sally Matthews, Kathy's mother."

"It's very nice to meet you. Kathy and I were just getting acquainted."

Sally smiled then looked at Kate. "Gallo?" Kate nodded. The woman's eyes teared. She turned out of her daughter's view. "I don't know how to thank you," she whispered. "Our insurance ran out. We didn't know what we were going to do. Here Kathy has a chance."

Kate put her hand on the woman's back. "The center will do everything possible for your daughter's recovery."

Marina saw how the woman was struggling to maintain her composure in front of her child. "Sally, if you have a camera on your phone maybe Kathy would like a picture?"

"Yay!" Kathy smiled. Marina knelt down next to her. The girl held out her hand to Anna. "You too." Anna stood next to her new friend.

"Papa, you take a picture too," said Anna.

"Sure, princess." Frank pulled out his phone and stood next to Sally. "Smile!" The cameras clicked and Marina gave the young girl a big hug.

"Oh that looks great," said Sally.

"We have to go now but it was very nice to meet you, Kathy," said Marina. She noticed Anna's smile fade.

"Do we have to?"

Frank put his hand on Anna's shoulder. "Yes, princess, we do. Mama and the baby need to have their lunch and so do you. Would you like to come back again and visit?"

"Yes please. We're not done making our kingdom."

"Your kingdom?" asked Marina.

"Yeah, Kathy is the queen and I'm the princess protector. I ride a Harley and fight bad guys, like Papa."

"That sound great. Sally, why don't you give me your number and I'll call you to see when we can come back."

Sally looked stunned that she'd been asked for her number by a big movie star. Frank pulled a business card out of his wallet and gave it to Sally. She wrote the number down and handed it back. Frank gave her a second card and nodded. Sally understood what Frank meant. It was a number in case something happened.

Marina smiled and gave Kathy another hug. "We'll see you again."

She led her family out to the hall and tried to retain her composure. It was never easy meeting sick children but seeing Anna next to her, making friends with her was terrifying. Kathy was gravely ill. If she didn't pull through how would she explain it to her child. How could she explain that life could be so cruel when they had been so blessed.

"Mama, Kathy's really sick."

"I know, baby. She's getting the best care in the world here."

Anna looked straight ahead as she pushed forward on her crutches. "I'm going to pray for her."

Marina blinked back tears. "I think that's a great idea."

Marina sat at her dressing table absently brushing her hair. It had been wonderful to confirm she was right about Riley. She was going to be a blonde angel who'd love all the girly things Anna didn't.

Anna. She'd surprised her at how fast she'd bonded with her new friend. She was playing with dolls for her, something she almost never did. They hell of it was she seemed to enjoy it.

She smiled at Frank as he appeared behind her. He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Hey there, Marine. What are you up to?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing. You've been brushing your hair for fifteen

minutes."

"What? I have?" She set the brush down.

"It's the little girl, Kathy, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I can't help but think what are we going to do for Anna if Kathy doesn't make it."

Frank sat down next to her on the vanity bench. "I know. I was thinking the same thing. The truth is we can't shield her from the bad things in life. All we can do is be there for her."

She rested her head on his shoulders. "I know you're right, it just doesn't make it easier."

"Mama?"

They turned to see Anna standing in the doorway, leaning on her crutches.

"Come in, sweetheart."

"I've been thinking a lot about Kathy. She's really sick and I want to do something."

"What do you want to do?" asked Marina.

"I can't make her not sick but I might be able to make her feel better."

"How?" asked Frank.

"She said she liked the playroom because it had some Time Traveler toys. She said she had a couple of her own but they were expensive and when she got sick her family stopped getting fun stuff. Could we bring her some toys? It might make her happy."

Marina looked at Frank and smiled. "We can absolutely do that."

"Cool. Then we'll go back to the hospital and give them to her."

"As soon as we can."

"Great," she smiled. She turned on her crutches and headed toward the hallway. "Sarah's making cheeseburgers for lunch."

"Do you want me to help you down the stairs?" asked Frank.

Anna turned and gave him a look. "Papa, I can do it."

He smiled and held up his hands. "Okay."

Marina smacked his shoulder. "What are you thinking?"

"She says she's got it." He waited until she was out in the hall then stood at the doorway and watched as she maneuvered toward the steps. She slid her crutches down

the stairs and held on to the railing. She supported herself as she hopped down the five stairs. She picked up her crutches and headed toward the kitchen. Frank turned back to Marina and smiled. "She did just fine. All that climbing has made her pretty strong."

"That's not the strength I'm worried about."

Marina joined Frank and the kids in the kitchen. Sara had already served them their lunch and they were arguing over who took the last pickle.

"Mrs. Nash, I have one for you, extra mushrooms."

"Oh, Sara you are a godsend." She sat at the table as Sara set the burger in front of her. She spotted a little hand trying to sneak the pickle off her plate. "Jacob Nash, I love you with all my heart but if you touch that pickle you're grounded until you're thirty."

"Yes, Ma'am. Sorry."

"You're forgiven." She took a bite of her pickle and smiled at the cold snap. Her children weren't the only Nashes that loved pickles.

Sara joined them at the table as they finished their lunch and talked about the plans for the summer. A trip to the house in Carmel was definitely on the list of things to do. Sara rose to clear the table. Frank glanced at Marina and she nodded.

"Sara wait a minute before we do that," said Frank. "We want to talk to everyone."

Marina smiled. "Anna and I both had doctor appointments today. Anna is doing fine," She gave Anna a pointed look. "So long as she stops trying climb the monkey bars."

"Anna's a monkey," giggled Jake.

"Jacob. Hush," said Frank.

"We found out whether you're having a brother or a sister."

Anna clasped her hands in prayer and closed her eyes. "Sister, sister, sister," she muttered. Frank laughed and ruffled her hair.

Marina smiled and rubbed her round belly. "It's a girl."

"Yes!" Anna shouted as she thrust her arms in the air. "I'm going to teach her about Harleys and how to climb and everything."

"Princess, she might like playing with dolls and things like that," said Frank. Anna looked at him like he'd lost his mind.

"Nah. She'll like climbing."

Marina looked at her sons. "Boys, what do you think?"

Jonas shrugged his shoulders. "I guess it's okay she's a girl."

"I think it'll be cool," said Jake. "What's her name?"

"Her name is Riley Jane."

"That's a funny name," said Jake.

"Jane was my grandmother's name," said Frank. "And Riley was Aunt Kate's name before she married Uncle Cabe."

"Oh. Okay," said Jake in the way only children can accept things.

"I like Aunt Kate so I guess it's okay," said Jonas.

Frank and Marina smiled at each other. "Why don't you kids load the dishwasher for Sara," said Frank. He took Marina's hand and helped her to her feet. "Come with me, diva." He led her out to the garden and sat down in the gazebo.

"What's up?" she asked.

"I want a few moments alone with you."

She smiled and slipped her hands in his. "Oh yeah? Bedrooms upstairs, Marine."

He smiled and gave her a quick kiss. "Not that. Well, not just that." He pulled his phone from his pocket and pulled up a website. "You know the rose I've been cultivating?"

"The pretty pink one with the white edges?"

"Yeah that one. I registered it." He showed her his registration with the Rose Society.

She gasped. "The Riley Jane."

"It's pretty delicate and you said it looked very feminine. I thought it sounded right."

"So you knew she was a girl too."

"Over the years I've learned to never underestimate your mother's intuition." He saw she was fighting back tears. "Sweetheart?"

She wiped her cheek and smiled. "After all these years you still manage to surprise me." She gave him a soft kiss. "I love you, Josiah."

Frank went upstairs to check on Marina. She was supposed to be taking it easy despite the fact that they were having the reveal party tonight. He walked into the bedroom where she had her head and feet elevated on the adjustable bed. He was not surprised to find her on the phone.

"Yes, you heard me. I want them all. Every piece. How many?"

"Who are you talking to?"

Marina covered the speaker with her hand. "George Lyons." She took her hand off the speaker. "Okay, I don't need that many, just get me the top of the line pieces. Yes you do have them. You showed me the R&D department at Lyon Gate toys when you were wanted me to sign off on the last Carrie toys." She held the phone away from her ear as Frank heard yelling. George was the producer of the Time Traveler series. He was none too pleased with Marina or Frank. Her pregnancy had sidelined the next sequel for a least a year along with millions in profits.

"George, George, George. Take a breath. There, that's better. Now, George, have I ever asked you for a favor like this?" Marina rolled her eyes. "George, my pregnancy is a blessing for me and my family. If you feel my child is such an inconvenience then you are free to recast my role. As you know I only sign on for one picture at a time." She looked at Frank and smiled. "George I'm not asking for my own children. It's for a child I met at the Gallo Pediatric Center. She's become friends with my daughter." Frank watched Marina working the billionaire producer just like she did when she was getting a donation for Welcome Home. "George, don't do it for me. Do it for a seven year old girl with leukemia." Marina smiled and Frank knew George was giving her what she wanted. "Oh, could you get a Carrie costume for me, girl's size ten. Your a doll, George, thanks so much." She hung up the phone and smiled.

Frank smiled. "Watching you work a donor is always an inspiration. Resistance is futile."

Marina laughed. "Thanks, babe but that's a different franchise."

Frank talked to the kids before the guests got there. They were under orders not to spill the beans about Riley before the reveal. He knew they wouldn't but he'd promised

them a trip to Harrow's anyway. He watched them putting their laundry away from their individual baskets. Each had their own basket and they were responsible for putting their own clothes away. It was all part of their regular chores. He'd seen some of their classmates who were already entitled little snots at the ripe old age of six or seven. This would not happen to his kids.

"Okay, everybody get cleaned up for company," he said as he walked toward the master bedroom. Marina was sitting on the edge of the bed and was struggling with her shoes. He knew if he valued his life, or at the very least, his manhood, he would not laugh. He didn't say anything, he just knelt down and helped her slip them on.

"It's not fair," said Marina.

"What's not?"

"I'm huge."

"You are not huge. You're beautiful."

"I had to dig out my maternity clothes already."

"Sweetheart, you're six months pregnant." As soon as it came out of his mouth he knew it was a mistake.

"Just barely! I've never been this big, this soon."

He sat on the bed next to her and put his arm around her. "Am I allowed to remind you that Dr. Weston said that you are perfectly on track and taking great care of yourself?"

She shook off his arm. "No. I'm wallowing."

"Fine. You can wallow for thirty minutes. The family will be here soon. I'm going to jump in the shower."

"That's it? You're taking a shower."

"Marina, angel, love of my life. This is the third time I've been through this with you and I've paid attention. Right now you're feeling awkward and uncomfortable. All I can do right now is take a shower and get the hell out of your way. But only for thirty minutes." He smiled and ducked as one of the pillows flew past his head.

It had been Marina's idea to let the children be apart of the reveal. Frank thought the kids wouldn't be interested but they surprised him. Turns out all his children had a touch of their mother's dramatic flair. He looked at the crowd in the garden. Everyone who

was important to their family had gathered. As much as doing this all again at his age was daunting, hell, downright terrifying, he wouldn't change a thing. He noticed Kate involved in an animated conversation with his daughter. Anna appeared to be in her pleading for something mode, a mode with which Frank was very familiar. He tapped on Marina's shoulder.

"Do you know what's going on there?"

"No clue. Let's find out."

As they got close they heard Anna's plaintive whine of "Please, Aunt Kate," which was followed by Kate's shoulder slump of surrender.

"Fine. I'll ask them."

"Ask us what?" asked Marina.

"Aunt Kate is going to teach me how to fight."

"Excuse me?" asked Frank.

Kate looked embarrassed. "When we were in the hospital she saw my gun so I showed her my shield."

"Anna, you know Aunt Kate and Uncle Cabe both work for the government."

"Did I hear my name?" Cabe asked as he joined them.

"Aunt Kate is going to teach me to fight!"

"Excuse me?" asked Cabe as he looked at his wife.

"Okay, we're going in circles," said Frank. "Anna, go talk to your grandparents."

"Papa, Aunt Kate..."

"I'm sorry. Did you think I was giving you an option?" he asked and pointed towards his parents. "Go. Now." He could have sworn he heard her mutter in Russian as she walked away. She'd ditched the crutches last week and was moving almost as fast as when she wasn't wearing a cast. He stifled a smile at his daughter and turned back to his friends. "Talk to me."

"She asked me if I could fight. I said yes." Cabe fake coughed and Kate smacked his shoulder. "That's enough out of you Agent Gallo. She asked me to teach her and I said no but she pleaded."

"Yeah, that's in her skill set," said Marina.

"So I thought maybe some defensive moves. I did some research."

"Of course you did," said Cabe. He hid his grin behind his drink.

"I've found some defense training for children. I'd be happy to show her."

"I could train her," said Frank.

"You're a boxer and a street fighter," said Cabe. "Kate does have a black belt in Krav Maga. She can knock me on my ass."

"Damn straight," Kate said with a smile. "Look, it's your call but it might not be a bad idea."

"It would burn off some of that energy of hers," said Marina.

"Yeah, it would," said Frank. "I really appreciate the offer, Kate. Marina and I will talk it over later and get back to you."

"Sure thing,"

Kate watched as Frank and Marina returned to their guests. She looked at Cabe and smiled. "You want another soda?" She turned to go and he reached for her hand.

"Hold on. What aren't you saying?" he asked.

"About what?"

"I know when you're keeping something to yourself. Talk to me."

"I worry about them."

"Marina and Frank? They're as solid as any couple we know." He put his hands on her shoulders. "They may even as solid as we are."

"Not them." Kate looked over at the Nash children. Anna was talking to her grandmother Anna. Jonas was showing his Grandpa Joe a pretty pink rose. Jake was giggling as he was chasing his namesake around the yard. "Look around. Everything here is as normal as any other family barbeque. But it's not. Not really."

Cabe released her and shook his head. "No, it's not."

"Even though she hasn't made a movie in a while Marina is still one of the most famous women in the world."

"Not to mention one of the wealthiest."

Kate sighed. "Exactly."

Marina could feel herself getting tired, even though the party was catered and all she was doing was hosting. Ten guests and three hyper children would make anyone tired. She rubbed her hands over belly and whispered in Russian, "Angel, I promise to put us to bed soon." She pasted on a smile and found Frank talking to her stepfather, no doubt about the latest and greatest in the world of roses. "You ready?"

"I'll corral the kids." Frank had a word with each child and they stood by her with giant smiles. He came back with a large box and set it in front of them.

"Okay everyone, we're about ready," Marina announced.

"Quite the production," said her brother Val.

"Hey, give me a break. I haven't been on a set for a year. I need a sparkle fix." She smiled. "Kids, are you ready?" Anna, Jonas and Jake lined up in front of their parents. "In this family we have a tradition of naming our children after the people we love and respect. She turned to Frank who put his hands on his daughter's shoulders.

"I chose Anna Marina's name because I wanted her to have the same fiery spirit as her mother and her grandmother."

Marina's mother smiled. "Be careful what you wish for." Anna Sokolov Davenport was fighting back tears.

Frank smiled. "I've never regretted it for a minute."

Marina put her hands on Jonas shoulder's. "I chose Jonas Franklin's name because I wanted to him to be as kind and loving and good as his father and grandfather." Jonas Nash Sr. didn't fight the stray tear.

Jake looked up at Frank, "Papa, it's my turn."

"Of course it is, little man. I chose Jacob Vasily's name for the two good, honorable men who've become my brothers." Jake and Val both smiled.

"So, does this make it your turn, again?" asked Cabe.

"That it does." Marina pointed to the box in the center of the guests. "The first name we've chosen is for someone who's been very present in our lives. Honestly, I don't know what we would have done without them. The other name is for someone we never met but I have a feeling will be a big influence on us for years to come."

Frank took Marina's hand and they walked to the edge of the box. They held their hands out to their children. "Are you ready?"

The children put their hands on the edge of the box and shouted "One, two, three!" and opened the lid. Pink balloons sprang from the box and everyone applauded. On the balloons was printed "Riley Jane Nash"

"Riley?" Cabe asked as he looked at his wife with a big smile. Kate looked stunned.

"Marina?" she whispered.

"Kate, you are always there for me and my family. I don't know what we...what I would do without you. I'm proud to have my daughter to carry your name." Marina was stunned when the tough as nails Homeland Special Agent broke down in tears and pulled her into a tight hug.

Marina was hugging and being hugged by everyone when she noticed her mother in law staring at the balloons and touching the name. She tapped Frank on the shoulder and nodded toward his mother. "Let's talk to her." She walked toward her and touched her back. "Florence, are you okay?"

"Is this for...?"

"Yes it is. Let's go inside for a bit." They walked into the house and sat down on the livingroom couch.

"How do you know about her?" asked Florence.

Marina bit her lip and looked at Frank. "Go on, tell her," he said.

"She may think I'm crazy."

"Actresses are eccentric, diva, not crazy," he smiled.

"You're not helping."

"Tell me what?"

"It was a couple of months ago, I had a dream."

"A dream?"

She looked at Frank. "See, she'll think I'm crazy."

Florence reached for her hand. "Please, go on."

"I was walking into our bedroom and I saw this pretty little blonde girl sitting at my vanity. She looked at me and smiled. She had the best smile and the brightest blue eyes, even brighter than Frank's. Her lips were very pink and she had my lipstick in her hand. Come to think of it, that was odd because my hair and skin are too dark to ever wear that shade. Anyway, I said to her 'Riley Jane you know better than to play in my makeup.' She

said, 'Sorry, Mama.' and she smiled." Marina looked down and rubbed her belly. "She's going to have the best smile. When I woke up I told Frank. I knew who Riley was of course but told him I had no idea where I got Jane. That's when he told me about your mother." Florence was smiling through her tears. Frank put his arm around his mother.

"Mom? Are you okay?"

"It's one of my few memories of her. She was sitting at her vanity and putting on her lipstick." She smiled at Marina. "Her bright pink lipstick. She was very fair with pretty blue eyes. And she was very blonde." Florence closed her eyes and traveled back seventy five years. "She smelled like lavender and gave the best hugs."

"What happened to her?" asked Marina.

"Cancer. She was gone so fast. I was ten."

She took her Florence's hand. "Are you okay with this?"

Florence dried her eyes and kissed Marina's cheek, then her son's. "I think it's wonderful. Thank you." She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. "I should get back out there. Your father will be looking for me."

Marina watched as Frank helped his mother to her feet and return to the party. "Did I upset her?"

"No. I think it just threw her to think about her mother after all these years." He held his hand out to her and she walked into his arms. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, but I am tired. I think it's time I call it a day." Thirty minutes later, while Frank was saying goodbye to the last of the guests, Marina was slipping under the covers and elevating her legs. It had a great party but she was really tired. As she closed her eyes her mind was swirling with images of Kate turning her daughter into a ninja warrior and a woman who'd been gone for seventy five years.

Chapter Ten

"Anna, knock it off!" shouted Jonas followed by the sound of slamming doors.

Frank sighed. The children had been itchy all day thanks to the non-stop rain. He'd finally sent them to their home gym to knock around on the mats. The only problem with that was he and Marina were in their office across the hall trying to get some work done.

"Will you please see what is going on in there?" asked Marina. She was laying on the couch with her laptop "But would you bring me an ice tea first?"

"You know you're supposed to lay off the caffeine."

"Franklin Nash," she growled. "Do not press me."

He ran upstairs and poured an ice tea. Marina had just past eight months in her pregnancy and she'd been restricted to bed rest. She'd been going sir crazy upstairs so he'd agreed to letting her catch up on Welcome Home paperwork from downstairs so long as she stayed on the couch with her feet up. He handed her the tea which she acknowledged with a growl that passed for a thank you.

He walked out of the office and reached for the door to the gym. "Out of the frying pan," he said as he walked into a room with three screaming children. "What in the name of God is going on in here?"

"It's Anna's fault!" shouted Jonas. "She keeps trying to throw me to the ground."

"I'm trying to show him what Aunt Kate is teaching me. It's really cool," she pleaded.

Frank watched Jake bouncing up and down on the mini tramp. "Jake, do you have anything to add?"

"No. I just stay out of her way. It's safer."

He sighed as he looked at his children. He'd never stayed to watch Anna's training with Kate. Kate would come by the house and work with her in their gym or Sara would take her to Kate's. Between trying to look after Marina and being swamped with work he'd been absent from his kids lives. That would have to change.

"Okay, first things first. Anna, your brothers are not tackling dummies. You will not practice on them."

"Papa!"

He glared at his daughter and she knew to stop whining. "Boys, why don't you go

upstairs. No mischief." Both boys cheered with relief. Jake darted out the door first but Frank stopped Jonas. He leaned close and spoke softly in Russian. "Please keep an eye on your brother for me. I need your help."

Jonas gave a grudging shrug. "Okay, Papa."

Frank smiled and kissed the top of Jonas head. "Thank you, son." He closed the door behind Jonas and turned to his daughter. "How about you show me some of the things Aunt Kate taught you."

"I don't want to hurt you, Papa."

He bit back a smile. "I think I can take it."

"Aunt Kate was showing me how to protect myself if someone tried to hurt me. She said I could do this," Anna picked up her foot and tried to smash it down on his instep. Fortunately he moved in time.

"Effective. What else?"

"She said I could use my size to my advantage."

"How so?"

"She said if it was a man I could do this." She pulled her arm back and aimed at his crotch. He quickly grabbed her arm.

"Okay, I've got the idea." Frank sat on the mat and pulled Anna down next to him. "Did she talk to you about why you might need to defend yourself."

Anna got quiet and nodded. Now he felt like a complete shit. He should have been the one to have this discussion with his daughter. He wished to God there wasn't a need for it, but there was. "What did she tell you, princess?"

"Well first she talked about her job. How she had to go under the covers."

He tried not to smile. "You mean undercover?"

"Yeah, that's it. She said sometimes she would go where the bad guys were and she didn't have a gun so she had to know how to protect herself if she needed."

Frank knew about some of the missions she'd been on and the violence involved. They trusted Kate but he wondered if maybe this had been a mistake. "What did she say?"

"She said the most important thing to remember was to trust my little voice."

"Excuse me?"

"You know, when you're thinking about something and you're wondering if you should do it or not and the voice says no. That voice. She says that voice is there to protect me." She smiled. "That's kind of cool."

Frank smiled and put his arm around her. Kate had told his daughter about trusting her instincts. "What else?"

"She said the best thing to do is if I think I'm in danger and I can get away to run to the nearest policeman or teacher or anyone else I trust."

"That's very good." He hated to ask the next question. "What if you can't get away?"

"She showed me how to hit. Sometimes I practice on these funny mitts. They look like big baseball gloves. Uncle Cabe puts them on and I get to hit him"

His best friend was helping his daughter and he had no clue. Back to total shit territory. He noticed a strange look on Anna's face. "What is it, sweetheart? Talk to me."

"That man who tried to hurt Mama, did he get punished?"

"That was a very long time ago, before you were born. How do you know about that?"

"Sometimes I look Mama up on the computer. There's a lot of stuff about her. I didn't tell Jonas but he probably knows. He's always looking stuff up." She look up at him with the questioning that can break a father's heart. "Did he get punished?"

This was why they were told not to read stories about their family on line. This is what happened. She only had half the story. "Yes angel, he was punished."

"Was it true you caught him?"

He wouldn't tell her the whole story. How he was trying to stop him before he got to her and he failed. It still haunted his nightmares. "I caught him."

She smiled and hugged him. "That's good, Papa. What happened to him?"

"He went to jail for what he did. That's where he died."

"I'm glad he died."

"No, baby, never that. It's okay to be angry about what he did. It's okay to be glad he was punished for it. But never be glad someone dies, even a bad guy. I was a sad waste of a life. Do you understand?"

"I think so." She looked at him with tears in her eyes. "Will someone come after me?"

He pulled his daughter tight to his chest, trying to rein in his emotions. He had to get this right. "Anna, you know how Mama and I have always told you the truth." She looked up at him and nodded. "I will tell you the truth now. I wish I could say there are no bad guys in the world, but I can't. What I can tell you is that we do everything we possibly can to keep you safe. This house has security cameras and alarms. Your school is very safe. Believe me, I checked."

"You did?"

"I did and I review it every semester. It's what I do at my work, keeping people safe. I trust the people you are with when you aren't with Mama and Papa. If I didn't you wouldn't be with them. You know who else I trust?"

"Who?"

"You."

"Me?"

"I trust you, Anna. You are very smart. You don't go places you aren't supposed to."

She gave him a devilish smile that melted his heart. "Except too high in the tree."

He laughed and hugged her tighter. "Except that."

She quieted in his arms. "Papa, if someone tries to hurt me like they tried to hurt Mama..."

Frank took his daughter's face in his hands and he spoke to her in Russian so she would understand how much he meant what he was about to say. "You listen to me. You are my princess, my baby girl. There is nothing in the world, nothing that would stop me from finding you and protecting you. Do you understand that? Nothing and no one."

"I love you, Papa," she whispered in Russian.

"I love you too, my girl, more than I could ever say." He tried to regain his control before he made Anna as frightened as he was now. "You know, I have something you can practice your moves on." He stood and opened the far closet. He pulled out the practice dummy he hadn't used in far too long.

"Cool! Aunt Kate has one of these." Anna immediately adopted a fighting stance and nailed the dummy right in the jewels.

Marina walked up to the kitchen to get another drink before going back upstairs. The all day rain had made the everyone feel a bit couped up. She poured herself a glass of ice water and looked out at the garden. She was stunned to see Frank outside, deadheading a rosebush, in the rain. Whatever was on his mind, it wasn't good. She walked into the laundry room, got a couple of towels, then sat down next to the deck door and waited.

Thirty minutes later, Frank slid open the deck door. Without speaking, Marina handed him the towels.

"Thanks, babe. I was just doing some deadheading."

"I noticed. Did you notice the driving rain?"

"Yeah, well..."

She followed him into the kitchen and sat down. "Sit. Tell me what's going on."

"I shouldn't sit in these wet clothes. I should jump in the shower."

"The chair will survive and so will you. Sit and talk to me."

He did a final wipe down of his body, dropped the towels on the floor and sat. "I had some things to think about."

"What things?"

"You know I've never stayed for Anna's fight training."

"Neither have I."

"You're on bed rest. I don't have a good excuse."

She put her hand on his. "You're busy with work and looking after me and our family."

"Important things are getting lost. I'm not here for our children, not like I should be. You know, I thought babies were the most needy. I was surprised when I realized the older they get the more they need me." And now with Riley coming..." He took a breath like he was bracing himself. "I'm thinking about selling the business to Jerry."

"Why? Because you miss a couple of karate lessons?"

"Not just because of that." He managed a smile. "And it's krav maga"

She laughed and waved her hand. "Whatever. Frank, you spent a lot of years building your business. You went from just you to a team of investigators and staff. You've

done some consulting with Scorpion. You've done some very important work. I'm very proud of what you've accomplished."

Frank smiled. "Thanks, sweetheart. But I've been thinking about it for awhile. Jerry and I have had some conversations about it. The truth is I'm getting too old."

"My very pregnant self would argue that point."

He chuckled and gave her a quick kiss. "You've always been great for my ego."

She rubbed her hand over her belly. "This child was not created by ego. This child was created by my very hot lover."

He smiled and kissed her again. "I seem to recall you had something to do with it."

She smiled. "Ah...maybe a little bit."

"The business has gotten too big for me to give it the attention it needs and still be here for you and the kids. This family will always be my number one priority. I need to sell. I want to sell."

"And you needed to get soaking wet to be sure?"

"Yeah, I did. I want to be here for you and for them."

"You know I'll back any decision you make. I just want you to be sure."

"I am."

She smiled and pushed herself to her feet. "Okay then. You grab the towels and we'll take that shower."

"We?" he smiled.

"I need a shower and I need you to scrub my back."

"Don't you have a brush for that?"

Marina grabbed his wet shirt and pulled him close for a passionate kiss. "No, that's what I have a hot husband for." She nodded toward the towels. "Now pick those up and hop to it, Marine."

"Yes, Ma'am." He smiled, grabbed the towels and followed her upstairs.

Marina sat on the bed and threw the afghan over her legs. She'd made it a habit not to get under the covers until she was actually going to bed. She propped up her pillows and adjusted the base of her bed so she could sit up comfortably and watch TV or read. She looked over at the master bath as Frank combed back his wet hair. She smiled to herself. She was really glad they installed that new shower. He turned around and stopped.

"What?"

"Damn, you are one fine lookin fella." Frank stood in the door frame and smiled. A knock at the door interrupted her scandalous train of thought. "Come in."

Jonas opened the door and peered in. "Mama?"

"Yes, Jonas. Come in."

He came in carrying a small package he had obviously wrapped himself. "Oh, hi Papa."

"Hi, son. What have you got there?" he asked.

"It's a present for Riley." He quietly raised the package and handed it to her.

Marina glanced up at Frank who look as confused as she was. She patted the bed. "Come sit next to me, sweetheart." Jonas sat down as she carefully removed paper. It was a school notebook. She opened it and saw it had been written in Russian. "The Lost Princess by Jonas Nash" On the facing page it was inscribed. "For Riley, Love, your brother Jonas. She glanced at a few pages and looked at Frank in shock. "It's a whole story book including pictures." She smiled at her son who looked a bit nervous. "And you wrote it in Russian." She held it up to Frank. "Look." Frank stood next to the bed and looked at the pages of crayon colored pictures and his son's handwriting.

"Jonas, this is wonderful," he said. The look on his son's face seemed to relax a bit.

"Why a storybook?" asked Marina.

"You always read to us and I looked up babies on the internet."

"You did?" Marina looked at Frank. The look on both their faces said they knew this could be awkward. "What were you looking for?"

"How babies learn. It was really very interesting."

Frank stifled a smile. "Was it now?"

"Yes," he smiled, obviously delighted to share this new bit of his research. "It said they can hear you before they are born. So I thought if you read to her in Russian now, she'd learn it faster."

Marina grinned. "That's a wonderful idea, and a very thoughtful gift. What about the pictures?"

Jonas went back to looking embarrassed. "I thought maybe later she might want to look at the pictures. They aren't that good."

She lifted his chin up to face her. "They are beautiful. Aren't they Papa?"

"Yes, they are, Jonas. It's a terrific present."

"How about you read it to her?" said Marina.

"Okay!" he said with a broad smile.

"Can I get in on this?" asked Frank.

Marina patted the bed next to her. "Bring it in here, Marine. Jonas you get between me and Papa."

Jonas sat between the and laid the book on his lap and began to read the story in his sweet Russian accent.

The Lost Princess by Jonas Nash

Little Princess Riley lived in a big castle with her parents the King and Queen. The King was very big and strong. The Queen was very beautiful.

The little princess had a sister, Princess Anna. She was strong like their father and beautiful like their mother. She had two brothers, Prince Jacob and Prince Jonas. Prince Jacob was funny and made everyone laugh. Prince Jonas was quiet and liked to read.

One day the Princess Riley decided to explore the castle even though her parents told her not to wander away on her own. She went down the long hallways and up and down stairs. Finally she found a long staircase and she climbed and she climbed. When she got to the very top she was in the very highest part of the castle. She looked out the window and saw all the pretty trees and animals. After her long climb she was very tired

so she laid down on a soft rug and went to sleep.

The King and the Queen got very worried when they couldn't find the little Princess.

"We must find her," said the King.

"Where could she be?" asked the Queen.

"Maybe she's climbing trees," said Princess Anna. Princess Anna looked in the trees.

"Maybe she's playing a game," said Prince Jacob. Prince Jacob looked in the toy room.

"Maybe she went exploring," said Prince Jonas. Prince Jonas looked down the long hallway. He found the long staircase. "If I was going exploring this is where I'd go." So Prince Jonas climbed and climbed until he was at the very top of the castle. He found his little sister asleep.

"Wake up, little sister. Everyone is looking for you."

"You found me," said Princess Riley.

"I found you," said the Prince. He kissed her forehead and they walked down the stairs, holding hands."

"The End."

Marina wiped her eyes and she caught Frank doing the same. She placed a kiss on her son's forehead. "Jonas, that is the most wonderful bedtime story ever."

Frank put a kiss on his son's head. "The best ever," he said with a choked voice.

"You really think so?" he asked with a bright smile.

"We really do. The pictures are beautiful. You made pictures of all of us. What a wonderful castle. We will read this to Riley all the time. I bet this will help her with her Russian."

"I'm glad you like it."

Marina pulled Jonas tight to her. "Can I tell you a secret? You have to promise to keep the secret. You can't tell anyone because it might hurt their feelings." Jonas nodded his head. "We've gotten a lot of baby gifts over the years, all sorts of wonderful things. Haven't we?"

"Lots," said Frank.

"Now this is the secret part. I can honestly tell you of all those baby presents we've ever gotten, this is our most favorite of all. Isn't it, Papa?"

"It most definitely is."

Marina didn't think she'd every seen Jonas this happy. "We are going to keep this in a safe place. Then we can read it to Riley when ever we want."

"Okay," he said.

"Jonas, it's almost time for dinner. Why don't you go downstairs and tell your brother and sister to get washed up."

"Okay, Papa."

"But first," Frank pulled him into his arms for a tight hug. "Thank you for such a wonderful gift. I love you, very much."

"I love you too, Papa."

Marina smiled and held out her arms. "Come here you" She pulled him close and kissed his cheek. Thank you, baby. I love you so much."

"I love you too, Mama." He jumped off the bed and headed out of the room.

Marina looked at Frank. "Wow."

"Wow, indeed."

Chapter Eleven

Anna didn't know why she had to go to the dumb old museum. She'd much rather be outside. Their teacher, Mrs. Cheswick, said it would expand their minds, whatever that meant. They had to buddy up when they were walking around in the museum so Anna picked Jenny Stanton. Jenny was new in school and she was really shy. Some of the mean kids picked on her because she had fuzzy hair. Anna thought her hair looked cool. She asked her why it was like that and Jenny said it was because it was like her daddy's hair. She said it was because she was mixed. Anna wasn't sure what that meant but her little voice said it would be rude to ask. Papa always said never be rude. She'd have to ask Papa what it meant.

"Jenny you stick with me," said Anna.

"Okay Anna."

Jenny was quiet and shy, like Jonas. Jonas was actually mad he didn't get to come today because he had a different math class in the afternoon. She promised to get him a program.

They were riding in the school bus when Jenny looked at her funny. "Anna, why are you nice to me? Nobody else is."

Anna had to think for a minute. "Well, you were new and you didn't know anybody. Mama told me I should be nice to new kids because they didn't have a brother or sister in the same class like I did."

"Jonas is nice."

"He's okay."

Jenny smiled. "He's really cute."

"Ewww. He is not."

"Yes he is."

"Yuck." They pulled up to the museum and Mr. Hobbes parked the bus.

"Okay kids, you know the rules. Stay close to Mrs. Cheswick and myself and stick with your buddy."

Anna followed her class into the building. They were introduced to a lady named

Ms. Chloe who called herself a docent, whatever that meant. They started walking around the museum and looking at the pictures. Some were kind of pretty. She liked the one with the pretty flowers like from Papa's garden. Jenny seemed to like the pictures and she was staring at one with a lot of swirling colors. Anna was bored and began looking around at the people. Most of her class was paying attention to Ms. Chloe. Some other people were wandering around and looking at the pictures and statues. One man kept looking over at their class. He was wearing a brown jumpsuit and he had a broom. He kept sweeping and looking over at them. No, not at them. He was looking at Jenny. Maybe he was staring at her fuzzy hair like the mean kids did. Anna got a creepy feeling and moved to the other side of Jenny, putting herself between her friend and the creepy guy. Jenny didn't like being stared at.

They kept looking at pictures and the museum lady kept talking. Anna felt better that she didn't see creepy guy any more. They walked into a big room to look at more pictures when Jenny tugged at Anna's shirt.

"I have to pee," she whispered.

"We're supposed to wait until lunch."

"I can't wait I really have to go."

Anna looked around and saw a restroom sign on a door on the other side of the big room. She walked around her classmates and found her teacher. "Mrs. Cheswick."

"Anna please, listen to Ms. Chloe."

"Mrs. Cheswick, please it's important."

"Oh, what is it, Anna?"

Anna crooked her finger to tell her to get closer. "Jenny has to pee," she whispered.

"She'll have to wait. Lunch break is in a few minutes."

"She can't wait." Anna pointed to the restroom sign. "It's right over there. I'll go with her."

Mrs. Cheswick sighed the way grownups do when they hate having to do what you want. "Fine. But come right back."

"Yes, Ma'am." She went back to Jenny and took her by the hand. "Come on. We have to hurry." She walked Jenny down the short hall and found the ladies room. Jenny used the bathroom and washed her hands. Then she did something that surprised Anna.

She gave her a big hug.

"Thank you," she said.

"For what?" asked Anna.

"For being my friend."

Anna smiled. She liked Jenny. She was really nice. As she reached for the door she asked, "Jenny, do you like to climb?" Jenny didn't answer. She didn't move. Anna looked up and saw the creepy guy standing in the doorway and he had a nasty rag in his hand. He moved toward Jenny and she screamed. Anna pushed him in the stomach and stomped on his foot. "Jenny, run!" Jenny pushed past her and ran down the hall. The creepy guy grabbed Anna and she tried to pull away. She was kicking the man in the shins and screaming when he put the nasty cloth over her face. The rag smelled funny and it made her dizzy. Then everything went dark.

"Diva, where are you?" shouted Frank

"Living room."

"What are you doing in here. You know you're on bed rest."

"I'm on the couch with my feet up. I needed a new view. I'm going stir crazy, Frank. Doing nothing all day is exhausting. He leaned over and gave her a kiss.

"I know, baby. It's only a few more weeks."

"Four weeks. Another thirty days like this." She through her head back against her pillows. "Ugh, I feel like a beached whale."

He sat down next to her and gave her another, deeper kiss. "I am married to the most beautiful, sexiest woman in the world. I won't have you talking about her like that."

Marina smiled. "Not to mention much younger."

Frank grinned and moved in for another kiss, "Not to mention." He would have continued this highly interesting conversation if his phone hadn't rung. "What now?" He saw an unknown number in the caller id.

"Hello?"

"Is this Mr. Nash?"

"Yes, who's this?"

"I'm Detective Esposito from LAPD."

"How can I help you, detective?"

"Sir, your daughter Anna was with her class today at the Nathan museum?"

Frank's heart began to pound. "Yes, what's happened."

Marina grabbed his arm. "What's wrong?"

"Mr. Nash, I'm very sorry to have to tell you but your daughter has been abducted."

"Jesus Christ," he whispered.

"We are on scene and we are investigating."

"What the hell happened?! Why wasn't someone watching her?"

"Oh God, Anna!" Marina cried.

"Apparently she took her friend to the ladies room, a Jenny Stanton. Jenny told us a man tried to grab her and Anna stopped him. She pushed him away and told her to run. In the time it took her to get back to her group and tell them what happened, Anna was gone."

"I assume you have a command post at the museum. I'm on my way."

"Sir I understand how concerned you are but you should stay put in case you get a ransom call."

"Concerned?! You think I'm concerned?!" he screamed. He pulled the phone away from his ear and took a few deep breaths. "I will route my home phone line to my cell. I'll be there in twenty minutes." He clicked off the phone and looked at Marina. She'd gone pale as chalk.

"What's happened to Anna?" she whispered.

He took another breath and repeated what the detective had told him.

"She attacked the guy?" she said.

"Apparently. She was protecting her friend." Marina pushed herself to her feet and slipped on her shoes. "What are you doing?"

"I'm coming with you."

"Marina, no."

She drilled him with a glare. "Either I go with you or I drive myself."

He could tell there was no stopping her and he couldn't blame her. "Fine. Let's go." He quickly rerouted the home phone line to his cell phone just in case, then linked the bluetooth to his car. As he pulled out into traffic he hit a button on the console. "Call Cabe."

"Calling Cabe," replied the mechanical voice.

"Hey, buddy. What's up?"

"Cabe, Anna was on a field trip to the Nathan Museum. She was abducted."

"Christ," he whispered. "I assume you're on your way there."

"You assume correctly."

"The team and I will meet you there."

"Cabe, Marina's with me."

"I'll make sure Toby has his bag. Frank, we'll get her back."

Frank tried to calm his breathing. His instinct was telling him to hunt down this bastard and kill him. But instinct wouldn't get Anna back. Rational thought and training would. He pulled up to the chaotic scene in front of the museum. Frank spotted the school's small bus parked with a dozen or more little faces peering out. None of them were his daughter. He also spotted the Scorpion van pulling in. Two policeman approached Frank and Marina as they got out of their car.

"I'm sorry sir, you can't park here. This is a crime scene."

"The child who's been taken is our daughter."

The policeman looked at him and then took a second look at Marina. "Holy crap," he whispered. "I'll get the detective."

"You do that."

"Frank."

He turned around to see Cabe and Kate walking toward them. Kate immediately put her arms around her friend. "Thanks for coming so fast."

"Mr. Nash?"

Frank saw a man and a woman coming toward him. They each had badges on their hips. "I'm Detective Esposito, this is my partner Detective Katic."

He shook their hands. "This is my wife, Marina." To their credit the detectives didn't miss a beat.

"Ma'am," said Katic. She looked at Cabe and Kate. "And you are?"

Each pulled out their badges. "Homeland Security, Special Agent Cabe Gallo. This is my partner Special Agent Kate Gallo."

"Okay, How is this a Homeland matter?" asked Esposito.

"It's not. She's our niece."

"I see. Well I understand your concern but family members..."

Cabe cut him off. "Inside that van is my team, Scorpion. They are tapping into the security feeds to see who took her."

"Holy shit," whispered Katic. "Show us what you've got." Katic started to move forward but Esposito held her back.

"This is an LAPD matter."

"Don't you know who these people are? They can help. I say we get the kid back then we worry about jurisdiction." She moved forward and Esposito shrugged and followed. They opened the doors to the large van and saw team members engrossed in their laptops.

"Give me an update," said Cabe.

"I've reviewed all the internal security," said Walter.

"How the hell..." started Esposito.

"Not now," said Kate. "Go on, Walter."

Walter turned his screen around and they could see Anna and her friend Jenny. Frank's heart pounded at the sight of his daughter. He felt Marina reach for his hand.

Walter continued. "We can see Anna and her friend walk through this door. There are no security camera's but the building plan says this is a short hallway where there are restrooms. Five minutes later we see Jenny running through the door and calling for help.

Frank felt Marina sag against him. "Marina!"

Toby jumped out of the van and held on to her. "Come sit." He helped her sit down on a small bench. The air conditioning was running to keep the equipment cool, so it was much more comfortable than the hot street. He grabbed his bag and pulled out a stethoscope. As he listened to her heart he nodded toward Frank. "I've got this."

"Please, I'm fine. Find her," said Marina.

"I backed up the footage to see if anyone was following them." Walter pointed to the screen. Here you can see Anna watching this janitor."

"Was he watching her?" asked Frank.

"No. He was watching her friend, Jenny. Anna saw this. Here you can see her move

next to Jenny, blocking his line of sight."

"She knew Jenny was being watched," said Frank.

"Yes, she did. She was obviously trying to protect her."

"Jenny said that when they were coming out of the ladies room the guy made a grab for her. Anna stomped on his foot and pushed him in the stomach. She told Jenny to run," said Katic. "How did she know what to do?"

Frank looked at Kate and smiled. "She's had some defensive training classes."

Esposito nodded his head. "Good call."

"I've been running facial recognition on the best angle we got of the guy," said Sly. "His name is Ricky Hightower. He works for Perry Maintenance."

"That's the maintenance company that services the museum," said Esposito.

"He's..Oh God," whispered Sly.

"What is it?" Frank shouted.

"He's a convicted sex offender."

"Oh Jesus," whispered Cabe. "This was never about money."

"No, it wasn't," said Sly. Marina covered her eyes and began to weep.

"Toby, profile," said Kate.

"Okay, Anna was not his target." He looked at Marina. "She wasn't who he wanted." He turned back toward the others. "He will likely be confused and trying to figure a way out of this. Basically none of what resulted computed for him. It will take him some time to sort out what to do."

"Guys, I've been scanning all the street cams and traffic cams," said Happy. "I've covered every entrance since she was taken. Nothing."

"What do you mean?" asked Frank.

Cabe looked at Frank. "She's still in there."

"That's impossible," said Esposito. "We've searched the entire building."

"Even the sub-basement?" asked Walter.

"What sub-basement?" asked Esposito.

"This building was constructed over the sight of an old hotel, The Valmont. A quick check of the history said it was raided several times during prohibition but they could never find anything. Sub basements were very popular for hiding speak easys and illegal

gambling. He's probably taken her there."

Cabe, Frank and Kate checked their weapons. "Whoa," said Esposito. "You can't go in there."

"You can try and stop me," said Cabe, "but you'll never stop him."

"He's a civilian."

"Trained security expert with Homeland clearance."

"Listen," Toby called. "This guy has been working in this building for two years. He knows every corner of it. He's probably got the entrance to the sub basement concealed. Be careful."

Kate nodded. "Will do." She looked at Frank and Cabe. "You ready?"

"Just a second," said Frank. He jumped in the van and gave Marina a kiss. "I'll find her."

"Bring my baby back to me."

"I will. I swear." He turned to his friends. "Let's go get her."

Anna had a headache. Her bed smelled funny. Her tummy hurt. Maybe she was sick. She opened her eyes and realized she wasn't in her bedroom. She closed her eyes again. Her brain felt fuzzy. She started remembering what happened. Jenny. The creepy guy. He put something over her face. That nasty rag. It smelled funny. Then nothing.

Okay, she had to think. What did Aunt Kate say? Stay calm. She heard foot steps and she peeked and saw the creepy guy pacing back and forth. She shut her eyes tight and thought. Papa would be looking for her. Should she stay still? No. She didn't want to stay here. She needed to get out of wherever this was so Papa could find her. He'd be looking. He promised.

She opened her eyes again and looked around. There was lots of stuff in here. It kind of looked like he lived here. She was on mattress but it was on the floor. She looked around at the walls but there were no windows. The creepy guy started to turn around so she quick closed her eyes. Okay, think Anna. Think. No windows. Where was the door? There had to be a door, right? How else would he get in here? It must be behind her, but that would mean rolling over. If she could get through the door she could get away, but she couldn't run fast. They had taken off her big heavy cast but they put her leg in a

smaller cast. She could walk fine in it so she hardly noticed it, but she couldn't run fast. But it would be okay because Papa, was looking for her. He would find her. He promised.

Anna opened her eyes and rolled over. There it was. Now she just had to figure out how to get out of here without the creepy guy catching her.

"So you're finally awake."

Anna rolled over and saw the creepy guy staring at her. Now he looked creepy and mean. "Why did you try to hurt Jenny? She's sweet."

"You ruined everything! This was not how it was supposed be!"

She struggled to her feet. Her tummy still felt weird. "I'm going home."

"He grabbed her arm. "You're not going anywhere."

"You better let me go. My Papa is looking for me. If he finds you he'll be really mad."

"He'll never find you." He leaned close to Anna and her nose twitched. He smelled really bad. "You're going to stay here with me," he whispered.

"I don't think so," she said. She pulled her arm back and smashed him in the nose. She was grossed out by all the blood that spurted out and got all over her. He swore bad words and leaned back but he tripped and fell on his back. She turned to run but he grabbed her ankle.

"You little bitch! I'll make you pay for that."

"You shouldn't say bad words!" She spun back and he lost his grip. She raised her foot and smashed it with all her might where Aunt Kate said she should aim.

Frank ran down the stairs to the basement of the museum, only vaguely aware of Cabe, Kate and the detectives behind him. The basement was a large space filled with storage cabinets, equipment and interspersed with pillars. He heard each person shout "Clear" as they covered a section of the room. He stopped for a moment, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He had to calm himself. "Focus," he told himself. "Anna is counting on you."

"I'm not seeing any doors. I think your people were wrong," said Esposito.

"They're never wrong," said Cabe.

"I checked every wall, just like I did before. No doors. No sub basement."

"The floor," said Frank

"What?" asked Katic.

"He'd want to keep it hidden. It's disguised. This floor is concrete. Look for an arc on the floor, scratches or dust, where he would open and close it." Each person took a section of the room. Frank focused on the concrete floor. It had to be here. She had to be here.

He stopped and bent down. He looked close. It was faint but they were there. Scratches in the shape of an arc in front of a cabinet. He pulled on the drawer and the entire cabinet moved away from the wall to reveal a stairwell. He was halfway down the stairs when he heard an ear piercing scream.

"Anna!" he screamed. A door opened and he saw his daughter run into the hallway, her shirt covered in blood.

"Papa!" Anna ran to him.

He shoved his gun in his belt and swepted his daughter into his arms. He covered her face with kisses as he heard the others run up behind him. They pushed past him to find the source of the screaming. "Angel, are you hurt. Did he hurt you?"

"No Papa, I'm okay."

"What about the blood?"

"That's from him when I punched him in the nose."

He shook his head and pulled her close. He knew he should get her outside to Marina but he needed a moment with his baby.

"Nash what the hell did you do?" asked Esposito.

"What are you talking about?"

"He's covered in blood. His nose and his crotch. What the hell did you do?"

"I never touched him." The man was still screaming.

"Papa, didn't do anything." said Anna. "That was me."

"What?" gasped Katic. "How?"

"I punched him in the nose and he fell down. I tried to run but he grabbed my ankle. So I stomped on him."

"It's nice of you to try and protect your Daddy but you're just a little girl. I don't think you could do that," said Esposito.

Anna angled her cast so they could see it. The bottom of her cast was covered in blood. "Oh gross," she said.

Esposito turned a little green and Cabe suppressed a smile.

"Come on, baby," said Frank. "Mama's outside waiting for us."

As Frank pushed through the museum doors with Anna, still in his arms, a dull roar erupted. It took a second for his eyes to adjust to the bright sunshine. He looked around to see the crowd had tripled since he'd gone inside. The word had gotten out.

He looked toward the Scorpion van where he saw Marina. "There's Mama, Anna."

"Moy rebenok!" Marina screamed. "My baby!" She ran toward them and pulled Anna into her arms to the sound of a cheering crowd. "My baby, my baby," she cried as she kissed her daughter.

"Marina, let's get her in the van," said Frank. He took Anna from her and helped her back into the van. She sat and pulled Anna back into her lap. She crushed Anna against her, rocking back and forth.

"My baby, my baby," she murmured in Russian over and over.

"I'm okay Mama. Papa found me, just like he promised."

Marina looked at her through her tears. "Like he promised?"

"He said if I was ever lost nothing would stop him from finding me." She looked at him and smiled. "And you did, Papa, just like you promised."

Marina smiled at him and said, "Yes, he did, angel. Papa always keeps his word."

"It's a Marine thing," he whispered. His wife and his daughter gave him looks of such love and faith, he knew he would spend the rest of his life living up to it.

It was only then she noticed the blood. "Oh my God, are you hurt? Frank, she's bleeding."

"No I'm not, Mama. This is from the creepy guy when I punched him."

"You what?" asked Marina

"How is she?" asked Cabe as he and Kate joined them in the van.

"I'm okay, Uncle Cabe."

"Apparently Anna defended herself. She hit him in the nose and she...a she..." Frank hesitated.

"She what?" asked Marina.

"I stomped on him!" said Anna. "I did what Aunt Kate taught me."

Marina brushed the loose hair from her daughter's face. "What did she teach you?"

"Well, she said if I'm ever in a bad situation the first thing was to stay calm. She said it was okay to be scared just use the scared energy to think my way out. She said bad guys always underestimate girls."

Cabe smiled at Kate who looked a little embarrassed. "Oh she did, did she?"

"Yeah. She said to stay quiet until you can see a way out. But he got too close to me so that's when I punched him in the nose. I did it just like you showed me, Aunt Kate, but you didn't say he would bleed all over me. It was really gross."

"Sorry. My bad," Kate smiled.

Anna got a little quiet. Marina held her close and kissed her. "You don't have to say anymore, baby. It's okay."

"I don't want to scare you, Mama."

Marina's eye teared. "So long as you're okay, I'm fine. Go ahead."

"After I hit him in the nose he fell back and tripped. He fell on the floor so I turned to run but he grabbed my ankle. He called me a bad name and said he'd make me pay for hitting him." The tears slid down Marina's face. It was all Frank could do to hold it together. "So I got mad and I turned around and stomped on him as hard as I could. He let me go."

"Stomped on him?"

Anna pointed to Frank's crotch. "I stomped on him there as hard as I could. Aunt Kate said that was how I could really hurt a guy, enough to get away." She smiled at Kate. "It worked. He screamed really loud. "She showed the bottom of her cast, dark with blood. "Except now my cast is all gross." Marina paled and held tight on to Anna. "Mama, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, sweetheart."

Toby moved close. "Is it okay if I take a look at both of you? You remember I'm a doctor."

"Yeah, you just don't look like one."

"Well, you're a badass but you don't look like one."

Anna laughed. "Okay."

"First, let's get you out of this shirt. I have a T shirt you can wear." He looked at Marina. "Don't worry it's clean."

"Okay." Marina looked at the crowd of people. "Everyone out except Frank."

As much as he wanted to stay he could see Anna was uncomfortable. His baby was growing up. "I'm going to go finish up with the police so we can get out of here."

Anna had a brief flash of panic. "You're not leaving?"

He got in close to Anna, gave her a kiss and spoke to her in Russian. "I'm not going anywhere, princess. I'll be right outside, I swear."

"Okay," she nodded.

He gave Marina a quick kiss. "I'll be right outside, angel."

"Okay sweetheart," said Toby in passable Russian. Then he pursed his lips for a kiss. Anna laughed as Frank pushed at his head.

Frank closed the door behind him and leaned back against the hot metal. His body had been pulsing with adrenaline for the last two hours and he could feel the crash coming.

"Are you okay, brother?"

He opened his eyes and saw Cabe and Kate. The rest of the team had moved aside to give him some privacy. "Yeah, I'm okay. What about the perp? Where is he?"

"Once he stopped screaming they handcuffed him to a gurney and took him to the hospital. He's probably in surgery."

"Surgery? How could she have hurt him that bad. She's a little girl."

Cabe leaned in and said, "She ruptured his testicles."

"She what?" He looked at Kate. "What the hell did you teach her?"

"I showed her how to use her size and her own energy to her advantage. I think a combination of that and the plaster cast is what did the damage. Adrenalin is a powerful thing."

He looked back at Frank and cracked a smile. "She ruptured his..." Cabe smiled and nodded. Frank started to chuckle. He knew he shouldn't but he couldn't stop. Then he laughed. Then he began to weep. Cabe pulled him tight and let him cry himself out. Kate and the others blocked the crowd's view. No one needed to capture this on their cell phone.

He pulled back and wiped his eyes. "Sorry about that."

"It's okay, brother."

Frank allowed himself a smile. "Yeah, it is now."

Esposito and Katic approached him. "Mr. Nash, where's your daughter. We need to talk to her," said Esposito.

"Not now."

"Mr. Nash you may have juice with homeland but this is LAPD."

Katic grabbed Esposito's arm, "Easy, Espo."

"No. I don't care if he's married to a movie star. I've got a suspect in serious condition and I need to talk to my victim."

"Your victim? That's my daughter!" Cabe put his hand on Frank's shoulder. The door to the van opened and Toby got out.

"If I can interrupt this tea party I'd like to get my patients to the hospital."

"Not before I talk to my victim," said Esposito. He tried to get into the van and startled Anna. She pulled in close to Marina.

"Mama?"

Marina's voice became dark and menacing. "You get away from my child." She pulled Anna's head close, covering her with her hands. Toby pulled the detective back.

"That woman just growled at me. Seriously? Growling? Doesn't she understand I'm trying to prosecute the guy who took her kid?"

"Detective, allow me to explain. What you have in there is an angry mother, an angry Russian mother, an angry, eight month pregnant Russian mother. If you go anywhere near her child right now she'll make what Anna did to your suspect look like a love tap."

Katic pulled a business card out of her pocket. "Please give Mr. and Mrs. Nash my card. Please ask them to call me as soon as Anna is ready to talk to me."

"Detective, this kid has been through hell today. I don't want her dragged into a police station for an interview."

"Who the hell are you?" demanded Esposito

"I'm her attending physician. Now, if you don't want me to turn that Russian tornado loose on you, I suggest you get gone." He reached in the van and picked up Anna's bloody shirt. "Before you go, a gift."

Katic pulled an evidence bag out of her jacket and Toby stuffed it in. She then grabbed Esposito's arm. "Doctor, when Anna is ready I'll come to their home."

"And leave Mr. Warmth, in the car."

"Will do, Doctor." Katic dragged her partner off by the arm. It looked like Esposito was getting an earful.

Frank pulled Toby aside. "What do you mean patients?"

"Anna's going to need have her leg x-rayed and that cast replaced. She'll be fine. It's Marina. Her blood pressure is through the roof. It's understandable but it's not good for her or the baby. We need to get them both to the ER, now."

Frank rubbed his hand up and down Marina's back as she held on to Anna. He was worried about them both. Anna's color didn't seem good. Marina seemed calmer holding on to her baby but blood pressure, especially with her history, could be a nightmare for her and for Riley. Cabe pulled the Scorpion van into the ambulance entrance and flashed his badge. He came back with two orderlies and two wheelchairs.

"Come on, sweetheart. Let's get you checked out," said Frank.

"Why two chairs?" asked Marina.

"One for you, babe."

"No."

"Yes."

"Fine." She sat in the wheelchair and pulled Anna into her lap.

"Mama, I don't feel so good."

"It's okay, baby. I've got you."

Frank followed his family into the all too familiar ER exam room. Dr. Brown and Dr. Weston were both waiting for them. He turned to Kate who smiled.

"I made a call."

He smiled and nodded. He was fortunate to have such good friends.

"Mama, I think I'm going to be sick."

"It's okay, baby." Dr Weston hand her a large tub and she held in front of Anna while she vomited. "Can I have a cloth, please?" She took the some paper towels from Frank and wiped Anna's mouth.

Toby had joined them in the exam room. "I'm Dr. Curtis. I treated her on site. Anna, did the creepy guy give you anything? Anything that made you feel funny?"

She was leaning against her mother, looking tired. "He had a nasty rag. It smelled funny. I woke up on a smelly mattress."

"Chloroform. She probably got to much."

"Anna, do you have a headache?"

"Uh huh."

"Why didn't you tell us, angel?" asked Frank.

"It's just a headache."

"We should run a blood test but the symptoms should pass in about twenty four hours," said Toby.

"Okay, Miss Anna, I need to get this cast off and get you to X-ray."

Marina pulled her close. "She stays with me."

Frank took Marina's hand away from Anna's back. "Sweetheart, you know this has to be done." She sighed and let him put Anna on the gurney.

"Papa?"

"Princess, Mama and I will be here when you get back." He gave her a kiss and took a breath as he watched them wheel his daughter away. Dr. Weston put her hand on his shoulder.

"Mr. Nash, you look like you could use a cup of coffee. I'm going to need about twenty minutes with your wife."

"I'm fine," said Marina and gave him a little smile. "But you look like you could use that coffee."

"Okay. Don't run off." He smiled and gave her a quick kiss.

"Not a chance, Marine. You're stuck with me."

"Thank God."

He walked out into the hallway and was surprised to find Toby waiting for him. "Hey Toby. Thanks for taking care of my girls."

"You're welcome." Toby patted his shoulder. "Come on. I'll buy you that coffee. They found the cafeteria and bought what passed as coffee. Toby took a sip and made a face. "Ugh, that's dreck." He handed him a few creamers. "Trust me. You'll need these." Frank took a sip. Toby was right. He grabbed the creamers and dumped them in.

"I'll be available for you later," said Toby.

"For coffee?" Frank smiled. "Anywhere but here."

"Thanks, but no. I was talking about there maybe some fallout."

Frank sat back against his chair and sighed. "I know. Marina did seem...I don't know, different."

"I'm not really concerned about Marina. Yes, her reactions today may seem intense but I think between the situation and the hormones flooding her system right now it's understandable. She may be a bit overprotective of the kids for a bit, but nothing I would worry about."

"Anna was frightened, sure, but she's a little girl. I think she did great, considering."

"I agree. I meant it when I said your daughter is a badass. Not many adults, let alone a...how old?"

"Eight."

Toby laughed. "Damn. Not many people would have the presence of mind to think their way out of a situation like she did. She may hit some rough spots but you and Marina are great parents. You'll help her through it."

"Then what?"

"You."

"Me?" Frank was shocked. "I'm fine."

"No you're not. You will be, but not yet. I saw you, Frank. Your instinct to protect your child was primal. It's what makes you such a great father. Every parent wants to protect their child but it's not always possible. You may feel some fallout from today. I want you to call me and we can talk it through."

"I'll be fine."

"I mean it, Frank. Don't try to tough this out. Call me. Do it for Marina and the kids."

"Thanks Toby. You're a good friend."

"Sure thing, Colonel." He took another sip of coffee and made another face. "Next time, you're buying."

Frank laughed. "Deal."

Frank went back to the exam area and found they had been taken to a private room. No doubt the reporters outside were trying to get inside. He opened the door to the private room and saw Marina staring out the window.

"Hey babe. Why aren't you in bed?"

"Look at them all out there. Why is my life more interesting than anyone else's because I make movies?"

He put her hands on her shoulders and guided her away from the window. "Sweetheart, please. Lay down."

"Fine." She got into the large bed and pulled the blanket up. "I wonder what's taking them so long with Anna?"

"It hasn't been that long and they do have to replace her cast." Marina shook her head and smiled. "Our daughter...I guess you won't have to worry about her when she starts dating."

Frank rolled his eyes. "Good Lord. Dating." A knock at the door interrupted Frank's thoughts of his daughter's boyfriends. Dr. Brown stuck his head in.

"There you are."

"Where's Anna?" asked Marina.

"She's getting her cast redone. There were no additional breaks or damage so her recovery should stay on track. She might be a bit sore but other than that she should be fine. I would like her to stay here overnight because of the chloroform. She's still got a nasty headache although she won't admit it. If she stays I can give her something that will help with the pain and let her sleep."

Frank sighed with relief. One patient down, one to go. "Can you have her brought up here. This is a secure wing."

"Of course."

Dr. Weston came into the room. "Well, it's a party."

"I was just leaving. Anna is doing well and I'm having her stay overnight." He opened the door and smiled. "That is one tough little girl you have there."

"Thank you, doctor," said Frank.

"Good." Dr. Weston smiled at Marina. "You'll have a roommate."

"What?" asked Marina.

"I want to monitor you for twenty four hours. Anna in the room will probably make you feel a bit better."

Frank took Marina's hand. "How's Riley?"

"She's doing fine for now but your pressure is still too high. That's why I'm going to monitor you." Dr. Weston took a breath and Frank knew it wasn't good. "If your pressure doesn't come down we're going to have to deliver her."

Marina put a protective hand over her belly. "It's too soon."

"It will be safer for both of you but let's cross that bridge when we get to it. I'll be back later to check on you," said Weston as she left the room.

Marina started to cry. He sat on the bed and pulled her into his arms. "It's going to be okay."

"How do you know?"

He tucked his hand under her chin. "Faith. Anna has survived the day. My women are strong." He rubbed his hand over her belly. "There is no reason to doubt Riley isn't just as strong as her sister and her beautiful Mama." He gave her a quick kiss just before

the door opened. An orderly pushed through a gurney holding Anna and her new cast.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was told to bring her here."

"That's my Mama and Papa."

"Please bring her here," said Marina as she scooted to the side of her bed."

"Oh, I don't know about this."

"It's fine," said Frank. "Come here, angel." He scooped up his daughter and placed her next to her mother. He kissed her forehead. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay."

He gave her a side glance. "Anna," he said as a declarative statement.

"My head hurts."

"I'll go tell the nurse so she can give you something." He looked back and smiled as Marina pulled Anna tight against her. It was the first time he'd seen Marina relax since this nightmare began.

Frank got the nurse to give Anna the medication Dr. Brown ordered. He sat next to the bed and held Anna's hand as Marina stroked her back. Anna's eyes began to droop.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"For what, baby?"

"I didn't mean to scare you and Mama. I didn't do anything I wasn't supposed to. I stayed with my class but Jenny had to pee. I told Mrs. Cheswick first."

Frank's heart skipped and Marina looked up at him. "Anna, why didn't Mrs. Cheswick take her? he asked.

Anna yawned as the medicine took effect. "She was listening to Ms. Chloe." She let out another yawn. "I'm sorry, Papa."

Frank kissed her forehead. "I'm not angry with you. Neither is Mama."

Marina kissed her cheek. "I'm not angry with you, angel. I promise, I'm not."

She smiled and closed her eyes. "That's good," she whispered as she drifted off.

Marina looked at him and whispered, "What the hell? The woman was too busy?"

He shook his head. "Not now. Let her sleep. You should try to do the same."

She sighed and laid back on the pillow. "Did you talk to the boys?"

"Yes. They know Anna's okay but they're pretty upset. Kate and Cabe volunteered

to bring them to visit and then take them to stay at their house."

"That's so good of them. I don't know what we'd do without them."

Frank stood and kissed Marina's forehead. "Please, baby. Close your eyes and try and get some sleep."

She gave him a small smile. "Only if you agree to get some food. I can hear your stomach growl."

"I'm fine."

"Josiah, how long have I been married to you?"

He couldn't help but smile. "Eight years."

"I know you. It's past five. You haven't eaten since breakfast. Go get something. Please."

"Okay." He kissed her again. "I'll wait for the boys in the cafeteria." He faked a smile and gave her a quick kiss.

"Don't run off with any young doctors or nurses," she said.

"Not a chance, diva. You're stuck with me."

"Thank God."

This time his smile was genuine.

Frank stared at his hamburger and picked at the fries. A few times during his service, he'd had days like this. Days when all he could do was put one foot in front of the other to get through the nightmare. Sending his Marines into harm's way was a gut wrenching part of his duty. Having his child in harm's way was a pain he felt on primal level. He wanted to know where that bastard was so he could kill him. He'd never felt that way about any enemy he'd ever faced. This bastard tried to hurt his child. His princess.

His stomach growled and told him he needed to eat. He barely tasted the food but managed to finish before Kate and Cabe joined him in the cafeteria.

"Papa!" called Jake as he ran into Frank's arms.

Frank scooped Jake into his arms and kissed his cheek. He handed Jake to Cabe and picked up Jonas.

Jonas looked at him. "Papa, I'm not a little kid."

"I know that, Jonas. I just wanted to hug you." He gave him a kiss and set him

down.

"Can we go see Anna?" asked Jonas.

"Of course."

Cabe leaned in. "We should do that now."

Frank looked around and he saw what Cabe did. No one had noticed him when he came in, but now with the children, people were starting to look them and talk to each other. It wouldn't be long before they would put it together who they were. As they moved toward the door a young man with a camera approached and tried to snap their picture. Cabe quickly moved in front of the lense as Kate and Frank moved the children toward the elevator.

"Hey, buddy, watch it."

Cabe flashed his badge. "No. You watch it." He waved to a security guard who was on his break. "John, can you help me out?"

"Sure, Mr. Gallo. What have we got here?"

"Someone who is harrassing my friends."

John smiled at the man. "Oh, that was a big mistake." He grabbed the man by the arm. "I've got this, Mr. Gallo."

"Thanks, John." Cabe joined them as the elevator doors opened.

"Everything okay?" asked Kate.

"Fine."

Frank looked at his friends and nodded. He didn't want to alarm the boys. "Okay boys, let me see if Anna and Mama are asleep. I don't want us rushing in."

"Papa, is Anna really okay?" asked Jonas. "I saw you carrying her out of the museum. Mama looked so upset."

"You saw?"

"It's all over the news," said Kate. "It's the lead story on every channel."

"Of course it is," he muttered. They exited the elevator and Frank led them to a small waiting room at the end of the hall. "Before we go in to see Anna and Mama I want you to hear from me what happened. A guy tried to hurt Anna's friend, Jenny. Anna tried to stop him and he took her and hid with her. Uncle Cabe and Aunt Kate brought the Scorpion team and helped us figure out where she was."

"I know Jenny. She's nice. Is she okay?" asked Jake.

Frank looked at his son and smiled. He was such a sweet, caring soul. "Yes, Jake. Jenny is fine. Anna stopped the man from getting to her."

"So she's a hero, like they said on the news," said Jonas.

"Yes, she is. I want you to remember that people are going to want to talk to you about this. I don't want you to answer anyone's questions."

Jonas smiled. "Don't worry, Papa. We worked that out a long time ago."

"You did?"

"Yeah, when any grown up tries to ask us questions they shouldn't we say," He paused, looked at his brother and they answered in unison, "Izvinite, ye ne govoryu po-angliyski,"

Frank laughed so hard he wiped tears from his eyes. He gave both his sons a kiss. "That's brilliant."

"What did they say?" asked Kate.

He looked at his friends and smiled. "Sorry, I don't speak English." He took both boys hands in his. "Come on. Let's go see Anna and Mama."

Marina opened her eyes and closed them quickly. This is what a hangover must feel like, not that she'd ever had one. Being raised in a Russian family with a fondness for Stolichnaya meant she had a high tolerance for alcohol.

She could feel Anna curled next to her. She sighed and smiled, despite her head. Her baby was safe. Riley reminded her that she was there too with a hard kick.

"Ow," said Anna. "Mama, stop pushing me."

"That's not me, that's your sister."

"Knock it off, Riley."

Marina smiled. "You should be used to being kicked by baby feet. You had eight and a half months of it from Jonas." A quiet knock on the door was followed by Frank peering in.

"You up for visitors?"

"Of course."

The door opened wide and her sons came barreling in followed by Frank and the

Gallos.

"Hi Anna," shouted the boys.

Marina winced at the pain shooting through her head. Kate and Cabe came to her side of the bed and gave her a kiss.

"How are you doing?" asked Kate.

"I'm fine."

"Liar," Kate whispered.

Anna sat up to greet her brothers. Jonas got close to the bed and gave her sister a hug.

"Are you okay?" he asked in Russian.

"I'm okay. I was a little scared but Papa found me just like he promised."

"I was scared too," he whispered.

"I'm okay, Jonas. I promise. I'm sorry I didn't get your program from the museum."

"That's okay," he said as he hugged his sister again, with tears in his eyes.

Jake moved in for his hug. "We saw you on TV," he said. "They say you're a hero."

"I was on TV?"

"Yeah, there was this big crowd in front of the museum and when Papa came out carrying you everybody cheered. It was cool."

"I want to see," said Anna.

Marina looked at Frank. They tried to keep media away from their children. "What do you think?"

"It's about her so I guess we should let her see." It was just past six so she turned on the local news. The local news anchor turned to the camera as a picture of their family appeared behind him.

"Our top story tonight is the abduction and subsequent rescue of actress Marina Sokolov's daughter."

"Your name is Nash," said Anna.

"Most people know me as an actress. Sokolov is the name on my SAG card."

"Still, it's not right," she said.

Marina rubbed her hand over Anna's shoulder. She was glad she was so proud they both carried Frank's name.

Anna pointed at the screen. "There's Jenny."

"Ms. Sokolov's daughter, Anna, was on a field trip at the Nathan Museum with her class when her friend, Jennifer Stanton, was assaulted by Ricky Hightower, a janitor working at the museum. For more on this story we go to Kane Fredricks outside the Nathan Museum. Kane..."

"Thank you, John. Things are quiet here now but that was not the case around noon today..."

They cut to a recorded piece of the activity outside the museum. They had shots of the police and they'd gotten the shot of the Scorpion van pulling in. They zoomed in on Marina and Frank talking to the police. They even had a brief interview with Jenny.

"Can you tell us what happened, Jenny?"

"A creepy guy tried to grab me. Anna pushed him and stomped on his foot. She let me get away."

Marina's heart pounded as she thought of her baby girl defending her friend. She pulled Anna close to her and kissed the top of her head. Detective Esposito appeared on screen and Marina let out a growl.

"The LAPD determined that the little girl was still in the museum so we initiated a search. We found her and she was reunited with her family. The suspect was taken into custody."

"Hah! Scorpion figured it out," said Kate.

"All that matters is Anna is safe," said Cabe.

"You're right, of course, but it still ticks me off." The screen cut back to a live shot.

"The video of Anna coming out of the building in her father's arms and being reunited with her mother has been shared around the world. Young Anna Nash is being hailed as a hero for defending her friend. Our sources say Anna was taken to Mercy General for observation and is in good condition. For Channel Four News this Kane Fredricks at the Nathan Museum."

"What a brave little girl," said the female co-anchor.

"Eve, this is probably the most compelling image I've seen of today's events," said the John.

An image appeared on the screen and Marina gasped. It was a picture of Marina and Anna cuddled together in bed asleep. This bed, this room.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "Frank?"

"Mama?" asked Anna. "Who took our picture?"

"I don't know, baby."

"I'll sure as hell find out," said Frank. "Look," he pointed to a chyron at the top of the screen. It read *The Inquisitor*.

Cabe put his hand on Frank's shoulder and whispered, "The kids." He nodded and took a breath. "I'm going to talk to Henry. Kate, I'll be back soon so you can stay and visit."

Kate smiled. "That sounds good." She leaned up to give Cabe a kiss on the cheek. She whispered in his ear, "I want someone's head on a pike."

He smiled. "I'll be right back."

"Mama, I don't remember anyone in here taking out picture. Why would they do that?"

"For money."

"That's so wrong," said Jonas.

"Yes it is." Anna looked frightened and Marina was ready to kill someone. All she needed was a name. She took a breath and she forced herself to calm down. Her fury wouldn't not calm her children. "But I was with you. I would never let anyone hurt you. Remember how I scared that detective?"

Anna laughed. "You really did." She turned to her brothers. "You should have seen her. It was awesome! This policeman wanted to talk to me and he was kind of scary.

Mama growled at him."

The boys smiled. "She did what?" asked Jonas.

"She growled."

"I did not. I just lowered my voice and made it clear he wasn't going to get near you."

Anna smiled. "Mama, you growled. Didn't she, Papa?"

Frank smiled. "Yeah, you did, diva. I'm surprised the guy didn't pee himself." The children giggled.

"Frank!" said Marina through her blush.

Cabe returned thirty minutes later with an armed security guard. He was a tall, barrel chested man with a bald head and a bright smile. "This is John. He's going to stay outside your door."

He nodded his head. "Mrs. Nash, Ms. Anna, I will be right outside if you need me."

"Thank you," said Marina. The guard took up his place outside the door.

"Anna, how is your headache?" asked Frank

"It's almost all gone."

"Good. Why don't you and the boys go down to the waiting room with Aunt Kate for a bit."

Anna got out of bed and pulled her gown tight. "Come on. The grown ups want to talk."

Once the door closed behind Kate and the children Frank turned toward Cabe. "How did this happen?"

"They don't know. Trust me Henry is in a panic. As Chief of Staff everything that goes on in this hospital is his responsibility. He's ordered a full investigation and I've brought Scorpion in on it. There's heavy surveillance on this floor. We should be able to get a facial recognition on anyone not authorized to be here."

"Thanks, but this doesn't stop this picture of them being sent all around the world."

"I have an idea," said Marina. "How fast can Henry set up a press conference?"

"Fairly quick, I imagine. Half the world press is already in their parking lot."

"Good. Tell him to do it. Cleared journalists only. I don't want any Inquisitor vultures

there."

"I'll set it up." Cabe left the room as Frank stared at her like she'd lost her mind.

"Marina, do you mean to hold a press conference, yourself?"

"Yes."

"You can't. Your pressure..."

"Won't get any better until this is resolved."

He sat next to her on the bed and took her hand. "What do you have in mind?"

"I think I have an idea that might work. If not at least I'll feel better for trying."

"Why don't you let me do it?"

"Josiah, I love you madly but if my idea is going to work it's going to have to be me in front of the cameras."

"If you're sure."

"I am. Now if you could track down a wash cloth and a hair brush I'd be very grateful."

He got a wicked look and a lopsided grin. "How grateful?"

Marina smiled. "Thank God some things never change."

Chapter Twelve

Marina sat in the anteroom with Frank as Henry Wilson walked into the conference room. She took a breath and tried to focus on anything but her migraine. Henry walked into the press conference to a the sound of camera shutters. "Alright, let's get started. I'm Dr. Henry Wilson, Chief of Staff of Mercy General. Today Miss Anna Nash was brought into Mercy General for observation following her ordeal. Miss Nash is resting comfortably and should be discharged quickly. Her mother, Marina Sokolov Nash was also admitted for observation in an abundance of caution for her advanced pregnancy." The reporters started shouting questions and Henry held up his hand. "I will not be taking questions. I will turn this conference over to the person who asked to address all of you." He opened the door and Frank pushed her wheelchair into the room. She wanted to cry as the noise of the shouting reporters pierced her brain. Frank pushed her up to the conference table and took the seat next to her. She raised her hand.

"If you will all take your seats I have a statement to make." She looked at Frank who nodded and gave hand a squeeze. "My husband, Colonel Frank Nash and I would like to thank you all for coming. Today our daughter Anna was abducted. Thanks to the efforts of my husband, Team Scorpion and the LAPD our daughter was quickly found. This was a horrible experience for our daughter but someone decided to make it worse. Someone decided that the pain of our daughter and of our family was an opportunity to make money. This person entered our hospital room and photographed us while we were sleeping. He then sold this picture to The Inquisitor. In addition to our daughter being abducted she also has to deal with the fact that another stranger felt free to violate her privacy and photograph in her bed. All of this pain was inflicted on a eight year old child because her mother happens to make movies. The police have been notified and this person will be caught and prosecuted. The reason I have asked you all here is because I want to take my case to the public. The Inquisitor has published this picture of our child in an effort to make money. I would ask the public to not feed this particular beast. Do not click on their webpage, do not buy their magazine. If you have a subscription, please

cancel it. Don't do it for me or my husband. Do it because you refuse to let these vultures profit on the pain of a child."

"How is Anna doing?" asked a reporter sitting up front.

Marina smiled. "She's doing well. Thank you."

"We hear she was quite the hero today."

Frank covered her hand and whispered, "I've got this." He turned to the reporters. "We will not be discussing the details of the events of the day but my wife and I are very proud of our daughter."

"Yes we are. Thank you all for coming." She smiled and leaned in. "Frank, I'm done." He stood and started pulling her away from the table.

A reporter shouted one more question. "Are you going to sue The Inquisitor?"

Marina smiled and the camera shutters fired. "You bet your ass we are." She was grateful when Frank shut the door behind her.

"Are you okay, babe? You look pale."

"Call Dr. Weston."

Frank walked down to the visitor's room and took a moment to watch his children playing. Jonas looked like he was sticking close to Anna. She still looked a bit pale but was smiling and showing him how to hit someone in the nose. Jake was looking at a magazine and translating it into Russian for Cabe. He looked up and smiled.

"Hi, Papa."

"Hi little man. How are the Russian lessons going?"

"Good. Uncle Cabe is pretty smart. He just needs to work on his accent."

"Hey! I'll get it. My Italian is perfect."

Jake shrugged his shoulders. "Il russo e piu difficile"

Cabe whispered. "Smart ass."

"I need to borrow Aunt Kate and Uncle Cabe for a minute," said Frank. He walked into the hallway and the Gallos joined him. "What did Jake say to you?"

"He said Russian is harder...in Italian."

Frank smiled. "Cabe O'Brien is an excellent language coach. He doesn't speak it to us but I hear Jake on the phone with your grandson."

"How's Marina?" asked Kate.

Frank tried to steady his voice. He couldn't let the children see how frightened he was. "Not good. Her pressure is too high. Riley hasn't turned yet so they're getting her ready for a c-section." He closed his eyes for a moment to fight the tears that were threatening.

"She's strong and she has the best doctors," said Cabe.

"I know but I'm still terrified. She wants to see the kids before she goes in. The kids..."

"Don't worry. We're not going anywhere," said Cabe.

Kate smiled. "And we're both armed."

"I honestly don't know what we'd do without you."

Cabe put a hand on his shoulder. "It's going to be okay, brother."

"Okay, let's do this." He walked back into the room and sat down. "Kids, come here. I need to talk to you."

"Could we get some ice cream? I'm hungry," asked Anna.

"Anna, please. Sit." She heard his serious tone and complied. "I need to tell you that Riley is going to be born tonight."

"What? I thought that wasn't for a while yet," said Jonas.

"It wasn't supposed to be but God and Riley had other ideas. Now Mama wants to see you so I want you to go in there and behave."

"Yes, Papa," they said in unison.

He led the children into Marina's room. They stopped when they saw the IV attached to her arm. "It's okay."

"Come here," she said managing a smile. "Give me a kiss." Each child approached cautiously and gave Marina a kiss on the cheek. Frank picked up Jake so he could reach her. "Jonas, will you do me a favor?"

"Sure Mama."

"We have a little time." She looked at Frank. "Dr. Weston said about thirty minutes. Jonas, sweetheart would you tell me The Lost Princess again. Riley and I would really

like to hear it. You know it by heart, right?"

"Uh huh." Jonas took his mother's hand and began to recite the story.

Frank listened as Marina closed her eyes, fighting the pain and nausea the migraine she finally confessed to having. He listened to his son's sweet voice and could barely remember his life before Marina and their children. Jonas finished the story and patted Marina's tummy.

"We'll see you soon," he whispered.

"Ok, Aunt Kate and Uncle Cabe are going to take care of you while Mama and I are busy."

"Well, technically, I'll be the one that's busy," she said with a smile.

Frank smiled. There was his girl. He leaned over and gave her a kiss. "Technically."

"We'll get the kids set up in another room," said Kate.

"Could you please see if Dr. Brown will let Anna have some dinner?"

"Of course. I'll have something sent up and if everyone is very good maybe I'll have some ice cream sent up," said Kate.

"Thank you," said Marina.

Kate moved toward her friend and kissed her forehead. "We'll keep watch on your babies."

A tear slipped down her cheek. "I love you, Kate."

"I love you too, sweetie."

Frank closed the door and took a breath. "That's the upside to having friends on the board of the hospital. Kate and Cabe can get Anna into another private room and have food sent up."

"Not to mention acting as armed guards," said Marina.

"Not to mention. He took her hand in his. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm scared," she whispered.

"I know, baby. but we have the best doctor in the best hospital."

"I love you, Josiah."

"I love you too, angel."

"Having you come into my life was the best thing that ever happened to me." She rubbed her hand over her belly. "Because of you I have four beautiful children." A tear slid

down her cheek. "Frank, if something happens to me..."

"Don't you say that. Don't you even think about it."

"Frank, you know what Dr. Weston said. This isn't going to be easy."

His heart started pounding. "You're going to be fine. Riley is going to be fine."

"Frank, please listen to me. If something happens I want you to know something. I want you to know I have complete faith in you. I know being a father was never in your plan but you are the best father our children could ever want. I know you will continue to be the best even if I'm not there."

"Baby, please, stop talking like this. You're going to be fine. So is Riley."

"I want you to promise me if something happens to me you won't blame Riley or yourself."

He could stop tears from running down his cheeks. "You have to be fine," he whispered. He rested his forehead against hers. "You're my world, diva."

Marina's voice got desperate. "Promise me. You have to promise me. A Marine always keeps his word."

He closed his eyes and whispered, "I promise."

Frank was numb as the nurse gloved him up. He mumbled a thank you as she tied a surgical around him. She handed him booties and asked him to sit down.

"I'll be back when we're ready to have you in with your wife." The young woman put a gloved hand on his shoulder. "Mr. Nash, I can assure you everyone in that room is the best in their field."

He managed a smile. "Including you?"

The woman smiled. "Including me. Your wife couldn't be in better hands."

"Thank you...?"

"Carrie."

"Thank you, Carrie."

Frank sat down on a chair and took a breath. "God, you and I need to have a conversation. My wife and my child need your help. Marina...", he gasped. "She's my heart. Riley hasn't even started yet but you must have a plan for her. Please watch over

them and keep them safe. And please God, give me the strength to be what my family needs." He leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes. He wasn't sure how long it was when Carrie came back in the scrub room.

"Mr. Nash, we're ready for you."

Frank stood and followed Carrie into the surgical suite. Marina was on a table surrounded by machines and four other gowned people. She was tented from the waist down so they wouldn't have to watch Dr. Weston cut into her. He reached for Marina's hand. "Hey there. Fancy meeting you here."

Marina giggled. "Hey there, Marine."

"You're feeling better."

"Whatever they gave me got rid of my headache. Now I just want to meet our baby."

"That's great, sweetheart." He smiled under his mask. He was still worried but relieved Marina seemed more relaxed.

"Okay, is everyone ready?" asked Dr. Weston. Her team acknowledged they were ready. "Once I start this is going to go quickly."

Frank felt his stomach flip when he saw the doctor picked up a scalpel. He continued to hold Marina's hand as he saw the doctor's arm make an arc. The tent prevented him from seeing what she was doing but he saw the bloody gauzes the nurse was tossing in a tray. The doctor smiled as she reached for their daughter.

"Hello Riley," she said as she handed her off to a nurse. Frank could tell, even at a distance, she was smaller than any of their other children.

"I don't hear her. Frank, what's wrong?"

"The nurse is cleaning her off." It was then Riley Jane Nash announced her presence. The nurse brought her to Marina and placed her on her chest.

"Hello, angel," said Marina in Russian. Riley calmed at the sound of her mother's voice. "We've been waiting for you."

Frank leaned close to his new daughter. "We're so glad you're here, precious girl. We love you."

"She's so pretty," said Marina. "But she doesn't look anything like me. She so fair." He smiled and kissed her forehead. "She has my mother's coloring."

Marina smiled. "And your grandmother's?"

"Probably." Frank placed a kiss on his new daughter's cheek. "My precious girl," he whispered.

"I'm sorry. I need to take her now," said the nurse.

"What? Why? What's wrong."

"Marina, let me finish what I'm doing and I'll explain," said the doctor.

They watched as the nurse placed Riley in an incubator and put an oxygen canula over her nose. Riley obviously didn't like it and began crying again. Doctor Weston walked toward the incubator. She listened to Riley's heart and lungs. She smiled and nodded at the nurse who wheeled Riley out of the room.

"Where are you taking her?" Frank asked.

"NICU."

"Is she okay?"

"She's four weeks early so we're going to run some tests. Her lungs may be a bit underdeveloped but I like what I heard."

"You did?" asked Marina.

"She's not totally out of the woods but from what I've seen so far we have every reason to be optimistic. I'm going to move you into recovery and it will be a couple of hours before you're moved into your room."

Marina grabbed Frank's hand. "Hours?"

"Marina, you've just had major surgery. You and Riley both need some rest. Frank, you look like you could use some rest too."

"Give us a few minutes?" asked Frank.

"Sure."

He didn't know if anyone was still in the room. He was focused on the amazing woman who married him. "You did it, sweetheart," he whispered. "I'm so proud of you."

"I love you, Josiah."

"I love you, too."

Frank stripped off the scrubs and threw them in the hamper. He knew the family would be waiting. Cabe had made the calls. But he couldn't. He needed to see his baby. He had to check on her, make sure she was okay. It was all he could think about.

He found the NICU and a nurse at the station. "Excuse me. I'm Frank Nash. I want to check on my daughter, Riley."

The woman smiled. "Of course. May I see your bracelet?" He held up the orange ID that had been placed on his wrist. The nurse scanned the bracelet and smiled. "Okay, Mr. Nash. Let's take you to your daughter."

He followed the nurse to the large room with several occupied incubators. She led him to the clear box that contained his child. He stopped when saw Riley. Not only was there an oxygen canula around her nose, there was an IV in her forehead. "What the hell is that?"

"Mr. Nash your daughter needs the IV and putting in her forehead is less painful for her and she can't tug it out."

"Jesus," he whispered.

"I inserted the IV. She fussed for a moment but settled down quickly."

"None of our other children had this."

"Mr. Nash, she's in good hands, I promise. Why don't you have a seat and talk to her."

The nurse pulled a rocking chair to the small window. Riley looked so small. Her weight was barely five pounds, much smaller than any of the others. She was fair and what little hair she had was very pale. He leaned close to the small window and whispered in Russian. "Hello, precious girl. Papa's here." Riley opened her eyes and looked around. "Precious, I'm right here." His heart leapt as she turned toward the sound of his voice and smiled. "That's it, baby girl. It's Papa. I'm right here. I'll always be right here."

Frank walked toward Anna's new room, just down the hall from the one she'd shared with Marina. He needed to see how she was doing. He was surprised to only find Cobe and Kate with the children.

"Hi, Papa is Riley born?" asked Anna.

"Yes, princess. You're sister is here."

"Yay!"

He gave Anna a kiss. "Did you get something to eat?"

"Just some scrambled eggs. The boys got ice cream. No fair."

"Do you want to puke again?"

Anna was properly chastened. "No, Papa."

"Can we see them?" asked Jonas

"Not yet. Mama's resting and Riley," he paused trying to stay calm. "Riley was born early so she has to stay in an incubator for a little bit until she can be on her own."

Cabe and Kate approached Frank and gave him a hug. "How are you doing?" asked Kate.

"I'm okay. Did you call the family?"

"I did," said Cabe "I explained what's happened and that it might be better if visiting waited until tomorrow."

Frank sagged a bit and smiled. "Thanks, Cabe. I should call them too. They must be worried about Anna."

"We Facetimed with them," said Kate. "They got to see she's doing well." Kate guided Frank over to a chair and they sat. He wondered if he had the strength to get up again. "Anna is going to be discharged tomorrow. We know Sara's still on vacation."

"Oh God, Sara. I never called her."

"I did. She talked to Anna and the boys. I told her we'd stay in touch and she didn't have to run home."

"She's been planning that vacation to Russia with her parents for a year."

"Anna and the boys can stay with us."

"Are you sure? They can be a handful."

Cabe put his arm around Frank's shoulder. "It's fine. Let us do this. Stay with your wife and your new baby."

Kate smiled. "Tonight the boys will go home with Cabe and I'll stay with Anna."

"Oh cool. You can tell me more stories about being under the covers."

Cabe looked at Kate. "Ah..excuse me?"

"She means undercover. Frank, why don't you go back to Marina's room and get some sleep. I had a bed brought in."

Every muscle in Frank's body screamed for that bed. "An excellent idea. Let me say good night to the children." Jonas and Jake were sitting on Anna's bed arguing over what channel to watch. He took the remote and turned off the TV. "Okay, listen up. Jonas

and Jake, you're going to go home with Uncle Cabe to his house. Behave. Anna, Aunt Kate is going to stay here with you. You behave too, and get some rest. You've had a hell of a day." The children giggled at his swearing, which he rarely did. "I get a pass on the swearing because I've had a hell of a day too."

"Do we?" they asked in unison.

"No," he smiled and gave each of his children a kiss. He turned to his daughter and smiled. "I'll be right down the hallway. I'll be waiting for Mama to come back to her room."

"Okay, Papa."

He gave her a hug and whispered in Russian. "I'm very proud of you, princess. You were very brave. I love you."

"I love you too, Papa."

He reached his arms out for his sons. "Bring it in here." They threw themselves into his arms and he hugged them tight. He forced himself to let go and straightened himself. "I love you all. Now get some sleep."

Frank sat down on the bed Kate had arraigned. There was even a fresh pair of scrubs and some extra toiletries for him to shower. Later. He didn't think he could stand up long enough to shower. He'd talked to his parents and Marina's mother and stepfather. He reassured them that everyone was stable and safe. He'd promised to call them back tomorrow to let them know when they could visit.

He stripped off his clothes and put on the scrubs. He's have rather slept in just underwear but even recovering from surgery, Marina would kill him. She wouldn't like him...what did she call it...strutting his stuff in front of the nurses. He smiled at the thought of the most beautiful woman in the world being jealous of other women. As if there would ever be anyone else for him. Not as long as he lived.

He laid back and closed his eyes. His head was spinning. He felt like he was in one of those training mazes. He didn't know where the enemy was. Which turn to make? Do I fire? What do I do? He realized he had one more call to make.

"Hello?"

"Hi Toby."

Marina opened her eyes to the dim light in the room. Her belly hurt from the incision but not as badly as before the pain med. Despite the pain she smiled at the comforting sound of Frank's sleeping. It wasn't quite a snore. She called it the Papa Bear growl.

Her head had begun to clear. She remembered being brought into the room at about eleven. Frank told her about Cabe taking the boys and ate staying with Anna. He also told her about seeing Riley. She needed to see her baby. Now.

She looked at the large but mobile IV attached to her arm. She quietly dropped the side railing and slipped off the bed. She stood carefully, pushing the wash of pain aside. She needed to see her baby more than she needed another shot of pain med. She'd been wearing two gowns, one reversed to act like a bathrobe. She couldn't risk waking Frank to turn on lights and look for her shoes. This would have to do.

Marina opened the door and checked the hallway and spotted the security guard down the hall. They'd stationed him outside Anna's room so Kate could get some sleep. She took a chance and slipped out of her room and faced the opposite direction. He was here to protect Anna, not her, so even if he spotted her he wouldn't follow. She found the elevator and pressed the button. NICU was one floor down.

She looked down the long hallway and saw no one. It wasn't surprising since it was three in the morning. She found the nurses station and startled the young woman behind the desk. Even pale and exhausted after surgery, there was no mistaking she was Marina Sokolov.

"Oh, hello Ms. Sokolov. What can I do for you?"

"I want to see my daughter, Riley."

She clicked a few keys and looked up at her. "Ah...I'm sorry. I don't see a Riley Sokolov."

"That's because my name is Nash." She held up her bracelet.

The nurse flushed red. "Oh I'm so sorry, Mrs. Nash. Yes, here she is."

The young woman led her into the NICU and to her daughter. Marina was surprised at how many babies were in the room. Monitors blinked and tubes were taped to the smallest of babies. Even though Frank had warned her, she gasped at the sight of the IV. Her poor angel. The nurse set a rocking chair next to Riley's unit.

"Don't stay too long, ma'am."

"I'll try not to wake her."

"I'm more concerned for you. You look a bit pale."

"Thank you. I'll be fine."

"Okay, I'll leave you with her."

Marina looked through the glass box that held her child. She began to softly sing an old Russian lullaby she'd sung all through her pregnancy. She'd done it for all her children.

She finished the song and stared at her baby. She seemed so small and fraile. "My angel, I'm so sorry," she whispered "I did my best for you, I swear I did. They wouldn't let me keep you inside any longer. They said it was safer. I tried, baby. I swear I did."

"I'm sure you did."

Marina was startled to see another nurse in the NICU. She hadn't noticed her before. She was a tall, blonde woman, older than the nurse from at the station. She had a kind face and a soft smile. "She's just so small. And her breathing, her lungs..."

"I wouldn't worry too much. Her color is good. I think she'll be fine."

Marina couldn't take her eyes off her baby. "How can you be so sure?"

"I've seen a lot of babies. You have a sense for the child. She's tougher than she looks."

She couldn't help but smile. "Are you sure?"

The woman put her hand on her shoulder and smiled. "Have a little faith."

"That's what my husband says."

"Smart man. Now you should get some rest. You need to be strong for her."

Marina smiled. "You'll get me if she needs me."

"Don't worry. She's in the best hands possible."

She leaned in to the small window and whispered in Russian. "Good night, angel. Mama isn't going far. Sleep well. I love you, baby girl."

She stood up and smiled. "Thank you." She turned to see the nurse had left her to have a moment alone with her child. After the insanity of the day, the kindness of the nurse was a godsend.

Marina walked back down the hallway of her floor toward Anna's room. The guard

was startled when he saw her walked toward him.

"Mrs. Nash, should you be walking the hall?"

"Shhh. I'm AWOL," she smiled. "I just want to see my daughter and then I'll go right back to my room."

"Sure thing," he said as he stepped aside.

She cracked open the door and was surprised to see Kate sitting up in the recliner, reading her tablet. "Kate?"

"What are you doing out of bed?" she whispered.

"I wanted to check on Riley and Anna."

"You went downstairs? Frank will have a fit."

"I needed to see my baby."

Kate smiled. "How is she."

"Sound asleep. There was a nurse that said she was doing well." She looked at her other sleeping daughter. "Has she been behaving?"

"She's fine. Kept asking me about my work."

"Good Lord, between her acrobatics and her fascination with motorcycles and law enforcement, she's going to make me crazy."

"Isn't that her job?"

"Yeah, I guess it is." Marina leaned over and kissed her sleeping child. She could go to bed now herself. Her babies were safe.

"You want to explain why you're roaming the halls?" asked Frank.

Marina cringed. "Busted."

"Do you not realize you have a major incision?"

She sucked in with the pain as she wheeled her IV back to it's place and slipped into bed. "I am aware. Believe me."

He walked over to the side of the bed. "Do you know how upset I was when I woke up and you weren't here?"

"I'm sorry, really I am. I didn't want to wake you I just really needed to see my baby."

Frank's tone softened. "How is she?"

"I hate that IV but she seems okay. The nurse said she's doing well. She has good color. That means her lungs are working well, right?"

He smiled and took her hand. "I think so." She closed her eyes as her body told her just how unhappy it was with all the movement. "You're hurting. I'll go find the nurse." He came back a few minutes later and began tucking Marina in. "The nurse will be here soon."

"What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're tucking me in like I'm one of the kids."

"I need to do something."

"Frank, talk to me. What's going on?"

"I hate being so useless."

"Useless? Where is that coming from? You are anything but useless." She pulled his hand away from fussing with the blanket and folded his hand in hers. "You brought my baby back to me."

"I had very little to do with that. Anna saved herself."

"You brought Cabe and Kate and Scorpion in. You led the search. You found her. You promised our daughter you would. You kept your word. You're a hero. My hero."

He looked away. "I don't feel like a hero. I've never been more scared in my life."

She yanked on his hand. "Hey, Josiah, look at me." He turned and she'd never seen this side of him, Frank being unsure. "What makes you think heroes aren't scared? That's the definition of courage. You recognize the danger and still get it done."

He managed a smile that made her feel a bit better. "I need to tell you something. Before you came back from recovery I was in pretty bad shape. I felt like I was losing my grip." He took a breath. "I called Toby."

"Toby?"

"He said I might feel some fallout from today and that I should call him. So I did." He paused. "I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?"

"I don't want to lose your respect. That would kill me."

Marina gasped. "I admit I'm a little surprised but you could never lose my respect."

Did talking to him help?"

"Yes. He seemed to understand what I was saying." Frank shrugged and smiled a bit. "He said I was having a normal reaction to the events but it sure doesn't feel normal." He took a breath as if he was bracing himself. "He wants to see me again."

"Okay, good."

"That's it?"

"Yeah."

"Don't you want to know what we talked about?"

"Do you want to tell me?"

"Ahh..."

Marina smiled. "There's the answer. When you want to tell me you can. If you don't want to tell me, you don't need to. The only thing I need to know, I already do."

"What's that?"

"You love me and you love our children."

"More than I ever thought possible."

"So why don't you slide that bed over here and we can shock the hell out of the nurse."

He laughed and gave her a soft kiss. "Diva, you are a constant source of amazement."

Chapter Thirteen

Marina checked on Riley before she went downstairs. It had been a hectic few days. Her baby had done well. The doctors called it "surprisingly well." It had only been a couple of days before she was out of the incubator and nursing. Marina had to take it easy because of her incision, but all her children were well and safe at home. She felt like she could finally breathe.

The family was coming over for a barbeque. Everything was ready, food had been delivered and Frank would man the grill. Katherine and Val were coming over early to discuss her case against the Inquisitor. It would be a hectic day but she had a few minutes to herself. She went to the kitchen to make herself a cup of tea when she saw Jonas sitting at the kitchen table reading. He looked up when he heard Jake and Anna playing outside.

Marina studied her son's expression and wondered what he was thinking. She wondered that a lot. He was so reserved it was often difficult to read him.

"Hi sweetheart. What are you reading?"

"It's an interesting article on the mapping of the brain and how people learn."

"That does sound interesting."

Jonas gave her a small smile. "No, it doesn't."

"Why do you say that?"

"Nobody but me likes this stuff."

Marina smiled. "Maybe we just don't understand it like you do." She opened a cabinet and pulled out a mug. "I was going to make a some tea. Would you like to join me?"

Jonas looked startled, then smiled. "Okay."

She plugged in the electric teapot and set up the teabags. She pointed to the cabinet behind him. "Jonas why don't you get us some shortbread." He smiled and pulled the red plaid box from the treat cabinet which they were not frequently allowed. Marina set two small plates out and placed a piece of shortbread on each, just like a proper tea. She poured the water and place each mug in front of their places. She put two scoops of stevia in each mug and set the milk on the table. She started dipping the bags up and

down in the hot water and smiled when Jonas mimicked her.

"You have to let it steep before you put in the milk." She pulled out her teabag and set it aside. Jonas repeated her action. She put the milk in her tea and poured some in Jonas mug. She took a sip of hers as Jonas sipped his. She was surprised at his big smile.

"That's good," he said.

"It's Chai, a spice tea. I'm not a fan of fruity teas. I like green tea when I'm sick but otherwise, I like my tea strong enough to skate on." Jonas giggled as he took another sip. "Are you going to tell me what's going on?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"Jonas, sweetheart. I'm your Mama. I know all and see all. I know when something isn't quite right with my babies. Now spill."

"Nothing, really. I just wish sometimes I was more like them," he said nodding toward his siblings.

"Why would you want to be like them?"

"People like them more."

"No they don't."

"Yes they do. Anna is always doing stuff and now she's a famous hero. Jake is funny and makes people laugh." He took another sip of tea. "I can't do any of those things. People think I'm boring."

"Jonas, do you want to do any of those things," She looked out the window at Jake, "like building forts or," She looked around the yard for Anna and spotted her dangling off a branch of the big oak. "Or climb trees," she growled. She knocked on the kitchen window and slid it open. "Anna Marina, you get down from there or you will be grounded for the party," she yelled. Anna dropped down the few inches, landing on her new cast. "That girl will be the death of me." She looked at Jonas and smiled. "Do you want to do the things they do?"

"Not really."

Marina took another sip of her tea. "Jonas, you're an introvert. Just because you're quiet on the outside doesn't mean there aren't a bunch of ideas running around inside you. You're always thinking about things. Lot's of things interest you."

Jonas smiled."Yeah. How did you know?" He looked curious. "Can you really see

all and know all?"

She grinned. "Yes I can but you're exactly like your Uncle Jake."

"I am?"

"Oh yes. Your Uncle Jake was always quiet. He was always reading and studying, just like you. People made fun of him for it."

"Did you?"

"I'm ashamed to say I did. I teased him because he wasn't interested in going out with friends or dating. That was wrong of me. But you know what? Uncle Jake never let that stop him. He kept doing what he loved and he went on to do very great things."

"He did? Like what?"

"He was recruited by the Marines when he was in college. A lot of what he did was secret and he can't talk about it. But what he did was teach people about Russian history and language so they would better understand each other. They were able to work better together because of his work."

"Wow, that's cool."

"It is. He spent thirty years serving our country. When he retired he started teaching at the university and doing research. I'm not really clear on the research but when he talks about it he gets very excited."

"Do you think he tell me about it?"

"I think he would."

Jonas smiled. "Cool."

Marina reached for his hand. "Sweetheart, I know you may feel like you're getting lost in the chaos of our family. Anna and Jake are very extroverted and it may seem like Papa and I spend a lot more time with them. Unfortunately, that's true." Jonas stared into his tea. "Do you know when you and Anna was born I thought I'd go crazy with her? She was a very demanding baby."

Jonas snickered. "Shocking."

"You were such a calm, happy baby. Papa and I decided that God gave you to us for balance. He knew we would need you." She squeezed his hand. "He was right. Now Riley is here and needs our attention so things aren't going to change, my love. You will still get less attention because you need less. But never mistake that for Papa and I not

loving you just as much as we love the others. We love you just as you are and you don't have to be anything other than who you are. We don't need another Anna or Jake. We need our Jonas, just the way he is."

"Boring old Jonas."

Marina tried not to laugh at her eight year old son calling himself old. She pulled on his hand. "Come here." She turned and pulled him into her lap.

"Mama, I'm not a baby."

"We've covered this Jonas. You're my baby and when you're an old man and I'm a very old woman you will still be my baby. Now, come here." She carefully pulled Jonas into her lap and wrapped her arms around him. She stroked his hair and kissed his cheek. "I love who you are. You're so thoughtful. You're careful. You don't do things that frighten me. You're a very good boy and you're going to be a wonderful man. You'll figure out what you want to do and then you'll be great at it."

"I think I already know."

"You do? What is that?"

"I think I'd like to be a teacher. Or maybe a neuroscientist. I like showing Jake things and I even show Anna sometimes. It's fun to watch them understand."

"I think that's wonderful, Jonas. What's a neuroscientist?"

"They map the brain and how it works. It's what I was reading. It's really cool."

"I think you'll be great at whatever you choose." She gave him a tight hug and another kiss as Frank entered the kitchen.

"Hey, can I get some of that?" he asked.

"Bring it in, Marine."

Frank gave her a kiss, then kissed the top of his son's head. "What's up?" he asked as he grabbed a bottle of water.

"Jonas was just telling me how he wished he was more like Anna and Jake."

He turned and looked surprised. "What? Why would you want to be like them? You're terrific the way you are." Frank didn't understand Jonas giant smile.

Marina patted his leg. "Uncle Jake and Aunt Mike are coming. I bet you could talk to him about your research."

"You think?"

"I'm sure he would find it fascinating."

"I'll get my notes." Jonas leaped off Marina's lap and darted for the kitchen door, stopping to grab what was left of his shortbread. He stopped and turned around. He came back and gave Marina a kiss. "I love you, Mama," he whispered in Russian.

"I love you too, angel."

Jonas darted out the kitchen yelling, "Thanks for the tea." and they heard him run up the stairs.

"What was that all about?" Frank asked.

Marina stood and smiled. She slipped her arms around his neck and gave him a deep kiss. "Thank you."

"You're welcome? What did I do?"

"You are a terrific father."

"Thank you, but I'm going to need a little more."

"You didn't realize it but you were backing me up. I was telling him he was fine just as he is. He didn't need to change."

"Of course not. Why would he think that?"

"He thinks he's boring."

"He's not boring he's...thoughtful." He smiled and gave her a deep kiss. "Thank you."

"You're welcome...for what?"

"For being a great mother."

"Thank you, but in this family, parenting is a team sport."

Marina saw everything was in place for the guests. The children were under orders not to get too messy before company. Well, Anna and Jake were under orders. Jonas was outside sitting under the oak reading his notes. She smiled at her clever boy when he caught her staring. He glanced up and smiled back. He was killing two birds with one stone. He was reviewing his notes for a discussion with his uncle while preventing his sister from dangling off the branches. She mouthed "Thank you." She turned when she heard Frank greeting Val and Katherine. They were dressed for the barbeque but each had their briefcases. They had some business to discuss before the party.

Val kissed her cheek and gave her a careful hug. "How are you feeling?"

"Good. Frank won't let me lift anything heavier than Riley."

"Damn straight," Frank smiled.

Katherine gave her an equally careful hug. "How are you really doing?" Frank and Val looked confused.

"I'm ready for war."

"Good," said Katherine. "Let's sit down." She opened her briefcase and pulled out a file. "I've drafted a lawsuit for you to see, invasion of privacy and everything else I could think of."

"It's not enough," Marina said without looking at the papers.

"It twenty million dollar lawsuit."

"I want him arrested."

"He will be," said Frank. "Scorpion was able to identify him with facial recognition software. He was the same creep who tried to get a picture of me and the boys in the cafeteria."

"Not just him. Tollerson. I want him arrested."

"The Inquisitor publisher?"

"He knew what he was doing, publishing a picture that was the product of a crime. Can't he be charged with something?"

"Well, it's possible he could be charged as an accessory," said Val.

"Good, let's do that."

"It's not that easy," he replied. "You have to convince a D.A. to go after one of the most powerful men in this town. They have to have proof that he knew about the picture."

"Of course he did."

"Does this mean you don't want me to file the lawsuit?" asked Katherine.

"Hell no. I want to come at him from every direction."

Frank took her hand in his. "Sweetheart, what is going on with you? We've gone up against this guy before. You've never reacted like this before."

"This time he made a big mistake. He came after our child. I won't rest until he pays. I want him shut down and in jail."

"Marina, you weren't this upset at the guy who abducted Anna."

"You wouldn't want to let that guy in a room alone with me either but he's a sick bastard. I don't blame a rabid dog for biting but I sure as hell won't let him do it again. The guy who took the picture is a symptom. Tollerson is the disease."

Val sat back in his chair. "Marina, I agree. Tollerson is a vile excuse for a human but he's connected. It could take a lot to bring him down."

"We thought as much." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a check and handed to Val.

"Marina, we've never needed a retainer."

"We realize you have a practice and clients other than family. Hire whoever you need for as long as you need to make this work." Marina looked at her brother. He'd never let her down and she knew he wouldn't now, no matter what she asked. "Val, I want you to make this guy bleed." She rose from the table and walked into the kitchen, leaving her stunned family behind.

She looked out the window at her children. The three of the outside, the one upstairs, they were her life. She would die to protect them. Or kill.

"Marina?" Frank rubbed his hands over her shoulders. "Sweetheart are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"I've never seen you like this."

She watched Anna playing with Jake in his cardboard fort. She caught her watching and smiled. "I don't want Anna to have to go through her life wondering if someone is going to creep into her room to take a picture, all because of me."

Frank turned her around to face him. "Marina, none of this was your fault."

"Tollerson wouldn't have come after her if it wasn't for me."

"Marina, Anna beat the crap out of a pedophile and escaped. They would have hounded her if she was the mailman's kid."

She shook her head. "I have to protect her."

"Listen to me. What happened was horrible, but the honest truth is if we take down Tollerson another one will take his place."

She started to weep and he pulled her close. "I know, Frank. I know we can't protect her from every bad guy out there. Let's protect her from this one. At least this one." He wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Please, Frank."

He gave her a soft smile and nodded. "Okay. We go after him with everything we've got."

Marina checked on Riley again before the rest of the family arrived. The baby began to fuss so she patted her back and whispered to her in Russian. Riley quieted at the sound of her voice. Marina closed her eyes and inhaled the sweet scent of her child.

"Is she still asleep?" whispered Frank.

Marina turned and waved him into the room. He walked up to the crib and slipped his arm around her shoulder. "She's so small."

"Yeah, she's a peanut." he smiled.

"The others were never that small."

"No, but none of them were an entire month early." Riley fussed at the sound of his voice.

Marina smiled. "Go on, pick her up. I know you want to."

He picked up his daughter and gave her a few rapid kisses on her cheeks. "I can't resist her. She so tiny."

"Good Lord, a week old and she has you wrapped around her little finger."

"You're going to be Papa's girl, aren't you precious?" He cooed and kissed her forehead. "She smells so good. What is that?"

Marina got closer and gave Riley a kiss. "Lavender? It must be the new clothes

Kate got for her."

"I know she's her namesake but she really didn't have to get so many."

"She needed them. Everything I got for her won't fit for at least a month or so."
Their cuddle time with their baby was interrupted by the door bell.

"Company!" yelled Anna. They were under orders to never open the door without an adult present.

Frank smiled. "You go, I've got this."

"She probably needs a diaper change. I set out that pretty dress Kate bought for her." Marina smiled as Frank made goofy faces at Riley. She shook her head and laughed.

The family gathered close around Marina as she sat on the couch while she held Riley. She had a hard time giving her to anyone to hold. She knew it was a holdover from what happened to Anna but she needed to keep her babies safe, even if Anna was determined to test her resolve. When her mother sat down next to her on the couch she knew she would have to relent and hand over her baby. "Would you like to hold her, Mama?"

She smiled and reached for her granddaughter. "As if you have to ask." She kissed Riley's forehead and whispered to her in Russian. "She's so fair. Maybe it's because she was premature."

"Or maybe because Frank's mother is a blonde?" she smiled.

"Well...maybe. She's still Russian."

"Half Russian, Mama. We go through this every time. Frank's family is English and Scottish." Anna harrumphed. "But she will speak Russian just like all your grandchildren."

"Of course you will, my angel," she said in Russian.

Marina stood while her mother was teaching Riley the Russian names for nose and hands and feet. She escaped to their bedroom for a minute. She need some space. She loved her family and thanked God every day for them, just sometimes she needed a little quiet. Quiet. Who was she kidding? She had eight year old twins, a seven year old and now a newborn. She would never experience quiet again until she was a senior citizen.

"Are you okay?"

She smiled at Frank standing in the doorway. "Yeah, I'm okay. I just needed some quiet." She could see he didn't quite believe her. "And maybe some Tylenol?" He smiled and got two pills and a glass of water from the master bath.

"Here you go. Do you want me to send everyone home?"

"No, really. I'll be okay. Let everyone enjoy Riley. By the way, who has her?"

"My mother was finally able to wrestle her away from your mother."

Marina laughed. "That must have been a sight. What did it take? Two out of three falls?"

"Just about."

She patted the bed next to her. "Join me."

"Okay, but we'll have to be quiet, the guests and all..."

"Very funny, Marine." She took his hand in hers. "I know it's been a while and it will probably be a while longer. You've been very patient..."

"Stop right there." He smiled. "I waited fifty five years for you," he whispered. "You're worth the wait."

Her eyes welled. Damn hormones, she couldn't stop tears from falling. "I love you, Josiah."

He leaned close and gave her a kiss. "I love you too, diva."

"Goon," she laughed. "I wanted to ask how are you doing?"

He smiled, knowing to what she was referring. "I've talked to Toby a couple of times. He seems to think I'm okay. At least I haven't had any of those panic moments like I did at the hospital."

"I'm sorry this has been so hard on you."

"It hasn't been a walk in the park for you either."

"I feel bad I'm not there for you."

"What ever gave you that idea? You don't still mean physically do you?"

"No. We usually talk more but I've been so absorbed with Riley and Anna and myself that I've been ignoring you."

"Enough with the guilt, diva. I'm fine. We're fine."

"I haven't asked you about work in ages."

"Actually, there is something to talk about work. I've finalized the sale of the

company to Jerry. I'll stay on as a consultant on a case by case basis. Jerry feels it will be better to keep my name on the letterhead. But for all intents and purposes I'll be retired by the end of June."

"Really? That soon? Are you okay with it?"

"Yes, diva. I'm great with it. I'll still consult with Jerry and occasionally with Scorpion, but I'll work from here. When you want to take on a role it will be easier. I'll be here for you and our kids."

"That's great. Were you okay with the terms?"

"Yeah. Jerry made a very generous offer for my share of the company."

"Am I allowed to ask how generous?"

"Of course you are. Twenty million plus some excellent percentages on any cases I consult on in the future."

"Holy crap, Frank! I knew the company was doing really well but wow!"

He smiled a little kid grin. "Yeah, the company grew a lot over the last ten years."

She gave him a kiss. "Congratulations, Josiah. In case I haven't mentioned this in a while, I'm very proud of you."

"Thank you, sweetheart." He reached into his nightstand and pulled out a small box. "I was going to save this until later but well, I got this for you."

Marina smiled. He'd gotten her an engraved necklace for Anna and Jonas and a beautiful pair of diamond earrings for Jacob. All of them had been designed by her sister-in-law. Michaela 'Mike' Turner. She opened the small box and gasped. It was a magnificent ring with a large, an emerald cut sea blue stone surrounded by stunningly brilliant diamonds. "Oh my God, Frank! This is amazing."

"It's an aquamarine. Mike said it's Riley's birthstone."

"It's magnificent," she whispered. He pulled it out of the box and slipped it on her right ring finger. "Wow."

"I'm glad you like it."

"Like it?" She gave him a deep kiss. "Once I get an all clear from my doctor I'll show you just how much I like it."

"Oh yeah?" he grinned.

"Hell yeah, Marine. You scored big here." She leaned in and whispered, "and you

will score later." She gave him another kiss. "But right now I'm going back downstairs to show this off."

"There you are." Florence Nash was standing in doorway of their bedroom.

She held out her hand. "Florence, look what your son just gave me."

"Oh my Frank, that's beautiful." She looked at her son and smiled. "Well done."

Marina smiled and gave him another kiss. "He spoils me."

"What's that, Mom?" Frank asked as he nodded toward a small bag his mother was carrying.

"I know you said not to bring any gifts but this really isn't that." She handed the bag to Frank and he pulled out a small silver picture frame. "I found a picture of my mother. I thought Riley Jane might like to know who she was."

"I remember this picture. I haven't seen it for years." Frank stood and kiss his mother's cheek. "Thank you, Mom." He turned the frame around to show Marina. "Wasn't she beautiful?"

Marina's heart nearly stopped. She forced a smile to her lips. "She's very beautiful, just like her daughter." Florence blushed while Frank studied Marina's reaction. She couldn't hide from him. She never could. She stood and gave her mother in law a kiss. "We'll hang it in her room. She'll know who Jane was. Maybe you could tell me a little about her sometime, like how your parents met."

"My father was a doctor, like Carolyn."

"Was she a patient?"

"Oh, no. She was his nurse. He told me years later he knew the moment he laid eyes on her she was the one."

"That's wonderful," she smiled.

"Mom, we're going to put this in Riley's room. Just give us a couple minutes then we'll be downstairs. It's almost time for cake." he kissed his mother's cheek. "Thanks, Mom."

"You're welcome, dear."

Frank closed the door behind his mother and turned toward her. "Okay, tell me."

Marina pushed herself to her feet. "Tell you what? We really should get downstairs."

"Hold it right there, diva. Explain to me why you looked like you where going to

faint when I should you the picture of my grandmother."

She looked at him and wondered if she could. The truth was, he was the only one she could tell. "You may think I'm crazy."

"I've told you before, you're an actress, sweetheart. You're eccentric, not crazy."

"You may change your mind."

"Marina, please, just tell me."

"Okay, don't say I didn't warn you. Remember that night I went down to the NICU to see Riley?"

"Vividly," he growled. He was still pissed at her for getting out of bed and roaming the halls at three a.m.

"I told you how I went to the NICU and the nurse at the station checked me in. She set me up in a chair next to Riley's incubator and I started talking to her."

"I remember."

"Remember I told you about the other nurse, the one I hadn't noticed before she spoke to me?"

"The one that was so nice to you."

Marina managed to smile. "She told me my baby was stronger than she looked. She also told me I needed to be strong for her and I had to go back to bed."

"Smart woman."

"Yes, she was. I leaned down to say good night to Riley. When I turned to say thank you she was gone. I assumed she had let me have privacy with Riley."

"Okay, I remember you telling me. What has that to do with a picture of my grandmother?"

Marina pointed at the picture. "It was her."

"The nurse looked like my grandmother?"

"No." She took a breath. "It was her." She saw the look on his face. She knew it, he thought she was nuts. "Look, I'm not saying I wasn't in a hormone haze or that I'm not still, but I'd never seen a picture of Jane. I had no way of knowing what she'd look like. This is why I didn't want to tell you. You think I'm nuts."

"Marina, I don't think you're nuts. I just have a hard time believing my grandmother visited you."

"Frank, I don't know how to explain it but I'm telling you this is the woman I met that night."

He started pacing around the room and she was sure his next move would be to call a mental hospital. "Lavender," he said.

"What?"

"On any baby clothes we've ever been given or bought did they smell like anything?"

"You mean other than baby powder? No."

"When I got her changed I smelled lavender, it was pretty strong. I remember thinking we'd have to wash her new clothes again."

"And?"

"My mother told us, my grandmother always smelled like..."

"Lavender," she gasped. "Are you saying you believe me?"

"I don't know what to believe." Then Frank did something she never expected. He smiled. "A lot of miraculous things have happened. Anna is safe. Riley is safe." He gave her a kiss. "You are safe." I'm not sure what has happened but it's kind of nice to think we have a guardian angel."

"That's a nice thought. I like that." She gave him another kiss. "We never tell anyone."

"God, no."

They both laughed as they rejoined their guests.

Chapter Fourteen

The barbeque was a typical Nash family gathering. Everyone was laughing and talking. Jonas was sitting next to his Uncle Jake and was animatedly talking about his research on brain mapping. Anna was the focus of her grandparents attention. Jake was teaching his Uncle Cabe the Russian names for the food. Frank and Cabe were discussing

Marina sighed and leaned back against the lawn chaise. She'd nursed Riley and put her down for a nap. She was blissed out over the plate of ribs she'd just finished off. She noticed Katherine take a call. It wasn't something she normally did during family gatherings, so it must be important. She disconnected the call and had a word with Val. From the look on her brother's face this definitely not good. He walked over to Frank and had a word with him, then all three approached her. Yeah, this was going to suck.

"What's going on Katherine?" She didn't answer right away. "Val?"

"Let's go inside," said Val. He helped her to her feet and they went inside, sitting down at the kitchen table.

"Okay, somebody better start talking," said Marina.

"I just got a call from Jimmy Collins."

"The reporter. Okay," said Frank. "What's up."

"Jimmy got a tip that the Inquistor is going to file suit against you on Monday."

"They're what?!" she shouted.

"Sweetheart, let them finish. Then we kill someone," said Frank.

"Apparently your press conference has had some consequences."

"What consequences?"

"Your request for people not to buy their magazine or to cancel their subscriptions has met with a tremendous response. Jimmy's source said they've had thousands of cancellations in the last week. Their revenue is down fifty percent."

"That's great," said Frank.

"Yeah, not so so much. Tollerson is filing suit for libel."

"Excuse me?"

"He's going to file for defamation and lost income," said Katherine.

"That's insane."

"I think our only response is to file before him," said Val.

"Agreed. I'll get to the court house first thing Monday morning," said Katherine.

"I'll go see Detective Katic and see where they are with the case. We need the photographer to confirm Tollerson was a participant."

"I have a thought on that," said Frank. "What about Jimmy?"

"Jimmy?" asked Marina. "He doesn't work for them he works for People."

"Not any more," said Katherine. "He's with the LA Times now."

"Really? Good for him."

"Even better," said Frank. "Katherine, can you call him and ask him to come over?"

A few hours later and all the the family had left except Katherine and Val. Riley was still asleep while her sister and brothers were up the street with their grandparents. Marina and Frank had agreed the kids wouldn't have to deal with this quite yet.

The buzzer sounded and Frank let Jimmy Collins in. He still had the red curls he had when they met nine years ago but he's filled out to a handsome man. Frank extended his hand. "Jimmy, thanks for coming." He wasn't surprised to see he'd brought a baby gift. It was just the kind of thing he did.

"Of course," he smiled. He handed Frank the bag he was carrying, "This is for the baby. How's Mrs. Nash?"

"I'm fine, Jimmy," said Marina as she joined them in the living room.

"Jimmy brought Riley a gift."

"Oh, how sweet." Marina pushed aside the tissue and pulled out a pink shirt that said 'Daddy's Girl'. She laughed. "You got that right. She's already got him at her beck and call." She smiled and kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

Frank led them to the dining room where Val and Katherine were seated. "Have a seat, Jimmy."

"Is this about the Inquisitor?" he asked.

"Yes," said Katherine. "First, I want to tell you that what we discuss today will be held in confidence. I understand you can't reveal your source but do you think you can

convince them to help us?"

"Help you how?"

"We need proof that Tollerson knew about the photo and that it was the product of a crime."

Jimmy looked at Marina. "Are you trying to take him down?"

"Yes. He's been coming after me for years but this time he hurt my child."

"We can't let this stand unanswered," said Frank. "He has to pay for his crime."

"I agree but I don't know if I can get them to help you. Tollerson is a very connected guy in this town."

"I understand," said Katherine. "Let me lay out for you our plan. Monday morning we will be filing suit against The Inquistor and Tollerson personally. We are also going to make a push with the DA to get him charged with accessory after the fact."

"Holy shit, you really are gunning for him."

"He went after our child. Nobody gets away with that," said Frank.

Jimmy sat back in his chair. "You're going to need a lot of public pressure to get the DA's office to push for an indictment. That means publicity."

Marina sighed. "I know. I'll give you the first print interview. Elaine Jansen will give me a spot on her talk show if I ask."

A quiet voice came from the kitchen. "I want to help." They turned to see Anna standing in the doorway.

Frank went to his daughter. "Princess, you're supposed to be at Nana Anna's."

"I'm tired. Grandpa George walked me home."

Frank picked her up and held her close. Anna had been uncharacteristically quiet since she'd been released from the hospital. "Angel, why don't I take you upstairs."

Anna pushed at his shoulders until he set her down. "No Papa. This is about what happened to me and Mama. The picture. I should be able to help."

Marina looked at her daughter and shook her head. She was both proud and terrified. Anna was as brave as her father, but she was still a little girl. Every instinct inside her screamed to protect her.

"Mama, don't you think I should help?"

She held out her arms to her daughter. "Come here, baby." She pulled Anna into

her lap and kissed her forehead. Normally, Anna would fight this cuddling, but nothing had been normal since she was taken.

"Mama, I want to help."

Marina stroked her daughter's hair and smiled. She knew Anna didn't want to help, she needed to. She looked at Frank and nodded. "Okay, sweetheart. Papa and I will figure out how you can help."

"What? Marina, no," said Frank. "I don't want her subjected to this."

She ruffled Anna's hair. "How about I tuck you in?"

"Okay." she said as she slipped off her mother's lap.

Marina stood and took her daughter's hand. She turned toward Frank. "I won't be long." She turned down Anna's sheets while she changed into her pajamas.

"Is Papa mad?"

"No baby, he's not. Don't worry. I'll talk to him and we'll figure something out." She kissed her daughter's head and smiled. "I'm very proud of you, angel. You're being very brave but I want to know you don't have to be brave all the time. If something is bothering you or is scary, you tell Papa and me."

"Okay."

Marina saw the look on her face and knew. "What is it? You can tell me."

"Sometimes when I'm outside I get scared."

"What's scaring you?"

Marina's heart nearly broke when she saw Anna's eyes well with tears.

"I don't know."

"Did you feel like that at Nana Anna's tonight?"

"Uh huh. Grandpa George was showing us some new flowers and I just wanted to come home."

"Why did you want to come home?"

"It's safe here."

Marina fought back her tears. These bastards had done this to her baby and she would make them pay if it was the last thing she ever did. "Anna, you know Papa and I are doing everything we can to keep you safe." She tried to hide the hitch in her voice. "I'm so sorry we couldn't stop what happened to you at the museum."

"That wasn't your fault, Mama. That was the creepy guy."

"Is that who you're scared of?"

"No. I could tell he was trouble. It's the ones you can't see that scare me."

Marina felt like she'd been gut punched. She didn't know what to say next. "Sweetheart, you're safe now. Papa and I are going to do everything we can to make sure these guys can't hurt you or anyone else again." She felt a bit better when she saw a small smile. "It's been a busy day so I want you to get so sleep." She kissed her daughter's forehead and whispered, "I love you, angel." in Russian.

"I love you too, Mama," she replied in Russian.

Marina walked into the hall, closing the door behind her. She heard Riley fussing. She walked into the nursery and picked up her baby. She changed her diaper and then cuddled her close. How could she protect Riley if she didn't at least try to help Anna?

Marina walked back into the dining room and sat down. "Frank, pour me a drink."

"What?"

"Please, just do it."

He grabbed a class and a glass and poured her a shot of Stoly. "How's Anna?"

Marina down the drink and sighed. "She came home not because she's tired. She came home because she'd scared. Here she feels safe."

"Was someone watching her? Did she see someone?"

"No. She said she could tell the guy who grabbed her was a bad guy." Her voice hitched. "She's afraid of the ones she can't see." Frank muttered a Russian curse. She looked at Jimmy. "This is what Tollerson did to my child. This is why he has to pay."

"I understand," he said quietly. "I could do an interview with both of you but I might have to ask uncomfortable questions."

"Marina, I don't know if we should subject her to that," said Frank.

She took Frank's hand in hers. "Why don't we call Toby and see what he says?"

Marina rocked Riley after she finished nursing. She hoped they were doing the right thing. Last night they got on the phone with Toby and talked about how to talk with Anna and the boys. He'd agreed that Anna needed to feel like she had some power over

the situation. Helping stop the men responsible would go a long way to doing that.

Frank walked into the nursery and smiled. "How is my peanut?"

"She's fed and has a fresh diaper. All she needs to do is get dressed for her first interview."

"Are you sure you want her in the picture?"

"If we hide her we're telling the kids they should be afraid. I don't want them to live like that."

Frank ran his hand over his daughter's back. "Neither do I." Riley picked that moment to let out an epic burp.

Marina laughed. "She's your daughter alright!"

Marina played with Riley's fingers as Frank as he served their children breakfast. When Frank sat down she cuddled Riley close. "Kids, Papa and I need to talk to you."

"What's wrong?" asked Jonas.

"Nothing. We want you to know what's going on. You know that Papa and I were very angry about the picture that was taken on Anna and me in the hospital. Tomorrow we are filing a lawsuit against the paper and the man that's responsible."

"What's that?" asked Jake.

"It's when we tell the judge and a jury that what they did and how it hurt us. If they agree, they make us a judgement in our favor," said Frank. "A judgement means they would make them pay us money."

"Is it right that they give us money for what they did? Isn't that why we're so mad at them, because they made money from it?" asked Jonas.

Frank and Marina smiled at each other. Their kids were good little humans. "Yes, Jonas, you're right. That's why what ever money they award us will be split between The Amanda Gallo center and Welcome Home. Jonas shrugged and took a bite of his toast.

"Oh. Then I guess it's okay."

Marina put Riley on her shoulder and rubbed her back. "We want to tell you about someone who's coming to the house today. His name is Jimmy Collins and he's a reporter for the LA Times. She was startled when the kids looked frightened. "Anna, you saw him

yesterday. Jimmy's a good guy. He's a good reporter, honest. We've known him for years and Papa and I trust him. He's going to talk to us about what happened." "Is he going to talk to me?" asked Anna.

"If you want to speak to him you can. Like you said, this was about you too."

Anna stared at her eggs. "I'll talk to him." She took a bite and looked up at her parents. "Papa, will you be there too?"

Marina's heart clenched. Her brave, daring daughter was now frightened.

"I'll be right there with you and Mama."

Anna nodded and continued her breakfast. Jonas and Jake picked at their plates. "Boys, what do you think?" she asked.

"I thought we weren't supposed to talk to people who asked questions," said Jake.

"That's right, Jake, but this is different," said Frank. "We've asked Jimmy to come so we could talk to him. We want everyone to know how much these people hurt not just us, but other families too."

The questions stopped but Marina could tell they were troubled. "Would you like to talk to Jimmy too? You could tell him how it made you feel." Frank looked surprised at her suggestion but to his credit, didn't stop her.

"I don't know," said Jonas. "Anna, what do you think?"

Marina smiled. Her twins were very close and it made sense Jonas would ask for his sister's opinion.

"It's okay if you want to. You could tell him how mad it made you."

Jonas nodded. "Okay."

Marina stood up and walked into the livingroom, placing Riley in her bassinet. She closed her eyes and sighed.

"It's going to be okay," Frank said as he came up behind her. He put his hands around her waist and she leaned back against his strong chest.

"I hope so."

"I'm thinking of asking Toby to come to the house. Maybe he could get a feel for how the kids are coping. This is outside anything we've ever handled with the kids. I want to make sure they're okay."

She closed her eyes and whispered. "God I hope so."

Marina sat down at the kitchen table and watched the children playing in the backyard. Anna was sitting on a swing, moving slowly back and forth. Anna Marina Nash never did anything slowly. If Marina had John Tollerson in front of her she'd rip him to shreds.

"Jimmy's here," said Frank.

"Let's do it in here. I want to keep an eye on the kids." Jimmy sat down at the kitchen table across from Frank. It was a testament to Jimmy's credibility that Katherine and Val felt they didn't need to sit in on the interview.

"Okay, you know the ground rules," said Frank. "If Anna doesn't want to answer a question, don't push. We are trying to let people know just how much this affected our child."

"I understand. I talked to Jenny Stanton and her family earlier today. She's still very upset."

"Oh, poor thing. Maybe we should call her parents."

"Actually she's more upset about what happened to Anna than what happened to herself."

"Yeah, we definitely have to call her parents," said Frank.

"Let's start with how you found out Anna had been taken."

Marina tried holding back tears while Frank told Jimmy how they'd been called by the police and Scorpion's involvement. Of course he left out the mention of the illegal hacking they'd done of the museum's internal security.

"Scorpion realized there was a sub-basement and that's where Anna had been taken. Frank found the sub-basement and found Anna running out."

"When she came out of the museum there was a great deal of blood on her. Was she injured?"

"No. That was the suspect's blood from when she defended herself." Frank couldn't hide a small smile.

"You're very proud of her aren't you?"

"Very proud. We both are. Anna kept her head under circumstances that test most adults."

"She placed herself in between her friend, Jenny, who was the target, and the suspect. That's amazing behavior from a small child. Did that surprise you?"

"Yes."

Marina shook her head. "No, it didn't."

"What?"

She reached for his hand. "She's her father's daughter. It's what you would have done."

"She's just a little girl."

She looked out window at her daughter. "Not anymore."

They talked to Jimmy about the stress of the abduction, hospital and then finally, the Inquistor picture. "We were horrified when we saw it on the news. Someone snuck into our room and took a picture of me and my child in our bed. My child was abducted by a maniac then subjected to further violation because someone wanted to make money from her pain."

"You must be relieved they arrested the photographer," said Jimmy.

"What?" asked Frank

"They picked him up last night."

"Frank?"

"I'll call Cabe. He should be able to confirm it faster than Val or Katherine."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Nash, I thought you knew."

"It's okay, Jimmy. It's a surprise but a good one."

Frank returned to the kitchen smiling. "It's true. He's been arrested. We should tell Anna."

"We should tell all of them." Marina stood and looked out at her children. "Let's finish this outside."

"Before we do, the paper is going to want a picture."

"It's okay. We assumed as much." She picked up Riley from her bassinet and Jimmy got a broad smile. She was wearing the 'Daddy's Girl' t-shirt. "All this affected Riley too. She wasn't supposed to be born for another two weeks. They put my baby's life at risk."

In a very uncharacteristic move, Jimmy put his hand on her shoulder. "We'll get the

truth out. Together."

"Kids, come here and say hello to Mr. Collins," said Frank. Anna got off the swing she'd been on most of the morning. The boys stopped playing with Jake's growing truck collection. They stood quietly in front of their parents, obviously nervous around this stranger. "Mr. Collins took the very first picture of Mama and I that appeared in the paper. He's been very nice to our family." Each of them whispered a small hello.

"Hello," said Jimmy. "We actually met a long time ago when you were very small."

"Are you going to say mean things about Mama?" asked Jake.

"Jacob!" exclaimed Marina.

"No, it's okay. I can understand why you would ask me that. I only want to tell the truth. Your parents trust me. I hope you will too."

"Okay," said Jake.

"Let's sit down," said Frank. He sat on the end of the large wicker couch. Marina sat with Riley as Jake squeezed in between them. Anna sat next to Marina but Jonas chose to sit closer to Jimmy. He looked like he was trying to keep an eye on the interloper.

"Come sit next to Anna, Jonas. Jimmy needs to get a picture of us for the article," said Marina. Jonas stood and took his place next to his sister without taking his eyes off him.

"Actually, I brought a photographer. She's in the car. You can trust her. I do." He smiled. "I have to since we're getting married next month."

"Oh Jimmy, that's wonderful. Please bring her in." Jimmy returned to the porch a few minutes later with a pretty brunette in her mid twenties.

"This is Theresa Burke."

"Hello Theresa, it's very nice to meet you," said Marina.

"Hello Mrs. Nash, Colonel. Hi kids. I'll just sit back here. You'll forget I'm here."

"No I won't," said Jonas in Russian.

"Don't worry, little dude. I'm cool," replied Theresa in excellent Russian. Jonas gasped.

"Theresa's grandmother is Russian." Jimmy smiled and opened his notepad.

"Kids, before we start there is something we need to tell you," said Frank. "The guy

who snuck into Mama and Anna's room and took the picture was arrested."

"He's in jail?" asked Anna.

"Yes he is."

"Good," said Jake.

"Will he stay there?" asked Anna.

"For a little while. He has to go before a judge and have a bail hearing. That's how much money he has to give to the court to get out of jail before the trial."

"He could get out?" Anna looked terrified.

"Come here, angel," said Frank and he folded his daughter into his arms. You're safe here."

"Papa I don't know what he looks like. What if he comes here. I won't know to punch him."

"I have a picture," said Jimmy. He pulled it up on his phone and looked at Frank. "Should I?"

Marina looked at Frank and nodded. Her daughter would at least be able to put a face to this bastard. Maybe she wouldn't have to think everyone she sees is a threat. Jimmy turned the phone toward Anna and she studied the mug shot. She then let loose with a string of colorful Russian curses. Marina and the boys gasped while Frank and Theresa hid small smiles.

"Anna Marina! Where did you hear such a thing?"

"Sometimes Papa gets mad when he's working on his bike."

Marina drilled him with a look. "Does he now? We'll discuss that later, Josiah," she whispered in Russian.

"Oooo, Papa's in trouble," laughed Jake.

"Anna I'd like to ask you something," said Jimmy. "You seem more angry at the man who took the picture than the man at the museum. Why?"

"I could tell he was bad. I saw him. That's guy's sick in the head. Papa said so. But this svin 'ya did what he did for money."

"Anna!" Marina scolded her daughter for calling the man a pig. He was, but she did want her daughter saying so. Riley started fussing at her loud voice. "I'm sorry, baby. I didn't mean to startled you." Riley wasn't having it, despite the back pats.

"Sorry Mama."

"Anna, sit with me." Anna moved next to Marina as she handed off Riley to Frank in a practiced move. When he put her over his shoulder and patted her back she immediately calmed down.

"Wow," said Theresa,

"Daddy's girl," Frank smiled.

"Anna, now that he's in jail, are you less scared?"

Anna looked at Marina and her heart broke. She could see the fear in her eyes. She smoothed her hand over Anna's hair and kissed the top of her head. "It's okay, angel. You can say what you feel."

"I'm glad he's in jail but what about the others?"

"What others?"

"The ones we don't see. I know they can't sneak in here but maybe they'll find us at school."

Marina brushed the tear from her cheek and pulled Anna close. "That's why we're doing this. So people will understand what all this means to us." She could see Jimmy was troubled by what Anna had said but what surprised her was Theresa. She'd been taking pictures but now her camera was in her lap and she was wiping her own tears.

Jimmy composed himself and looked at her son. "Jonas, were you at school when Anna was at the museum?"

Jonas dropped his gaze and nodded. "I have a different class in the afternoon. I should have been there."

Marina gasped. Jonas had never said anything before. Frank put his arm around his son. "Jonas, what happened was out of your control," he whispered in Russian.

"I should have helped," he said before he jumped off the couch and ran into the house.

"I'll take care of this," Frank stood.

Anna pulled away from Marina and stood. "No, Papa. Let me."

Frank looked at Marina and she nodded. "Okay."

Anna knew right where she would find Jonas, on his bed with a book. That's what

he always did when he was upset. She looked in his room and saw him staring at his big book about rocks. "Jonas, are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

She knew he wasn't. He was trying not to cry. She got up on the bed next to him and put her arm around his shoulder. "Tell me why you're upset."

"I'm not. I just don't want to talk to that stupid man anymore."

"This is me, Jonas. You know you can't fool me."

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"For what?"

"I wasn't there to help."

"At the museum?"

"At the hospital too. I'm your brother. I'm supposed to look out for you. Papa said so."

"You couldn't have stopped what happened."

"I could have tried."

"I know you would have so I'm glad you weren't there."

"What? Why?"

"Because you could have been hurt."

Jonas lip started to quiver. "I don't care. I was scared when I knew what happened. Aunt Kate and Uncle Cabe came to get me and Jake at school and they told us what happened. They said you were okay but then I saw the news and you were all messed up and thought you got hurt."

"I wasn't but I'll tell you a secret. I was scared too. Real scared. I was scared I wouldn't see you or Jake or Mama and Papa again. Even though he promised he find me if I was lost, I wasn't sure."

Jonas gave her a tight hug. "I'm sorry you were scared."

"I'm still scared," she whispered.

"About what?"

"I know Papa said we're safe here but I'm afraid someone might sneak into my room."

"Do you want to sleep in my room?"

"Could I?"

"Sure. Whenever you want."

Marina was surprised when Anna came back to the deck holding Jonas' hand. "Is everything okay?"

"It's fine."

Marina pulled her boy into her lap as Anna cuddled next to her. She kissed the head of both her babies. This was the reason Tollerson had to be stopped.

"I think we have everything I need," said Jimmy. "Theresa?" Theresa sat with her camera in her lap. "Honey," he whispered. "Are you okay?"

"Kids, why don't you go into the kitchen? Jonas could you please start the sandwiches?" asked Frank.

"Okay, Papa," said Jonas as he walked into the house with Anna and Jake in tow.

Theresa watched the children close the door behind them and then turned on Jimmy. "You bastard. You did this on purpose."

"What?" gasped Marina. "What's going on?"

"I had to. I needed you to see for yourself what was at stake."

"You knew once I met them I'd never be able to stay quiet."

"I know what kind of person you are. That's why I love you."

"Yeah well, tell me that again when I can't get a job and you have to support me."

"You're the source," said Frank. "You know about Tollerson."

Theresa took a breath and sighed. "Yeah. I'm a freelance photographer. I have a friend who works at the Inquisitor. She knows I'm engaged to Jimmy. She also knows Jimmy knows you. She called me and asked me to use my relationship with Jimmy to get close to you and your family. I turned her down of course but I got another call."

"Tollerson?" asked Marina.

She nodded. "He offered me fifty thousand dollars for an exclusive. He said..." she paused.

"Go ahead, tell them."

"He said it would be one hundred thousand if I got the shot from the morgue."

Marina looked at Frank. She'd never seen him so angry. She could believe at that

moment her husband would kill. She reached toward Frank and took his hand. She tried to maintain a calm voice. "Theresa, we need you to tell the police. Your information could make the difference between John Tollerson getting away with this or stopping him once and for all."

Theresa nodded and Jimmy took her hand. "We'll go there from here. I call Ms. Davenport and let her know."

Marina and Frank walked them to the front door. "Thank you, both of you," she said. She closed the door behind them and looked at Frank. She could tell he was still angry. He was holding Riley close and kissing her forehead. "Now what?" she asked.

Frank looked up from his baby and gave her a small smile. "Now I call in every favor I can find to convince the DA to file charges against Tollerson."

Marina rubbed the back of her sleeping infant. Riley would never know the turmoil their family was going through, at least not now.

"Is she asleep?" Frank asked.

She looked up at her husband and smiled. He looked as tired as she felt. "Like an angel." He slipped his hand around her waist and pulled her close. She leaned back against his strong chest. "Did you make the calls?"

"Yeah. I talked to Cabe and a couple of guys on the force who I've helped in the past."

"And?"

"Cabe is going to see what he can do. The guys on the force say Tollerson is so connected they doubt they could get an indictment."

"Frank, he can't get away with this."

"He won't."

Marina sighed and turned toward him. "It's been a long day. Let's get the kids in bed."

"I thought they were in bed. They came up here an hour ago."

They walked into the hall and heard giggling from Jonas room. They opened the door to find what seemed to be every blanket in the house stretched out over the bed to a chair, desk and bookcase. It looked like a makeshift homeless shelter.

"What is going on in here?" Frank demanded.

Jonas popped his head out of their makeshift tent. "Oh, hi. We're having a campout."

"In your room?" asked Marina. She pulled back part of the blanket to see Anna and Jake in the tent too. They had books and games and somewhere they'd found a flashlight. They'd also brought the pillows and blankets from their beds. "You're all going to sleep here tonight?"

"Can we? Please?" they all asked.

"I don't..." Frank started.

Marina nudged Frank's arm. "Papa and I will discuss this." She grabbed his hand and pulled him into the hallway. "Did you see what I saw?"

"You mean the unholy mess? Yes I did."

"No. I mean our children smiling. It was the first time they looked happy in a week."

"Yeah, they did."

"Come with me." They went into the kitchen and Marina grabbed a box of graham crackers. "Grab some juice boxes." She pulled peanut butter from the closet and spread some on the crackers and put another cracker on top. She made a stack of crackers and put them on a plate. "You can't have a campout without snacks. I don't have chocolate and marshmallows for smores, but I think they'll do."

Frank smiled and gave her a kiss. "You're a good Mama, diva."

She smiled and winked. "Thanks, goon."

They walked back into Jonas room with the snacks. The children smiled at the unexpected treats. "Here you go and have fun," said Marina. "Just try not to wake your sister. Now come here and give us a kiss good night."

Each child came out of their tent and gave their parents a kiss. They went back into their tent, resumed their giggles and munched on peanut butter grahams. They all seemed happy, even Anna with her new cast resting on a makeshift sleeping bag. Frank closed the door to Jonas room and followed her to their bedroom.

"You realize those snacks will give them all a second wind."

"Uh huh."

"They'll probably be up way too late."

"Probably."

"They'll never get up in time for school."

Marina smiled. "Not a chance."

"You're going to let them skip?"

"Yup." She slipped into her nightshirt and pulled back the covers. "You know what else I saw tonight? I saw our kids pulling together. They were happy and sharing. We haven't had a lot of those moments lately. Let's let them enjoy it."

Frank smiled and nodded. "I defer to the wisdom of Mama Bear."

"Since that's settled I think you should get yourself in this bed, Papa Bear." She looked at her handsome man as he pulled off his clothes and got into bed. Before the kids they always slept naked. Now it was nightshirts and boxers. It was still good.

Chapter Fifteen

The lawsuit against Marina and Frank by the Inquisitor made the news as a short item, as did their countersuit. They knew it could take years for this to get to court which is why they were pressing for formal charges against Tollerson. The DA had been avoiding Katherine and Val's calls that was until Jimmy's story hit the LA Times. Instead of being relegated to the entertainment section it was front page news. Theresa's picture of their family was beautiful and heartbreaking. Frank was holding Riley while Jake was cuddled against him. Marina was kissing the top of Anna's head. They were both crying. Jonas haunted face was the most powerful image of all.

They'd received thousands of supportive messages through her agent's website. The most amazing were those from industry people who were finally ready to join forces against Tollerson. Even with all that the DA still was refusing to press charges. He had bowed to public pressure and finally met with them. He told them even with Theresa's testimony they needed more. They might have given up there until the DA said this sort of thing is to be expected in her business. Now they'd never give up.

That's when Marina called Elaine Jensen. Elaine had promised her not only an immediate spot on her show but the entire hour. Elaine did broach a delicate subject, interviewing Anna. She knew Elaine was right, it could make a huge impact on their case. She told Elaine she'd talk to Frank and get back to her. They'd also talk to Toby and see what he thought.

She was surprised when she saw Frank pull into the drive. He wasn't supposed to be home for a couple of hours. She walked outside to meet him and he gave her a kiss.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Let's go inside."

"What's going on?"

"Val called me. Hightower is pleading guilty."

"What does that mean?"

"It mean's no trial. Anna doesn't have to testify."

Marina wrapped her arms around him. "Oh, thank God."

"His lawyer convinced him that taking a deal was the best he was going to get."

"What deal?"

"He's a convicted sex offender. He violated the terms of his parole and this makes him a three time loser. The DA offered to put him in a facility for the criminally insane."

"What? A hospital. He'll get out."

"No. Part of the deal is if he's ever found competent, which is doubtful, he'd serve the rest of his sentence in a regular prison."

"What's the rest of his sentence?"

"Life."

"And he agreed to that?"

"Apparently he's been in a regular prison before. He knows child molesters are the lowest form of life in a prison."

"No argument there. That just leaves Tollerson."

"The DA is adamant. He won't go to trial without a sure thing."

"Coward."

"Agreed. I don't know what else we can do except wait for the civil case to come up in court."

"I talked to Elaine. She's willing to give me an entire hour."

"Really? Wow."

"She also brought up the idea of interviewing Anna."

"I don't know about that."

"Let's talk to Toby."

Toby gave them the all clear to approach Anna about the appearance on Elaine's show. He felt giving Anna the option would give her another bit of control over the situation. Toby had talked with Anna and felt her response to the situation was normal. He said so long as Anna felt she could come to her parents with her fears, that she would recover from this incident.

"You ready for this?" Frank asked.

"No, but let's do it." They knocked on Anna's bedroom door. "Hey sweetheart, can we come in?"

Anna saw the look on her parent's faces and knew what it was about. "Sure." She

put down her Harley book. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," said Frank. "There's news about the guy from the museum. He pleaded guilty and will be locked up forever."

"Really?" she smiled.

"Really."

"What about the other guy?"

"He's being charged. He faces a lot of time in jail for what he did."

"What about the man who paid him?"

"That's what Papa and I want to talk to you about. We're still trying to get the authorities to press charges. I'm going on Aunt Elaine's show about it." She looked at Frank and he nodded. "She has asked if you want to be on the show too."

"Me? On TV?"

"Yes. She would ask you about how you feel about what happened."

"I don't know. I want him to stop hurting people. Will you be there, Papa?"

"I'll be back stage."

"Do you want him to be there?" Anna nodded but she looked embarrassed. "What is it?"

"I don't want you to be mad at me."

"Anna, sweetheart, you can tell me anything."

"I'm not scared when Papa is with me."

Marina looked at Frank and they were both surprised but didn't want to overreact. "Anna, I'll tell you a secret. I'm not scared when he's around either."

Her eyes grew wide. "Really?"

"Really." She smiled and grabbed Frank's bicep. "Look at how strong he is. I know he'll always protect me." She saw he was struggling to hold back tears.

"Princess, if you want me to be next to you when you talk to Aunt Elaine then I will be."

Marina smiled. "I'll call Elaine."

"I don't know why I have to wear a dress. You can see my cast." said Anna.

"Because you get dressed up for television. You don't want to embarrass Aunt Elaine."

"No," she said grudgingly.

Marina zipped the blue shift dress up and smoothed her long hair. She stared for a moment at her little girl. She wasn't so little anymore.

"Mama? Are you okay? You look like you're going to cry."

"No baby, I'm just thinking how big you're getting."

"Is everyone ready?" Frank stood at the door of Anna's room.

Marina smiled. He looked so handsome in a dark blue suit with a light blue shirt and tie. "Looking good, Marine."

"Thanks, diva."

"Papa, what are you wearing?"

"A suit. You've seen me in a suit before."

"Only when we go to Mass. You won't scare anyone looking like that. You should be wearing your jeans and your Harley jacket."

Frank smiled. "I don't have to look scary to protect you and Mama. Sometimes it's best to look like everyone else." Anna looked doubtful. "I didn't say I wasn't ready to protect you." He opened his jacket and showed her his gun tucked in his shoulder holster.

"Oh, okay," she said. She walked out of her bedroom and down the stairs.

Frank leaned into Marina and whispered. "Do I look scary in jeans?"

"Badass, dear. You look badass."

"Oh, okay."

Marina snickered at how much alike father and daughter were.

The makeup artist was diverting Anna's attention from being nervous. "You look like your mother," said Janice as she put powder on Anna's face.

"Everybody says that."

"That's a compliment, sweetie."

"I suppose."

"Your mom is a beautiful lady and not just on the outside." She put down the powder and looked over at Marina. "Is a little lip gloss okay?"

"Just a little," said Marina.

"Hey everyone," Elaine Jensen came into the room, a bit more subdued than usual. "Hey there Miss Anna."

Anna gave Elaine a hug. She'd known Elaine her whole life. "Hi Aunt Elaine. Thanks for inviting me to your show."

"How's your leg?"

"It's okay. I'm sick of wearing a cast."

"It comes off next week," said Frank.

"That's great."

"Could we go back to the ninja gym?" she asked.

"Good Lord." Marina shook her head. This girl would be the death of her. Elaine had gotten hooked on the ninja gym when she did a story on it. Knowing how much Anna like to climb she took Anna with her to the children's section, which she quickly conquered.

"As soon as we get the all clear from your doctor and your parents," she smiled. She sat down next to her. "I want to explain how this works. The first segment will be me talking to your mom. You can see it on the TV in here. Then we have a commercial break and a producer will come in and take you into the wings I'll introduce you to the audience and that's when you and your father will come out to the table."

"Okay."

Elaine pulled Anna into another hug and gave her a kiss. "I'm so glad you're okay." She came over to Marina and Frank and gave each a hug and a kiss. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay," Marina smiled.

"How is Miss Riley doing?"

"She's good," said Frank. He pulled a picture out of his jacket pocket. Elaine had asked if they could show a picture of Riley to the audience. She squealed when she saw the picture. It was a picture of Frank making a face at the baby. Riley was smiling, obviously enraptured by her Papa.

"Oh my God, this is perfect. She so tiny."

"Papa calls her peanut."

A young man with a headset entered. "Elaine, ten minutes to air."

"Okay." She handed the man the picture. "Get this picture cued up and make sure I get this back." She turned to Frank. "I can keep it, right?"

"Sure," he smiled.

They sat down on the couch and Frank turned up the sound on the monitor. The camera was panning around the studio and it appeared to be a full house.

"Wow. I didn't know there would be so many people," said Anna.

Marina held out her hand. "Come here, angel." Anna squeezed between the two of them on the couch. "You like Aunt Elaine. All those people are there because they like her too. I don't think you have to worry about them at all."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"I'll be right there with you," said Frank.

"Okay," she said. But she didn't look convinced.

Marina stood in the wings waiting to be introduced. She wasn't nervous for herself. She was concerned she was doing the right thing for Anna.

"Please welcome Marina Sokolov," said Elaine. She walked out to a cheering standing ovation. She smiled at the audience and gave Elaine a hug. "First, thank you for coming. How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay. As anyone who has a newborn knows, sleep is a distant memory."

"We have a picture," said Elaine and the picture of Frank and Riley appeared on the screen. The audience giggled and awed at the sweet image. "That's Frank with Riley. He's such a good father."

"The best."

"I know this has been a difficult few weeks. Can you tell us about what happened with your daughter Anna?"

"Anna was on a school trip to the Nathan Museum. She noticed a man watching her friend. When they came out of the ladies room the man tried to grab her friend and Anna stopped him." She took a breath and tried to stay calm. "He took Anna." Elaine

reached for her hand.

"That's when Frank contacted his associates and they figured out where Anna had been taken. Frank led the search team and he found her." She paused and tried to smile as the audience applauded.

"The whole world has seen the video of Frank carrying Anna out of the museum. She appeared to be hurt but she wasn't," said Elaine.

"No. She had defended herself and that's how she got away. She broke the man's nose." Marina left out the details on what else Anna broke. "As traumatic as that was that wasn't the worst thing that happened that day. We turned on the TV and saw a picture of Anna and I asleep in our bed in the hospital. Someone had snuck into our room and taken a picture."

"That person has been arrested."

"Yes, thank God but not the person who commissioned the picture."

"You're talking about John Tollerson, the owner of The Inquisitor."

"Yes. He commissioned a crime but the police refuse to prosecute."

"Have they said why?"

"I was told in my business I should expect this sort of thing. They are treating this violation of my daughter as, and I quote, not that big a deal. After all no one got hurt." Marina paused for the gasps from the audience. She looked at the largely female audience and saw the shaking heads. She could tell they were thinking about their own children and she hated it. "I'm not doing this to say "Oh look at poor me the movie star. These people and specifically John Tollerson have been coming after me for decades. I can take it. My husband can take it." Marina punch the table with her fist. "This bastard came after my child. I don't care who you are, there is no way any parent lets that stand. You come after my child and my husband and I will never stop until you're made to answer for what you've done." The audience jumped to their feet in thunderous applause.

Sitting in the green room Anna reached for her father's hand. "Wow. Mama can be scary."

"When it comes you and your brothers and sister, there is nothing Mama and I won't do to protect you."

The producer opened the green room door. "We're ready for you." Frank took her hand and led her to the wings.

"Papa, I'm nervous."

He bent down so he could look her in the eye. "Can I tell you a secret?" She smiled and nodded. "I'm a little nervous too. I've never been on TV either. But it's Aunt Elaine and I know her so it will be okay."

"Okay," she whispered.

Frank hoped he was right.

"We're back with Marina Sokolov talking about the dramatic events of the the last two weeks. We've been talking about Marina's daughter, Anna. I've known Anna Nash her whole life. She's my ninja gym partner. She is a brave, bright and beautiful little girl." Elaine stopped and composed herself. "That this happened to any child is horrendous, but when it happens to a child you love..." She smiled when Marina reached for her hand. She took a deep breath and forced a smile. "I would like to introduce my next guests, Colonel Frank Nash, and the bravest girl I know, Anna Nash."

Frank took Anna's hand and walked her out to the table. The audience stood and cheered "Anna, Anna." Elaine kissed Frank and then gave Anna a big hug and kiss.

Anna sat between her parents and leaned into Marina. "Why are the doing that, Mama?"

"Because they're happy to see you, angel."

"What should I do?"

"Say thank you."

Anna smiled at the audience. "Thank you."

"Anna, Frank, thank you for coming on my show."

"Thank you for having us," said Frank.

"Anna, first let's tell everyone how you broke your leg."

"That's when I fell out of the tree."

"You love to climb. Don't you?"

"Yeah, it's fun. I always beat you up the wall at the gym," she laughed.

"Yes you do you."

"Frank, how are you doing?"

"I'm good. Like Marina said, a newborn means not a lot of sleep."

"Not to mention eight year old twins and a seven year old."

Frank rubbed his hand down Anna's hair and smiled. "They keep us busy." Elaine took a breath and he could tell she was about to change directions.

"I want to ask you about the lawsuit you've filed against The Inquisitor. Was this in response to The Inquisitor suit?"

"Yes. They are blaming us for lost revenue when the American public decided they'd gone too far and stopped buying their crap."

Anna gasped. "Papa," she said quietly. "You said a bad word," she whispered in Russian. She looked around and realized she corrected her father on national television.

"Sorry, princess," he whispered in Russian.

"Anna, can I ask you about what happened?"

"It's okay."

"Why did you protect your friend against the man at the museum?"

"Jenny's littler than me and Aunt Kate taught me how to protect myself. Jenny didn't know how." Frank smiled. It was just that simple for her.

"What did you think of all the people cheering for you outside the museum?"

"I didn't really notice until I saw them on TV. I saw Mama and she was really upset." Marina's eyes watered and she reached for Anna's hand. "When I saw it I thought it was nice of them."

"Okay, this next question is hard for me to ask, especially since..." her voice caught. "Since I've known you your whole life." Anna got out of her chair and walked over to her and gave her a hug. "Aunt Elaine, I'm okay now."

Elaine gasped and pulled her into her lap. "I love you sweetheart," she whispered.

"I love you too."

Frank looked out into the audience and saw many of them wiping tears from their eyes. As difficult as this was, maybe they were getting their point through.

"When I saw that picture of you and your Mama in the hospital I was really angry."

"So was I. It was scary too. They snuck in when we were sleeping."

"Anna, tell me why you wanted to come on my show and talk about this."

"I wanted to tell people how scary it is when it happens. Mama said if we could show people how bad it is that maybe it wouldn't happen anymore."

Elaine gave her a hug and looked into the camera. "We'll be back after this commercial break."

"And we're clear," said the director.

"Are you okay?" Anna asked.

Elaine gave her a big hug. "I am sweetheart. Thank you." Anna slipped off her lap and went back to her seat. Elaine smiled at Frank and Marina. "She's amazing."

Frank smiled. "She sure is."

"We're back in three, two..." the director pointed at Elaine.

"We are back with my special guest Miss Anna Nash and her very proud parents, Frank and Marina. In the middle of all this there was a very happy event, the birth of Riley Jane."

"Yes, we were very fortunate," said Marina. "The stress of the situation necessitated delivering her a month early."

"Well, I have a little something for you." A producer came out with a large basket of baby gifts. Marina pulled out a little pink shirt that read 'Devushka papy'

Anna laughed. "Papa's Girl. Is she ever. Papa's always making funny faces at her."

"So I did get it right, good," said Elaine. "Anna's taught me a few phrases."

"You're doing good, you just need more practice," Anna said in Russian.

"Anna, hush," said Frank

"What? She does. Aunt Elaine is really smart. She'd do great if practiced more."

Elaine laughed and Marina shook her head and shrugged. "The entire Nash family speaks fluent Russian and they've been trying for years to teach me. Miss Anna said I need more practice."

"I said you were smart too! Tell them Papa."

"Yes, you did." He lost the battle to hide his smile.

"We only have a few minutes left but I do have something for you too, Anna." Elaine took a breath. "I've always been impressed with you. You always try harder and go farther. And you always beat me up that darn wall." Anna giggled. "Anna, you are a real hero." A producer walked out with an arm full of roses. He handed them to Elaine who presented

them to Anna. "Heroes get roses."

Anna gasped and smiled. "Wow."

"And one more thing although, Marina, Frank, you may hate me for this one." She pulled a card from under the desk. "When George at the gym found out what you did he wanted me to give you this." She opened the card and read it out loud. "This card awards Miss Anna Nash a lifetime membership to the LA Ninja Warrior Gym." Anna squealed and bounced up and down in her seat.

Frank shook his head and smiled. That was his girl.

Anna helped Marina put her roses in a vase. "I've never gotten flowers before. That was really nice of Aunt Elaine."

"Yes, it was," said Marina. "You will write her a thank you note as soon as we're finished and you change your clothes."

"I'll write it in Russian," she laughed.

"Anna..." said Frank.

"What? It will be good practice." She got quiet and looked up. "Did I do okay on the show?"

Frank bent down to look her in the eye. "Anna, you were perfect." Marina reached for her. "You were, angel."

"Do you think it will make a difference?"

Frank pulled her into a tight hug. "I think we've done everything we can for now. We'll just have to wait and see."

Detective Elena Katic turned off the TV in break room and looked at her partner, John Esposito. "That's one tough little girl."

"Yeah," he said.

"Tollerson has been getting away with this stuff for years."

"Maybe it's time somebody stopped him."

Katic smiled. Sometimes Espo got lost in procedure and making the case, but at heart he was a good guy. "What do you have in mind?"

"Is the photographer still in custody?"

"No. He made bail."

"Call his lawyer and have him bring him in."

"What are you going to do?"

Captain Hawes came into the break room. "Did you see that damn interview? Marina Sokolov and her kid?"

"Yes, sir, we did."

"Well apparently so did my wife, the chief's wife, the mayor's wife and their calling their husbands demanding to know why Tollerson hasn't been arrested."

"The DA felt that the word of one photographer who didn't take the job wasn't enough."

"Then get him enough and get these people off my back!"

Espo sat back and smiled.

Fred Carlson fidgeted in his chair. His lawyer, Martin Elliot, looked at him with impatience. "Sit still."

"What do they want?"

"That's what they'll tell us. Do us both a favor and shut up. Let me do the talking."

Esposito and Katic walked into the interview room and sat down. Katic nodded at her partner, letting him take lead. She would play the sympathetic good cop to Espo's hardass.

"Okay, Mr. Carlson, we are letting you know that we are about to level additional charges against you for child pornography. You're looking at hard time."

"What?" Carlson look panicked.

"They can't do that," Elliot sneered.

"Yes we can. Your client photographed a minor child in her bed. The child had been drugged. Your client is in a world of trouble."

"I didn't drug her!" Carlson screamed.

"Shut up," Elliot yelled.

"Who drugged her is irrelevant. I've checked the statute carefully," said Espo.

"They want something," said Elliot.

Espo leaned back in his chair. "Tell us about Tollerson's involvement with

contracting the photograph of Anna and Marina Nash."

"We're done here," said Elliot.

"Freddie," said Katic in a sympathetic tone. "Do you know what they do to child abusers in prison?"

"Oh God," he whimpered.

"That's enough, detective." Elliot stood. "Let's go Fred."

"Freddie, let me guess. This guy was hired by Tollerson. He's looking out for Tollerson's interests, not yours. Are you willing to do a few decades in prison for Tollerson?"

"Decades?"

"Freddie, you snuck into the bedroom of an eight year old child who'd just escaped from a pedophile. On top of it, she's the daughter of one of the most beloved movie stars in the country. Do you really think a jury is going to side with you?"

"Tollerson told me to get the picture."

"Ah Christ," muttered Elliot as he sat back down.

"He told me to do what ever it took. Fifty thousand if she was alive, one hundred thousand if she was dead."

"What did you do once you got the picture?" asked Espo.

"I wasn't about to trust it to an email. I'm not stupid. I took it to the Inquisitor and I didn't give it up until he handed me a certified check."

"He. Tollerson," said Espo.

"Yeah."

Espo sat back in his chair and smiled.

"Are you sure you don't want to come in with me?" asked Katic.

"No. I don't want to get growled at again," smiled Espo.

She walked up the long drive and pressed the buzzer. A female voice came over the intercom.

"Yes?"

She held up her badge to the camera. "Detective Katic for Mr. and Mrs. Nash. The door was opened a moment by a young woman.

"They're in the kitchen."

Katic followed her through the surprisingly suburban home. Comfortable furniture, no overdone artwork, and children's toys scattered around. She did spot a magnificent garden beyond the patio doors, but other than that this was the home of an average family. An average family whose father founded an international security firm and whose mother was a world famous movie star. Yet here they were sitting at the kitchen table having tea. Yeah. Average.

Frank Nash stood to greet her. "Detective Katic, what can we do for you?"

"There's been some developments and we wanted to let you know before it hit the news, which will probably be any moment. Tollerson has been arrested."

"What? Really?" said Marina.

"The photographer, Carlson, was persuaded to give him up."

"Persuaded how?"

"We informed him that since he'd taken a picture of a child in her bed, a child who'd been drugged, that he would be charged with trafficking child porn."

"We?" asked Frank.

"It was my partner's idea." Katic held back a smile when she heard a small growl come from Marina. "He's actually not a bad guy. We saw the interview. So did a lot of people. Espo got creative."

Marina stood and Frank pulled her close. "Will he be charged?" he asked.

"Definitely. There's no going back for Tollerson after this, no matter what he has on anyone else. The whole city is in love with your daughter."

Frank extended his hand. "Thank you, detective. And thank your partner for us."

"I will."

Katic got into the passenger seat and closed the door. "How'd it go?" asked Espo. She looked at her partner and smiled. "Today has been a very good day. Hey how about some lunch? Monties Wings? I'm buying."

"If you're buying I say hell yeah."

Marina and Frank hugged each other. "We did it?" she whispered. "We got him."

"Yeah, we did."

"Should we get Anna out of school? Tell her what happened?"

"No, she's just getting back into the swing of school. It can wait until we pick her up. Besides, we could use a moment to ourselves."

"You're right," she smiled and gave him a soft kiss. They enjoyed the quiet for only a moment before the sound of Riley demanding their attention came through the monitor.

"Moment's over," she laughed.

Frank smiled and gave her a kiss. "Not by a long shot, diva. Not by a long shot."